

Molly Whitehorn: So the date is November 22nd, and this is Molly Whitehorn, with Dr. John Bass, interviewing Harold Mabern for Echoes of Memphis. So thank you so much for being here today.

Harold Mabern: My pleasure.

Molly Whitehorn: And if you could just start off, could you tell us a little bit about your childhood and the music you were exposed to when you were younger?

Harold Mabern: Okay. My childhood, I was born in Memphis, Tennessee, John Gaston Hospital, March 20th, 1936. Childhood, I didn't get into music until I was about 15, 16 years old, because I'm self-taught. I never had the privilege to study the piano. And I was going to Douglas High School, and I graduated from Hyde Park High School, and then I went to Douglas. And my first year, I got in the marching band, and I wanted to play a trumpet, but I couldn't, so I played the drums. And the second year, I was able to play – learn how to play the baritone horn, euphonium. And a friend of mine, his name is Frank Strozier, he's from Memphis Tennessee, alto player, wonderful alto player.

[00:01:01]

Harold Mabern: He was saying to me, "Why don't you transfer to Manassas High School?" But during that time, you had to go to school in the district where you lived. So I was able to some kind of way transfer to his high school, which was Manassas, and he was playing alto, saxophone, and clarinet in the marching band. And his band director was Dee Dee Bridgewater's father. His name was Matthew Garrett. And he taught me, George Coleman, Frank Strozier, Booker Little, Hank Crawford, Louis Smith, Isaac Hayes, Richard Allan. He later became the house drummer at Motown. They called him Pistol.

Anyway, so I met Frank, and he was saying, "Look, I have a piano at my house. Why don't you come by and play it?" I say, "Play it? I know nothing about the piano." But I was able to play out of – pick out a few tunes and stuff.

So we started – this is like '51, '52. We started practicing together. I only knew two songs, "Perdido" and "Blues in F."

[00:02:00]

Harold Mabern: And we did that. I got in the marching band. I was playing – still playing baritone horn. Graduated June 6th, 1954, and I moved to Chicago. And when I got to Chicago, that's when I really – started really getting into the piano. You know, practicing 12, 13 hours a day. And as they say, the rest is history, for the most part.

John Bass: Can we back up a little bit and go back to Manassas, because this is – actually, I interviewed Matt Garrett a few years ago.

Harold Mabern: Right.

John Bass: We were talking about some of these times, and the names you mentioned are just incredible. But what was it like to be in Manassas at that time?

Harold Mabern: Oh, it was a great environment.

John Bass: What was the – what was the culture like?

Harold Mabern: It was very rewarding and very beneficial, because going to Douglas High School, ___ you said, we were so poor money-wise, we didn't – we couldn't even afford band uniforms. You know, but when I got to Manassas, it was really quite uplifting, because they already had a very sound musical program.

[00:03:00]

Harold Mabern: And it gave me a chance to learn how to read music then, because I didn't – I hadn't had any piano lessons at all. So I was able to pick out, with the help of my music teacher there, I was able to pick out a few chords. And here again, like I said, most of the musicians there were on their way to do something creative, because Hank Crawford was very popular then, even though we were still in high school. Louis Smith was very popular in his own way. And because of the fact that Professor Garrett was a trumpet player, he took Booker Little under his wings, you know.

And even though, improvisation speaking, we didn't really know a lot about that, but Booker Little and Frank Strozier and even George Coleman, they always understood the essence of chord changes then, especially George, because he's only a year older, but his knowledge is so fast. And as we said, the bebop era, they knew about Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie then. And we would play – oh, Charles _____ was also one of our classmates.

[00:03:57]

Harold Mabern: And we would do little field trips and go out of town and play little concerts. And we had an orchestra called the Rhythm Bombers. It was like about I guess eight or ten pieces, you know. But the exposure was great, because Professor Garrett, we had to play the marches. Now we had to play **Crown Bogie** and all that stuff. But we also had an outlet where we would get a chance to play some jazz things, you know, in and around town.

John Bass: And was Matt Garrett, was he introducing jazz? And so this was in the fifties. Were you listening to Charlie Parker records in class –

Harold Mabern: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. And he –

John Bass: And how did that –

Harold Mabern: – would participate, and we would play – he would play the trumpet with us, you know. So he was important – he would conduct, but he was also an important part of the band also, you know.

John Bass: He told me when I talked to him that – because – is it true that you guys would go play in clubs and things like that around town with him?

Harold Mabern: Right. Right.

John Bass: And I asked him about that situation, with the – and he would play with the bands with you.

Harold Mabern: Right.

John Bass: Is that correct?

Harold Mabern: That's true. There were some times he would play with us, but most of the time, my mainstay would be – would have been Mitchell's Hotel.

[00:05:00]

Harold Mabern: Which is where I met George Coleman and Louis Smith. But before then, George Coleman has a brother – he's not play now – named Lucian Coleman, who played alto sax also. And I played mostly at Mitchell's Hotel. You know, it would be piano, no bass, and drums, piano and drums. So I had to walk the bass line,

because we only had about three good bass players in town, Jamil Nasser, a bass player named **Shelly** Walker, and I forget the other bass player's name.

And Jamil would be out with BB King's band, so most times, there would be no bass, and I – the left hand would be the bass. You know, so I'd play with George Coleman and Louis Smith, and the people would dance. Here, the thing was, he wanted to play bebop, but the club owner, **Sunbeam**, wanted us to play dance music. So he would say, "You better get that bebop out of here. You're running my customers out of here." So the only way we could play bebop was we'd tell the drummer to play the shuffle beat, and the people could dance.

[00:05:58]

Harold Mabern:

Then we would play the changes to "All the Things You Are," and they never knew any difference. As long as the people kept dancing, that's how we got over it.

And also, during that time, I hate to use the word hate, but we didn't want to play the – we wanted to play bebop. But now, when you fast forward some 40, 50, 60 years, we realize what a blessing it was, being forced to play the blues, because that's a part of the music that everybody can't play. And you can't teach it. You know, you can write down some notes, but it has to come from here. It has to be natural.

So I always tell people, you know, a few years ago, I was doing an interview and the man said, "How do you analyze your concept or style?" So I say, "I'm a rhythm and blues piano player that understands the philosophy of jazz." You know? Excuse me.

John Bass:

That's great. ____ ____?

Molly Whitehorn:

So what about the piano specifically like drew you to it? Like why – I mean, you played other instruments before, but why did you like focus on –

[00:06:59]

Harold Mabern:

Well, that's a very good question. I'll tell you why. You've heard people say this before. I didn't choose music. I didn't even choose the piano. It chose me. What happened, when I was a kid, you know, we were hanging around, going to different places, so it was about maybe five or six of us going. We went to this house

one day, and there was this old upright piano, and the young lady, true story, she went to the piano, and all the black keys, which would be F sharp, and she played this [*humming*], it's called, "I Stuck My Dollar in the Mud." That's the only time I ever knew it. I don't know where it came from. But some years later, somebody told me, say, "That's part of an excerpt from something by Ravel or Debussy."

So she went to – and I went to the piano and I did the same thing, just on the spot. So then maybe this was my calling. I had an ear for that. But I still didn't think about it. Then once I got to Mitchell's Hotel and started playing the blues, little by little, tunes started coming to me and started sticking with me. But like I say, I didn't intentionally choose the piano.

[00:08:00]

Harold Mabern:

It chose me, because after I played this one song, that's how I started getting into it, you know. And then once I – you know, I played around here until '54. Then when I graduated, that's when I moved. But during the time I stayed in Manassas, we were doing a lot of things at different clubs. There was a club out near Manassas called Johnny **Curry's** Restaurant, where we would play little gigs with a wonderful saxophone player, passed away, named Reverend Ben Branch. He left here and became part of Jesse Jackson's, what you call it, Operation Breadbasket.

Wonderful tenor player. I wish he and Stanley Turrentine – _____ **Wellin** reminds me a lot of him, because they both had that real bluesy concept. They could play bluesy, and they could also play slow ballads. See, it's hard to play – people think it's easy to play slow. It's easier to play fast than slow, because when you play slow, especially if you play saxophone or something, you got to have a beautiful sound, so that when you play, you sustain the notes, you know.

[00:08:59]

Harold Mabern:

So that was my introduction to jazz, playing all over – we didn't have many clubs, Johnny Curry's. We played a place called the Paradise Club, and another – there was a couple other places, but mostly it was around Bill Street and Mitchell's Hotel. And I stayed around and did that. But Professor Garrett was always play with us on certain jobs, you know.

John Bass: Well, he told me – it was _____, because I asked him about that, and he said – and see if you remember this correctly. He said that he was 20 – early twenties when he took the Manassas job.

Harold Mabern: Uh-huh.

John Bass: So he was not really that much older than you guys. Did he feel like your professor, or did he feel like your band mate? Or how was –

Harold Mabern: No, he didn't feel like one of our equals. He felt like a professor. And we respected him, too. We always called him Professor. It was never, hey, Matt. We always called him Professor Garrett, you know. _____, no, he felt like he was doing what he should have been doing, teaching us. And I'm eternally grateful for him, too, because he had a lot of faith in me. You know, because like I said, not knowing what I was doing, and I remember he had a gig for us, paid \$35.00.

[00:10:02]

Harold Mabern: Now that was like – oh, that was – \$35.00 then was like, what, \$4,000.00 or \$5,000.00 now, maybe. That was a lot of money, because a hot dog was \$0.05. The street car was \$0.07. You know, so \$35.00 gig, wouldn't you know it, I broke my arm. I had been playing football, sand lot, true story, and I had a cast, small cast. And I was able to make the gig, though, just **comping**, but Professor Garrett always had faith in me. He did everything he could to encourage me, because I really didn't have a clue. I think I knew about five songs. I could play "Stardust," you know, because we had that in the book, you know.

But no, he was – he felt like a director, and/or a professor, you know, and he was very patient with us, too. And he taught us as much as he could. But he would strict about the marches. We had to play the marches, because that was the forte. You know, the jazz was just something a little extra. But we had to get in there – in that band room and learn all those marches and stuff.

[00:10:59]

Harold Mabern: You know? And he was very helpful to me, because of the fact that he played trumpet, he could play the baritone horn, too. So there were times when he would stay – I would stay after school, and he would help me, you know, get the feel for the instrument.

John Bass: What were some of the – because, I mean, the names are just legendary, but what were – what was ____, what was Booker Little like in high school? What was Hank Crawford, any of these guys like?

Harold Mabern: Well, like I say, Hank Crawford was very – I would say Hank Crawford during that time was the most popular musician. For whatever reason ___ understood, he was just – he was very charismatic for some – you know what I mean. He was very popular.

Booker Little was very studious, but very mischievous, too. You know, he'd clown around. He wouldn't get out of hand, but he was very serious. And we knew that he would be something, because it's like the minute he picked up the trumpet, he could play it. You know, and that's why I think Professor Garrett took him under his wing, because he was an excellent sight reader, even in the beginning.

[00:11:58]

Harold Mabern: We went out to places like Jackson College and did like little what you call recitals. Booker Little won first prize on a song called – it was either “Flirtations” or “Trumpet as a Lullaby.” Frank Strozier won first prize on the clarinet, because he was a clarinet major. To my surprise, I won second prize on the baritone. I don't remember what I played. Maybe it was something like ____, [*humming*]. That seems like – you know.

But it was a good climate, like I said. And we knew eventually we wanted to play jazz. We had no idea that we would be able to actually make some kind of living out of it. So we were just really taking it one step at a time. And we would go and sit in at the different places around Memphis. There wasn't a lot of places, but mostly it would be Memphis – I mean, not Memphis, would be Mitchell's Hotel. And they had a specialty on the menu, was a bowl of chili, so we would get paid \$0.50 a night. I'm talking about two quarters. Can you imagine?

[00:12:56]

Harold Mabern: Now here again, not to be redundant, that was a lot of money. And get a bowl of chili. And we would come back, we'd work like five nights a week. And then they'd have a saxophone player named Eli **Cartrell**, and ___ **Lloyd** and I used to play with him a lot. And it was good times, you know, for us, because we were doing

something that we wanted to do. Now here again, we didn't – there were no guarantees, because some of the guys felt that they were going to be able to get scholarships because of their high marks and everything. Me, I had no idea that I would get a scholarship, even though I didn't take the scholarship, because I move to Chicago. And then once I did that, then here again, everything was wide open. You know what I mean.

John Bass: Well, tell us a little bit about going to Chicago, and what – and how – you mentioned you had some offers. What – where did you offers, scholarship offers?

Harold Mabern: Well, I had a scholarship to Tennessee State, Arkansas State, Lane College, I think it was, and one other place I don't remember. But my sister had said, "Well, look, if you come to Chicago, maybe we'll be able to afford you to go to the Conservatory."

[00:13:59]

Harold Mabern: But when I got there, Frank Strozier, I knew he was going, because his folks had already paid his tuition. When I got there, my sister and my brother-in-law and my mother, they were living together, she said, "Well, look. The money situation is not – " you know, because during that time, people were being laid off. We're talking about 1954, '55. She said, "But you're here. You might as well stay here. There's no point in going back."

So staying there was the best thing that ever happened for me, because the environment there was **widened**, because there were clubs everywhere. On the South Side, there must have been – may have been 25 pure straight ahead jazz clubs. Then you had jazz clubs downtown, on the North Side. So there was music being played everywhere.

But I also had to support myself, so I got a day job at Hart Schaffner & Marx, the clothing company, you know. And I would do my little day job five days a week, and I was able to pick up some gigs at night. I played with a group called the Morris Ellis Big Band Group. He had like a little big band.

[00:14:58]

Harold Mabern: So I had a chance to learn how to read music. And Morris Ellis was a excellent trombone player. He's still around. He went to Howard University with Bennett Golson and Eddie Jones, the great bass player who played with Count Basie, who became a computer

expert for one of the insurance companies. So I would play the little big band stuff, and on the weekend, I might make \$45.00, and I would put that in the bank.

So then I got with a group called Walter Perkins MJT+3, and that was a big thing for me, because we recorded a record, and it sold like 10,000 copies. Well, in the fifties, 10,000 copies in jazz was like a hit record. That was a big thing. **I mean, Jamil** was selling something like 20,000 copies. Ramsey Lewis was selling – playing ___ crowd, like 15,000 or 20,000 copies.

So we stayed with that group in Chicago, you know, from '54 to '59. As a matter of fact, yesterday was my 54th anniversary of being in New York City.

[00:15:55]

Harold Mabern: Because once we did everything we could do in Chicago, there was no purpose for us to stay there any longer. We started to move on. So after those 4.5 years, we moved to New York City, which was November '59, you know.

John Bass: Fifty-nine?

Harold Mabern: But it was a great environment there, because here again, like I said, we had quality musicians here, but up there, it was quantity, like you might have 20 piano players in a 10 block radius. They all could play, because it was a much larger city, you know. You had saxophone players. Like I said, Gene Ammons, Johnny Griffin, John Gilmore, Clifford Jordan, Eddie Harris, Walter Perkins. They all went to the same high school, DuSable High School, under Captain Dodd. He taught them, Walter Dodd.

Then Wendell Phillips High School, you had Dinah Washington, Matt **Cole**, Sam Cooke, Milt Hinton. They all went to the same high school. So there was music everywhere, you know. And then it was a healthy environment. So you could just say music was going on like 24/7, because they would have after hour clubs you could go to.

[00:16:59]

Harold Mabern: And you would see people like Sarah Vaughan, Carmen McRae, **Doe** Williams, Bill Eckstine, you know. So it was a healthy environment, because as I said, after we graduated, there was no point in staying around Memphis, because things were kind of

drying up a little bit then. They would still have people like Duke Ellington's Big Band come and play at the old – the new Days Inn, or the Palace, and things like that.

But in the clubs in Memphis, rhythm and blues was the way to go. That's all they wanted to hear.

John Bass: Mm-hmm. So when you go to New York, there's – did you guys sort move as a unit? Would you and Booker and _____ –

[Crosstalk]

Harold Mabern: Yeah, we moved as a unit. Now what happened – it wasn't with Booker. I think Booker had already moved.

John Bass: He goes first?

Harold Mabern: Booker and George I think had moved there like around '57, '58, because they joined Max Roach's group. But Frank Strozier, Bob Cranshaw, Walter Perkins, Willie _____, myself, we moved in '59. But we didn't go there with that approach, because we had about two months of work already lined up in New York City.

[00:18:02]

Harold Mabern: And the main thing we wanted to go was to go to New York and try to stay there long enough to get to **the U** and get our union card, to become a union member, because you had to stay six months, you had to establish residence for six months. But when we moved, we were prepared, because when I moved to New York, I had \$5,000.00 I had saved up. Five thousand dollars in 1959 was a lot of money.

To give an example, a round trip ticket from New York – I mean, from Chicago to New York was \$24.50, Transcontinental Airlines. The Marriott Hotel, or the Hilton, or whatever the – Four Seasons, would have been \$45.00 or \$50.00 a week. You ready for that? The Hilton and the Marriott and the Four Seasons, the occupancy rate is \$59.00 a night. That's aside from \$500.00 that you pay. So you see, \$5,000.00 is a lot of money. You see what I'm saying?

[00:18:57]

Harold Mabern: But I knew I didn't want to use up all my money, so somebody said, "Well, why don't you go to the Y?" So I moved to the YMCA in Manhattan, 34th Street, and my rent was \$0.75 a day. Seventy-

five cents minus – a dollar minus \$0.25. Oh, yeah. So I was able to save my money, you know. But here again, we had about three works – three months' work in New York City. So while we were waiting to get our union card, we were still making money, you know. And we worked – the first three weeks, we worked as what they call a traveling musician. You had to go report to the union.

And then we waited to finally get our union card without having to wait the six months. You know what I'm saying?

John Bass: Certainly. You want to follow up on anything? I know you've got to go pretty soon.

Molly Whitehorn: So how long has it been since you've been in Memphis?

Harold Mabern: Well, I was told by Mr. Mike Kelly I was – the last time I was here was James Williams, with the Contemporary Piano Ensemble at – it was Memphis State then. He said it was 2001 or 2002. That was my last time.

[00:19:59]

Molly Whitehorn: So do you like coming back to the city, and how does it feel different _____ –

Harold Mabern: Well, it's definitely different. I was just looking at it today, down Main Street, the way it used to be when I was – it's definitely different, because I'm sure a lot of those department stores, when I was coming up, they're long gone. Like Lowenstein, Goldsmith, a couple of others. I'm sure a lot of stuff has been torn down and replaced. And when I was here, the Orpheum Theatre was called the Malco, you know. And I haven't been to Bill Street. I'm sure those places are no longer there, like the Palace Theatre, the New Days – you know, and they used to have a restaurant called the Harlem House Restaurant. That was a great place we used to go to and get like a – what you call a hot dog special, with a hot dog, French fries, cole – you know what I mean.

So it's good to be back after all these years. I don't really have any relatives here, more or less, you know. Probably a few third and fourth cousins that might still be here that I probably wouldn't know unless they came up and introduced themselves, you know.

[00:20:57]

Harold Mabern: So it was good to be back after all these years. It's just unfortunate. I wish they had more jazz down here. That's the only thing that bothers me a little bit, that from what I understand, there are no jazz clubs, you know. It would be nice if they had that going.

But hey, it's always good to come back to your birthplace, you know. They've still got great food down here. I'll say that.

Molly Whitehorn: Okay.

Harold Mabern: And that's why it was important to do the clinic _____ today to try to inspire the young people, to motivate them, and here again, like we tell them, there are no guarantees. I mean, you could be as great as whoever, and it's no guarantee that you're going to get work or make a living out of it. But I try to instill and motivate them and tell them, you know, motivation comes from within. Motivate yourself. We plant the seed, and it's for you to do the hard work, you know. So it was good to come back. I hope it won't be another 10 or 11 years, you know.

John Bass: When you see – because you've seen several waves of musicians from Memphis come to New York, who'd go to other places, too, sort of – you know, in the seventies.

[00:21:59]

John Bass: Of course, you have James Williams and Donald Brown and –

Harold Mabern: Right.

John Bass: – **Mulgrew** come up there. So with you guys being in New York, do you see other Memphians come and take them under your wing, or look out for them when _____ –

[Crosstalk]

Harold Mabern: Well, there have only been – other than – Tony Reedus would have been the youngest –

John Bass: Tony Reedus?

Harold Mabern: – but he came to New York and he started working right away. There are only two other young musicians that came up after we left, and I haven't seen – and we were talking about – yeah, James Hurt, piano player. I haven't seen him now in about ten years.

You know, somebody said he's married and lives in Minneapolis or something like that.

And there's another musician, excellent pianist, named George Caldwell. He had been playing some with Basie. I haven't seen him in a while. He moved to Auburn and Buffalo. But I spoke to him about, oh, two or three months ago, and he was a little down I guess about the business, so I talked to him and tried to uplift him, and to tell him, don't ever doubt yourself, because the business is funny. And it did him a lot of good. But those are the only other two younger musicians that I know that's been on the scene, you know.

[00:23:02]

Harold Mabern: Since we left, you know.

John Bass: Well, why don't – sort of shifting a little bit, talk a little bit about, if you don't mind, how you got some of the opportunities to play with – like when you moved to New York. You know, when you played with JJ Johnson, you played with _____ –

[*Crosstalk*]

Harold Mabern: Okay. Good question. That's a easy question to answer. Okay. I got to New York, Frank Strozier and I, because even though we got to New York, everybody went different ways, still, you know, because Frank Strozier's wife, during that time, Frank Strozier's wife – let me see how to say it. Coleman Hawkins' wife, the great Coleman Hawkins' wife, was Frank Strozier's then wife I think aunt. I think that's the way it was. So until we get established, Frank Strozier and his family – he had a young son named Mark Strozier, very talented young man. He's a doctor now in Kansas City, Dr. Mark Strozier.

[00:24:00]

Harold Mabern: And they moved with Coleman Hawkins' family until they got established. Bob Cranshaw and Walter Perkins already had an apartment set up for them. So me, I knew I had to stay in a hotel for a while.

So the first night we got there, we checked in and went straight to Birdland, because Birdland was 52nd Street, Broadway. We were staying at this hotel called the Flanders at 47th Street and 7th Avenue. So we walked a few blocks. I went straight to Berlin

with all my money on me, \$5,000.00, in my shoes, and I saw Cannonball _____ standing out front, unfortunately taking a cigarette break.

So he saw me, so Cannonball said, “Hey, Big Hands,” for obvious reasons, because that’s what my friends called me, affectionately speaking. Frank Strozier wrote a song on the album *MJT+3* called “Big Hands.” So he said, “Big Hands.” He said, “You want a gig?” Now keep in mind, this was a Tuesday night, which was like a major night.

[00:25:00]

Harold Mabern:

But every night was packed at Birdland. Every night, because that was the place to go. No matter where you would go to, you end up there. So I say, “Sure.” I thought he meant with him. So he took me downstairs and the little maître’d guy’s name is Pee Wee Marquette. You probably hear his voice on the Art Blakey records. “_____ thank you. Art Blakey.”

So we walk ____, so Pee Wee Marquette, he called everybody Papa. “Where you going, Papa?” Because he didn’t know me. He said – Cannonball said, “He’s with me.” So Pee Wee said, “Well, tell me something, because this Birdland. Don’t nobody know you down here.” Now keep in mind, the admission, the cover charge, business charge, you ready for this? Was \$1.25, as opposed to \$25.00, \$50.00, _____ \$65.00. But that was a lot of money then, you know.

So we walked in. The place was packed. There’s Quincy Jones standing next to the wall with Spike Lee’s daddy, Bill Lee. There’s Bill **Russell** talking to Cannonball. There must have been 15 piano players, _____, Bobby Jones.

[00:25:59]

Harold Mabern:

And the group that was working was **Harris Sweets Sutterson’s** group, Harris Sweets Sutterson, Jimmy Forrest, Tommy Flanagan, Gene **Raymond**, and Elvin Jones. Tommy Flanagan was getting ready to leave to go with JJ Johnson. This is – now first night in New York, November 21st, 1959.

So Cannonball introduced me to Sweets, so that meant Sweets was going to need a piano player. Now little did I know that Sweets was getting ready to come back to Chicago for three weeks. So Sweets said, “How you doing?” He said, “You want to play?”

talking to me. Man, I'm shaking like a leaf. First night in New York City. Now no matter what I learned in Chicago, that might not work in New York, because we're talking about the Big Apple. You got to prove yourself.

So I said, "Sure." So Harris Sweets Sutterson looked at me and said to me, he said, "Habit, eight bar introduction, A flat." So I said, well, what the heck is habit? You know, see, because jazz musicians, they talk in short terms, and they figure that if they say something, you're supposed to know what they're saying.

[00:26:58]

Harold Mabern:

You're supposed to know whatever song, because you're supposed to – if you're a – that's their mindset. He didn't say, "What do you want to play? Do you know this?" He assumed if Cannonball introduced, I must be okay.

Long story short, so the song was "Getting to Be a Habit With You," [humming], "Getting to be – " you know, I never played that song before. So the first chorus, I fumbled through the changes. The second chorus, I had to put on my thinking cap, like we walking today. And I kind of got through it. So when I got through playing it, Harris Sweets Sutterson said to me, "You got the gig." He hired me on the spot because I knew that song.

So I went right back to Chicago and a place called The Blue Note. We played three weeks, making \$250.00 a week. Do you know how much money that was? Hello. If you go to Google search, they'll get a mathematician, they can tell you what \$250.00 a week was compared to what it'd be like now, but it was a lot of money.

Because, see, most musicians, before taxes, you were making \$165.00. Or our main goal was to save \$100.00 – and we could save \$100.00 a week, we were doing great.

[00:28:00]

Harold Mabern:

So we did the three weeks in Chicago. I came back, and that gig was over quick fast. So now this would have been like '59, 1960. Lionel Hampton's band was working at the Metropole, but they didn't use a piano player or guitar. So a friend of mine was in the band from Chicago, so he introduced me. Lionel Hampton called everybody Gates. "Hey, Gates. How you doing, Gates?"

So Lionel Hampton said, “Hey, Gates, you want to play something?” So I sat in with Gates, and I could read big band music, because I had learned how to read music in Chicago. So he said, “We’re going to Argentina, Gates. You want to go?” I said, “Sure.”

So they didn’t even have a ticket for me, so we had to get vaccination, because you’re going to South America, places like that. So one of the – one of the – what you call it, the agency that’s working the booking office gave me – I had to take – I took his ticket, plane ticket, and they just changed my name. So that would have been April 1960. My first trip to Europe was Buenos Aires, Argentina, where they had steak that thick.

[00:29:01]

Harold Mabern:

And we played for like an auto show. So we did like about a seven week tour all through Europe, Germany, Switzerland, Argentina, Belgium, all over. So I did that. So that was like from 1960 to 1961.

Now after that, ’61, October, Cedar Walton, my dearest, dearly departed friend Cedar Walton, was playing at Birdland with the Jazztet, Art Farmer and Benny Golson. Now here again, he was getting ready to leave to go join Art Blakey’s group with the Jazz Messengers, with Freddie Hubbard, Reggie Workman, Wayne Shorter, that group.

So here again, if you were hanging out at the right time, you could get a gig, because it was always somebody leaving one job to go do something else better. So Cedar Walton called me up. I don’t know to this day why he called me. He could have called anybody. And said, “You might want to come down and sit in Birdland.” So I went and sat in at Birdland, played the song, and I looked up. Benny Golson was smiling, and a couple other members was – they liked what they heard, just because of the way I was comping.

[00:30:02]

Harold Mabern:

So when I got through, Art Farmer said, he said, “Well, hey, man, you know, we got somebody with the piano,” but they had hired somebody, I don’t know who it was, but I was comping. I guess they liked the way I comped. The next morning he called me and said, “We want you to join the band.”

So I joined the band, and I stayed with them until I met my wife, rest her soul, which we met in '61, October. We got married '62, November. And then after that, I was hustling. I was always out hustling then. Then I met Miles Davis, even though I knew Miles, and I had been work with Roy Haynes. So when I came back, Miles Davis had called me, wanted me to join the band for a six week West Coast tour, and that's when George Coleman got in the band, Ron Carter, Tony Williams. Frank Strozier was in the band, and Jimmy **Carl**.

So I did the six week tour with Miles, and I came back. I played a week at the Birdland with Sonny Rollins.

[00:30:57]

Harold Mabern:

And a few weeks after that, Bobby Timmons was playing with JJ Johnson, and he didn't show up for rehearsal, and JJ called me. We made a rehearsal. I joined his band, which was September '63. As a matter of fact, the day my son was born, I went on the road with JJ Johnson.

And after that, to make a long story short, I kept maneuvering around. But during that time, I had to get a day job. I worked at Alexander's Department Store in '68, and then Lee Morgan called me. Oh, before that, I worked with Joe Williams. I was recommended for a job with Joe Williams. So I played piano for him. And I played at Birdland like in the sixties a lot, with all the singers.

Now to this day, I don't know how I got those jobs, but I think it was a case where once you're exposed, the old timers were keeping an eye on you to see your development. They might not say anything to you, but they might say, well, you know, that young kid down there, Mabern, he sounds good playing for singers. So I was playing with all the singers. So what I kept doing, I always kept hustling.

[00:31:58]

Harold Mabern:

When one door would close, I would go and hope that another one would open up. So I've been able to sustain myself over the last 62 years some way or the other, you know, by constantly performing with different people. Then I spent a lot of time with George Coleman, with his octet and his quartet. You know, as a matter of fact, we're going to play with the octet, first time in

probably 20 years, at the Jazz Standards in December, December 11th through the 15th, you know.

So that's been my mainstay, constantly promoting myself and hustling. You know, I was able to do a record date, and one record date led to another, as far as the so-called leader. And to this day, that's what I'm still doing, you know.

John Bass: Well, I think that's great. I mean, and that's just something you were just talking about in the clinic, right? You just sort of have to be there. You have to be there –

Harold Mabern: You've got to be there.

John Bass: – and then you learn how to comp, right?

Harold Mabern: You learn how to comp.

John Bass: _____ not –

[Crosstalk]

Harold Mabern: You know, and you sit in. You know, I would go up to a place – go up – Count Basie had a joint up in Harlem where they'd have jam sessions on Monday nights.

[00:32:57]

Harold Mabern: I'd go up there on Monday nights and stay all night to play one tune. The next Monday night, I'd get there a little earlier, two tunes. The next thing I know, I was going so much, I was becoming to the point where I could play like a whole set.

So that's the main thing, is you got to be high visibility. Being out, going to – and I still do that from time to time. It's hard to do it on Mondays because I teach on Tuesdays, but they have good session on Monday in New York City at Local 802 and Smoke, which is where I play a lot. You know, we're going to ten days at Smoke starting Christmas Eve through January 2nd, a tribute to Coltrane.

So the main thing is to be out and to be exposed, you know, and learn the tunes. So if you play a tune tonight, you don't know it, it's not excuse for you not to know it the next week. That's what I was trying to imply to the students. You know, you got to be patient, you know.

John Bass: Well, I'm a guitar player, so I need to hear just a little bit about what it was like with Wes Montgomery.

Harold Mabern: Oh, people ask me that all the time, and I really don't have enough adjectives to describe it, to say – he was a true musical genius, and such a generous, beautiful, giving person.

[00:34:06]

Harold Mabern: He paid me very well, but it was a challenging job, mainly because he didn't read music, so a lot of those songs, he's playing those funny keys, we call it guitar keys, like E minor, F sharp minor, "Twisted Blues" in D flat. So it was a challenge, because he said, "Hey, Mabern, play this with me." So I had to get that so fast. There's a song we do on YouTube called "Jingles," and that song, it's in E minor. *[Humming]* To this day, I don't know how I was able to play that. It was no case where Wes would say, "Can you do it." He said, "This is what we're going to do."

But he was very generous. He was not – he was not like a dictator or anything, like – and if you made was perceived as a musical mistake on the bandstand, he wouldn't say nothing. He would just smile, like if you didn't know you made the mistake, it's not for me to tell you. You know what I mean? So it was a great experience, man, experience for me, because he would let me play.

[00:35:01]

Harold Mabern: He paid me very well. He was very supportive, because when we made those videos, up to that time, he wasn't flying. None of the family would fly. But he made this hit song called "Windy," *[humming]*. It became a humongous hit. Now you're going to – if you're going to go to Europe, you've got to go there one of two ways: fly or take a boat. So if you take a boat or cruise, by the time – you know, so he went to the doctor and got some kind of hypnosis type medicine, and that's how we made that trip over in Europe.

But he was really – and he was so creative like. We'd do a rehearsal, we got a arrangement on "Here's that Rainy Day," and he would say, "Mabern, play this with me." *[Humming]* The syncopation, I had to match it, but it kept me sharp, because of the fact, like I say, he might play anything in any key.

I remember one time he always said, "Mabern, man, you're a bad cat." And to me, all I was doing was just trying to keep up with

him, you know. But that was a – you know, I’ve been blessed, because I’ve had a chance to do some wonderful things with some great people. And here again, not to be redundant, mainly because of the way I comp.

[00:36:06]

Harold Mabern:

I know for a fact, everybody hired me because they loved the way I comp. But I attribute that to being able to play for singers, because with singers, you have to know how to comp, because if you get in there ____, sh, don't play too much now. So it was a kind of case of you had to discipline yourself. As they say in poker, know when to hold, when to fold. Know when to forge ahead, know when to lay back. Know how to play _____. So that’s always been my forte.

And Cedar Walton always said that. He was never interested in being a band leader. He enjoyed the role of being a so-called sideline. So being with Wes ____, I’ve really been blessed that I’ve had the chance to do some wonderful things with some great people.

I had a chance to work with Sarah Vaughan, which I didn’t ask for that gig, because that was a rough gig, because Sarah was an excellent pianist herself, as was Carman McRae. But Bob James was taking off to do something, or his wife was having a baby.

[00:37:00]

Harold Mabern:

And he recommended me. Now during that time, my eyes were kind of **up**, because I’d been playing with Joe Williams. Sarah Vaughan’s book was that thick, 70 pieces of music. So I went by Bob James’ house. He gave me the list. Sarah had three concerts. He had a list of 20 songs, which was still a lot of songs for three concerts. But because of the fact that I’ve never been a great sight reader, my mind said, well, go through that whole book, which I did, even the songs that weren’t on the list.

And I got to the rehearsal, I’m waiting for the rest of the musicians, it was just me and Sarah Vaughan. Man, I'm shaking like this. And she said, “Relax. Relax, because if you're nervous, you’ll make me nervous.” So I said, “Where the rest of – “ she said, “No, it’s just you and me.” I said, “Oh, my goodness.”

And the first song she called was “Pearl Butterfly.” She said, “Let’s try number 23.” See, during those days, a lot of the singers,

they had their book, they didn't call by name. They called by number. Big band, they say, "Okay, fellows, get up number 16, number 30 – " you know the deal.

[00:37:56]

Harold Mabern: And when I heard 23, I said, "That's not on the list." But because I had gone over it, I felt good. So we did three concerts. She gave me a very nice bonus. And that kept me going. You know, that's how I was able to kind of get my reputation around. You know, but my whole thing has always been to be the best accompanist I could be. Even to this day, my main thing is to make George Coleman sound good tomorrow night. To accompany him, make sure the music is – so if something gets out of order, which it probably won't, then I'm able to readjust and pull it up to make sure that everything is settled down.

You know, the piano player is like the quarterback in the rhythm section. But here again, if something goes wrong, it's what's happening with the piano player? If something is right, they're never going to say, "Man, the piano was great." You don't get no brownie points. But I don't mind that, as long as I know I'm doing what I can to uplift the group. Because here again, if the bass player and the drummer are fighting each other time-wise, that can be very chaotic. It's up to the piano player to say, okay, know how to rein them in, so to speak.

[00:39:01]

Harold Mabern: To keep everything going, you know. We're like the orchestrator, you know.

John Bass: Mm-hmm. Who are some of the other singers you've enjoyed playing with?

Harold Mabern: Well, at Birdland, these are the singers I played with at Birdland, and I'm talking about for weeks at a time. Betty Carter. The best record date that Betty Carter ever made, you can download it, it's called *Inside Betty Carter*, and Bob Cranshaw and Roy McCurdy and I rehearsed six hours a day for a week. And the record was so popular she had to re-put it out, and she said that's her favorite record.

Betty Carter, Irene Reid, Gloria Lynne, who just passed a couple of weeks ago, Etta Jones, Ernestine Anderson, Dakota Staton, Johnny Hartman, way before Coltrane recorded with him. They got the

idea from us, because we were working _____ them. Arthur Prysock. So I probably played with ten different singers at Birdland. And here again, I don't know how I got those jobs, but word got around that, oh, yeah, that young piano player, Harold Mabern, he really knows how to play for singers.

[00:40:01]

Harold Mabern: And that's – that was my claim to fame. You know, and playing for singers so much after a while, you just get a knack for it, so when you got to play with somebody like Miles Davis, you can be very sensitive, because you use that kind of concept to play for vocalists, because you can't play for vocalists the way you play _____ horn play, even though there's a built-in swing that they demand from you. But you can't overpower them, you know.

The use of the sustain pedal is very important, so you can sustain things, and not play leading tones. If they're singing and you're playing the same note that they're singing, you're not an accompanist. You're playing – you have to orchestrate behind – if they sing a phrase, then you fill in the gaps, like an orchestra, like Frank Sinatra and Nelson Riddle.

So that's been my claim to fame. And even to this day, I still enjoy accompanying. You know, if I play the gig and they say no solos, you got two choruses, but they got to be chords, that's no problem, because I love – plus I love chord changes.

[00:41:00]

Harold Mabern: I love moving chord changes around. And most singers love it when you have an affinity for chord changes, you know. But that's what has kept me going, even up to this point, trying to be the best accompanist I can be, you know.

John Bass: Mm-hmm. Well, that's great. Well, the other part that's been a big part of your career is your teaching career.

Harold Mabern: Right.

John Bass: You've been – you've been an educator for a very long –

Harold Mabern: I've been at William Paterson for 32 years.

John Bass: So talk a little bit about shifting over into teaching, and –

Harold Mabern: Well, here again, I didn't ask for that. They saw fit that I could do it. I went out, 1980, we played a concert at William Paterson, the Lewis Hayes Quartet, with Clint Houston on bass, Frank Strozier, myself. So the head – the director at that time, Dr. **Marty Crivens**, wonderful man, rest his soul. Rufus Reid was there. So he knew about me, so he asked Frank Strozier, he said, "You think Harold Mabern would want to teach out here?" He said, "Well, why don't you ask him?" So he did.

[00:41:57]

Harold Mabern: And I said, "Yeah." I said – well, at that time, I said, "Now I don't have any kind of degree." He said, "Don't worry about that. Because there are certain colleges, I know **Lehman** College, where you can get a degree on your life – on your life experience, based on what you know," because you know yourself, having a degree all the time don't necessarily mean you got all the qualifications, you know. But I had been playing so long that he thought I was qualified.

So I took the job. I figured it would last a couple of years or so. This was January 1, 1981. January 1, 2014 will be 33 straight years. So that's been motivating for me, because Ted Dunbar used to say, "Teaching is learning, learning is teaching," and he's right. Because say if I got some piano students, they say, "Well, how do you do this?" That means I got to go inside myself and research to show them or tell them the right things to do. And if I don't know it, I go to the music store, I might spend \$20.00 on one book to make sure I'm showing them the right thing rather – you know?

[00:43:01]

Harold Mabern: So – excuse me – I get a lot of inspiration from it, because you got something now – the hardest thing about teaching, I can't teach young kids or beginners, you know, people that don't – you got to be able to play some so you can understand. But if you're just like starting out, I'm not a teacher from that standpoint. But if you can already play, because most of my piano students, they already could play, but I showed them the art form of playing – again, playing introductions, comping, how to transpose, the great American songbook.

Say if they're playing with a singer and somebody say, "We're going to do 'Skylark' in E flat," but you've been playing in F. You've got to be able to transpose quick fast. So that's the joy of teaching. And, you know, you get different levels of students.

Some come in already, they grade themselves. Like when Eric Alexander came, I said to myself, "This is a AA student," by what he played. I didn't tell him that, you know.

[00:43:58]

Harold Mabern:

So that's the joy. You're always going to get students, different levels, because you can have some students who are young, maybe not that much talent, but they got a good, wholesome attitude. I like that. Like this year, my students are very young. They're not overly talented, but they're very wholesome and creative. And to me, that's inspiring, because what they lack in talent, I give them a little bit better grade because of their attitude.

Now you got some will come in there with an attitude, half show up, and they think they more than you. Now those kind, you know, they definitely grade themselves. You know, I've never failed a student – I've never given an F. I gave one D in 32 years. You know, and the student called my house. My wife said, "You know such –" I said, "Yeah."

"Well, he called the house, wanted to talk to you about his grade." So he said, "Yeah, you got – that grade, it's going to follow me around everywhere I go." I said, "Well, that's why I gave it to you, because I want it to follow you around everywhere you go." And that was a D. So I talked to Rufus Reid, and he said, "Okay." He said, "Give him a D plus. That's the best we're going to do." You know what I'm saying.

[00:45:00]

Harold Mabern:

But teaching has been very – you know, as opposed to saying, "Oh, I hate to go to school," I can't wait to get there, because the way I teach, when I'm on the bus going to school, I map out a song that we're going to learn for that day, so when I get there, I don't have to say, well, what are we going to do? I already say, "Write these chord changes down." Boom.

Then – and the first thing they always say is, "Well, what's the name of the song?" I tell them, "Don't worry about the name, because I could tell you the name of the song. It's not going to help you improvise. So knowing the name is not going to amount to a hill of beans." You know? So I still enjoy teaching. I figure – I used to tell Stanley **Cowell**, "Don't leave the job. Let the job leave you."

And I figure, as long as I can get around, and it's not interfering with my health, I'll be there. You know, it's no – but I enjoy teaching, you know.

John Bass: Well, I know our students just had a great time.

Harold Mabern: Yeah. I wish we had more time. It was very enjoyable. But at least what we did with them and for them was quality time, quality as opposed to quantity.

[00:45:59]

John Bass: That's – absolutely. Well, so who are some of the students that have gone – just for the _____ –

Harold Mabern: Well, like I say, Eric Alexander, Joe Farnsworth, Bill Stewart, Carl Allen, Tyshawn Sorey. Some of these names you never – Jonathan Blake Junior, Amal Giuliani, Tomoko Ohno. She came from Japan, and she was assigned to me, and the first thing she sat down and did was played Phineas Newborn's "Share." [Humming] So I knew I had a great student. Bill Stewart.

Let me see. Who else? Freddie Hendrix. I mean, so many. I'm probably leaving out – Jesse Davis. Great alto player. So I've had I would say at least 60 students that I taught are out making money now. I mean, doing very well. And I feel good that I was a part of that, that I could help enhance what they're doing. But Eric Alexander is by far the top student that I've had in 32 years. I mean, he's so – like George Coleman calls him a genius, which he is.

[00:46:59]

Harold Mabern: You know, he went to George, took one lesson. He's like a sponge, like a piano player that I love, Geoffrey Keezer. Geoff is like that. Whatever – _____ used to look at Geoff – now James Williams discovered him. And when I heard Geoff, I said, "Well, I see what you mean, James." And I said at the memorial service, I said, "Well, speaking of James Williams, it takes a genius to discover another genius," and that's the way Geoff Keezer is, you know.

So I feel good that these young men and women, they're doing wonderful things out there in the music world, you know.

John Bass: That's really interesting, something you just said, because your time at Manassas, your professor was on the bandstand with you, right?

Harold Mabern: Right.

John Bass: And then Geoff Keezer, he was – when I saw you with the Contemporary Piano Ensemble, Mulgrew couldn't come –

Harold Mabern: Right.

John Bass: – so he played the gig.

Harold Mabern: Right.

John Bass: And you're – you still tour with Eric Alexander, right? So –

Harold Mabern: Right. Exactly.

John Bass: So there's this continuum of teachers playing –

Harold Mabern: Of teacher-student. And ___ wasn't playing – and what it is, I think we're supposed to be going in the studio this coming Tuesday.

[00:47:59]

Harold Mabern: I've done – let me see. Eric Alexander, with his own dates and others, we've done 26 CDs together. That's kind of a record. I've never done 26 CDs – I've been knowing George Coleman 60 years. We've only made about – record CDs, maybe 5.

But what happened, he remembered, Eric Alexander remembered that I encouraged him. I didn't preach. I'm not saying other teachers didn't, but I could – maybe I could hear a diamond – hear and see a diamond in the rough. He remembered that, that I supported him, and that I would – and so now you can say I'm reaping the benefits. We've been to Japan together, Eric and I, at least 15 times. I've kind of lost track. Yeah.

But see, I'm giving him something that he needs, too. Comping. Because at my age, I'm still able to put out, because my son is always – he say, "Daddy, don't get tired." So I tell him, the only time I'm tired is when I'm off the bandstand. When I'm on – see, the music is therapeutic.

[00:49:01]

Harold Mabern: I can't explain it. If you talk to any of the older people, **Ken Dedo**, 90 years old, he can barely get to the bandstand, but when you get him on those ____, he's playing like he's 20 years old. Now when he gets through, he needs – you see? So it's – this music is very therapeutic. That's the only way I can explain it. So I get tired when I'm off the bandstand. But if I'm on the band, I could play – not bragging, I could get on the bandstand and play a three hour – a three hour set without stopping. Now I don't know if people would want to hear a three hour set, you know. But that's just – Sonny Rollins still plays a long time and everything, you know.

So that's the thing with Eric and I. It's like we're still student/teacher, but he didn't plan it this way. That – it's just something that happens. Because they sent an email, they just got back from Spain. They wanted me to go, but I told them I could go, but I had to be back, because I had to come to Memphis to do this, and I didn't want to be – I don't like to push stuff too close, because say you get over there, and we're supposed to be ____ on the 19th.

[00:50:02]

Harold Mabern: Say they decide there's a plane strike or shutdown. That can happen, you know. Now I've committed to go to George – with George Coleman, George Coleman Junior, to Rhodes College. You see? I don't like to push. I said, "I can go only if you can guarantee me I can be back at least by the 18th. I don't want to take no chances." So they sent me email, said, "May – " they call me May. "May, we sure miss you over here," and I feel good, because that means whoever's playing piano is not quite, you know – and I sent a little friendly email back, said, "Yeah, I know." I said, "Why don't you act like that when I'm here? All you do is take me for granted." And they fell out and started laughing. You know what I mean.

But, you know, that's a wonderful thing, playing with Eric. You know, like I said, we've made some wonderful music together, you know.

John Bass: Well, we're certainly glad you're here.

Harold Mabern: I'm glad to be here, too.

John Bass: Yeah. Well, talk about – you’re playing tomorrow with George, with George Coleman, and you guys went to high school together.

Harold Mabern: Right.

John Bass: And you're still playing today.

Harold Mabern: Right.

John Bass: I mean, is it – is it different when you're there with him?

[00:51:01]

John Bass: I mean, do you have, you know –

Harold Mabern: No, because we pretty much use the same kind of vocabulary music-wise that I do with Eric. We play the same kind of tunes, you know, like the regular – like _____, _____ Chains. Or we might play a tribute to Miles Davis. We might play something like, “I Thought About You.” We might play something by _____, you know. So it’s never boring, because we know so many different kind of songs, so many different songs.

But George Coleman is very tricky _____, because he’ll start doing this with his horn. Next thing you know, because he keeps pressure on me, musically speaking. You got to keep – because he might call a tune that we haven’t played in 20 years. And I’ll say, “How did he remember that?” And I might kind of fumble through the chords, and he’ll look and smile. Then the second time I got it.

So it keeps me on my toes, because we don't have no preset – no. Who knows what he’s going to play? He might get up there and call anything, so I got to be ready for him.

[00:51:59]

Harold Mabern: So that keeps it fresh, too.

John Bass: Mm-hmm.

Harold Mabern: I mean, always be swinging. And we might play blues, and he loves it when I play “Boogie for _____.” He’s going to feature me on that. He loves that. Or he loves it when I play something that’s reminding him of **Earl Gonner**, because that’s a style that’s – not too many piano players know about, the way Earl Gonner plays. That’s a totally different concept, you see?

John Bass: So do you play different when you play with George, or do you think he plays different when he plays with you than with other people?

Harold Mabern: No. Good question. No, I play the same with George as I do with Eric Alexander or Billy Golson. I feed them a lot. Coltrane liked for you to feed him a chord tenor. Now some saxophone players or horn players, saxophone players, I don't play that way because I might crowd them. Some – I play the same ____, but space. You know how some people eat fast? You know, some people eat like this. Those are great eaters, because they digest their food. So I'm playing basically the same **voicing**, but I'm giving them more room to grow.

[00:53:00]

Harold Mabern: So I'm pumping them up. With George, I can pump him up. With Billy Golson, I can pump him up. With Johnny Griffin, I can pump up. With Frank Strozier, Joe **Hennison**, Sonny Rollins, Miles Davis, more space. That's the whole thing. Same basic chords, but less – you know, less aggressiveness.

John Bass: What about George, do you think? Do you think he plays differently with you, or when you hear him on other people's – you know, playing with other pianists?

Harold Mabern: No, he play – he doesn't –

John Bass: He's the same –

Harold Mabern: – change his style with the other piano players. It's just that a lot of times, it gets a little tricky, because their lack of knowledge of tunes, and it's – the thing is, he says, "Nobody knows everything," but these – he'll call the tune, and he figure, these are tunes that the piano players should – see, when you play piano, you can't hide. You – I don't care. You can put the – you can put the soft pedal down. A wrong chord is going to come out a wrong chord. If you play bass and you're loud and you don't _____, you can turn it off. You don't hear nothing.

[00:53:59]

Harold Mabern: Drummers don't have that problem. They just play brushes or stick. But with George, with other piano players _____, I'm rooting for them. He might call some old standard tune, and it gets

a little bit, as they say, nebulous. Of course, but see, the difference with them and what I do, if I play a song, and maybe a couple ____ I'm not sure, I don't wait for the next night or the next set. I say, "Hey, George." ____ before the set's over, because he plays piano excellent, I say, "What was that chord?" I want to know what I did wrong before I leave the stand.

I say, "Oh." So I say, "Let's try it again on the next set. I got it." That's the way we were raised in Memphis. We weren't trifling at all. Music was too important to us, and Professor Garrett instilled that in us without saying it himself. We wanted to be perfectionists. We wanted to make sure whatever we played, it swung, it had quality, a good sound, and it was correct. We just – we just grew up that way, being correct. You know, like I said, they gave me – George and Louis Smith gave me "All the Things You Are."

[00:54:58]

Harold Mabern:

I held on to that song for a whole year, finally said, "Let's play 'All the Things You Are.'" I said, "What's that?" They said, "Man, we gave you that song a year ago." I said, "Oh, I didn't know I was supposed to learn it." You know? I didn't _____. But we grew up with that mindset, because we had great people before us, like Robert **Talley**, Honeymoon – Hank **O'Day**, who played alto with – I think it was Tuff Green's band. Al Jackson, you know, or Bill Harvey.

So we always – _____ **Horne**. We always had good quality musicians who were a little older than us who knew the importance of being correct and playing right chord changes.

John Bass:

Well, you mentioned – one thing I've always been interested in, so you're at Manassas, and it's – you know, Manassas has this wonderful history. Did you guys know or were you aware of like what Lunceford did back in the day?

Harold Mabern:

I had no idea that Jimmie Lunceford started the program there until that – long after I had graduated.

John Bass:

Wow.

Harold Mabern:

I had no idea. Then when I found out, I said, "You're kidding."

[00:55:59]

Harold Mabern: That's when I found out, years later. "Oh, Jimmie Lunceford started the program at Manassas." I had no idea. And Gerald Wilson was playing fourth trumpet in the trumpet section. Yeah. So no, we didn't know anything about –

John Bass: Interesting.

Harold Mabern: We knew about Jimmie, but we didn't know how important he was to that school. So then that's when I really stuck my chest out, like a lot of people don't know, I told them, Aretha Franklin was born in Memphis, Tennessee. She just grew up in _____. Morgan Freeman, Memphis, Tennessee. The ex-mayor Marion Barry, Memphis, Tennessee. They said he had a PhD in chemist. I said, "Well, maybe that explains some other stuff we got going – " you know?

So this naturally – Alberta Hunter, you know, Memphis _____ and Big Maybelle and Ike and Tina Turner. You know, the list is endless. A lot of great people come out of this town. And even present day, Justin Timberlake.

John Bass: Absolutely.

Harold Mabern: You know, his – he does quality music. You know, maybe one day he might open up a nice jazz club.

[00:57:01]

Harold Mabern: If anybody could afford to do it, he could.

John Bass: There you go. That's –

Harold Mabern: You know what I'm saying? So maybe – somebody tell him, say, "Hey, Justin, a little jazz, a little 200 seater on Bill Street." You know? But no, we didn't know about Jimmie Lunceford, you know, but that's the part I'm proud of, that it's – that's been some great people to come out of this, you know.

But every time, you know, I think about Phineas Newborn Junior, man, you know, because – excuse me – I never – and George Coleman, either. I never heard him say a bad word about anybody, because he – first of all, he didn't talk much. But if you ask him a question, he would expound on it, you know. And the way they overlooked him and underappreciated him, it was just – oh, man, it was a hurtful thing. Every day I think about him, you know. I mean, I never heard him say anything bad, you know. And never's

a big word. If he couldn't say anything good about you, he wouldn't say anything, you know.

John Bass: Could you talk a little bit more about Phineas Newborn Junior? I mean, we've been talking for a couple of days about ____ –

Harold Mabern: Yeah, but like I said, you know, Frank Strozier and I started out playing together.

[00:58:03]

Harold Mabern: And we were playing **counterpart**. At this point, I was kind of getting a little _____. We play a lot of stuff by Paul Desmond, Dave Brubeck, the West Coast guys. And it was good music. It was just, you know, people asked, what's the difference? But during that time, I would say the East Coast music was good music, but it was lighter in texture, a lot of counterpart. *[Humming]* But it was good music, as opposed to the East Coast was a little bit more hardcore, if you will. You know, they both swung, but one was a little lighter, and it's like saying Paul Desmond – Paul Desmond's alto sound against Charlie Parker or ____ sound. Great sound, but one is a little more forceful.

Stan Getz's sound against say Coltrane's sound. Great sound, but one's a little bit – they both are great artists, great musicians. You see? Say Mel Lewis's drum sound as opposed to Buddy Rich's sound. Now that – you're talking about a musical genius, Buddy Rich.

[00:59:00]

Harold Mabern: That – oh, but anyway, but back to Phineas, so Frank and I were playing, you know, our little counterpart. Now at my high school, he was a little older, we had a great pianist who was kind of playing like Phineas did. His name was Evans Bradshaw. Then he had a younger brother named Johnny Bradshaw who played piano, and they both could play _____, because I had no clue about how to improvise or nothing. I was just doing the best I could.

So then some kind of way we met this pianist named Charles Thomas, rest his soul, and he – then he was heavily entrenched in Bud Powell and George Shearing, and he could play the George Shearing with the block chords and the lock chords, you know, *[humming]*. You know? And that was a lesson.

So he came to hear us play at Frank's house. He said, "Man, you cats better get hip to Bud Powell." Now I tell you, we said, "Well, who is that?" We'd never heard of him, because on the radio, George Shearing and Oscar Peterson's music was being heard, because it was commercially conducive to what the people wanted to hear.

[01:00:02]

Harold Mabern:

Oscar Peterson had a hit on "Tenderly" with Ray Brown. So it wasn't what you call real _____. Even then, there was a kind of way that if your music was too aggressive, you couldn't get too much airplay.

So I'm playing – so Charles Thomas says, "Well, man, there's a piano player you need to hear." I said, "Who is it? Does he play like you?" He said, "He's better than me." I said, "Well, what's his name?" He said, "His name is **Phineas** Newborn." As we know, that's his ____ – I said, "Really?"

So he took me down. That's when Phineas, they had a little music store, the little records in the front and the little piano in the back, and Phineas would give a little lesson. So he introduced me to him, and Phineas said, "How you doing?" He said, "Play something for me."

Now during that time, like I said, I had two songs I could play, and I was playing like a little classical thing with the – called "The Happy Farmer, [*humming*]. So I couldn't even play that. So I'm scuffling, trying to play the second part, and Phineas was playing the first part for me.

[01:00:59]

Harold Mabern:

And that's how we met. So then I heard him play. Like I said, the first thing he played for me was "Taboo" by Art Tatum. And when I saw what he could do, and what he was doing with his left hand, and the independence, and the touch, and then the technique with the octave ____, I said, "Wow." Man, I couldn't believe that. And I said to myself, "That's what I want to do."

And that was the standard. I knew I would never outplay that. I didn't want to. But when I saw him do that, I was motivated. I said, "That's what I want to play. I want to play like that."

So I would get together with him. Now he never did really sit down and say, “Now – “ he would play, and I would listen, and I think that’s what cultivated my ears, because he would play everything in the natural form. He never did take the time – every now and then he would play a run, like he would play a run with the left hand going this way, and he would look at me and play that real slow, even though I still couldn’t get it. But I kind of understood what he was doing.

So I didn’t spend a lot of time with him in Memphis. I met him like in ’52.

[01:02:02]

Harold Mabern:

We played off and on, jammed together. He’d play the bass or the drums. I graduated in ’54, moved to Chicago, heard Clifford Brown play _____, [*humming*], came back to Memphis. So he said, “Play something for me.” He always called me maestro. So when I played _____, he had never heard that, because he had never heard – you know, because they didn’t have any records of Clifford Brown or Max Roach in the store.

He said, “What’s that?” And I showed him. And he said, “Show it to me.” I showed it to him, note for note. That’s my claim to fame, that the student taught the teacher. And I told him – and the first record, he recorded it. He recorded it twice, on _____ *Piano*, and he recorded it on *Here’s Phineas*, with Kenny Clark and Oscar Pettiford. You know?

And off and on – I didn’t see him no more, until finally, he moved to New York, 19 – I think ’56, he and Jamil Nasser, and Big **Phineas** came together. And after a while, the _____, “Well, look, you can keep the bass player, but you really need to get a drummer, kind of upscale drummer, to – “ you know what I mean.

[01:03:03]

Harold Mabern:

And then Calvin was in the group for a while, and then I saw Phineas off and on at Birdland. Then the next thing, he had moved to Los Angeles, and I wasn’t really in touch with him, except through his records and stuff. But what he played and the way he inspired me, man, was an everlasting thing, you know. And I tell people, John Coltrane had tremendous respect for him. Coltrane used to sit and watch him practice all day, because Coltrane knew – he played tenor saxophone, too. He played tenor saxophone very well. He played the trumpet very well. He played vibes, like Milt

Jackson. In the **Omni** Band, he played French horn and mellophone. I mean, he was truly – if there’s anything such as a genius, Phineas Newborn Junior was a super-duper genius. Some guy told me he was in the Omni Band with Phineas, and said they called out names. “Jackson, what instrument?” No, they said, “Jackson, flugelhorn.” And they’d say, “**Rosenwasser**, trumpet.”

[01:04:02]

Harold Mabern:

And they got to Phineas last or something. He said, “Okay, young Newborn.” He said, “What instrument do you play?” And Phineas said to him, “What instrument do you need?” Just like – you know what I mean? But here again, like I said, man, not to be redundant, there are not enough adjectives and things I could say about him, because he was such a gentle human being, and he deserved much better than he got.

Matter of fact, most of the musicians from Memphis, except for a few, been overlooked. Booker Little died too young. Frank Strozier got so fed up, he just put the horn in the case. But in his case, he had such a good relation, he was so smart, he was a science teacher for 22 years. So he didn’t need it.

George Coleman is still hanging on. They’re not giving him his just due. So I try to keep him motivated. You know what I mean.

John Bass:

Mm-hmm.

Harold Mabern:

James Williams gone too soon. Don Brown, he’s down in Knoxville. He’s not – you know what I mean.

[01:05:00]

Harold Mabern:

So what I try to do is become the motivator. Hank Crawford was doing pretty well on what we call the **Chittlin’** Circuit. Thank goodness, **Curt Weller** is doing quite well, deservedly so. Bobby Lyle, even though a lot of people don’t know he’s from here, but he’s been able to do some things, because he was always involved with what they call the smooth jazz. But he can play bebop, too, and he was musical director for Al Jarreau, Anita Baker, and Bette Midler. Bobby Lyle, bad cat, you know.

So it’s like – it’s like the musicians from Chicago, aside from Herbie Hancock and a few others, which is fine, been overlooked. Johnny Griffin didn’t get his just due. That’s why he moved to France. Great as he was, you know.

But the Memphis musicians, it's like we're almost nonexistent. So I'm trying to – like I say, every time I play, it's about us. Every note I play, it's for Phineas, because had he gotten his just due, he would still be here with us. But he just got depressed. He might – you know, nothing to live for.

[01:05:58]

Harold Mabern:

Of course, I saw him one time, I say – I always called him Junior. I said, “How you feel, Junior?” He said, “I’m okay. I just – I just wish I could play, had a gig.” Can you imagine, a genius wishing he had a gig? And that’s why I always loved James Williams. James really looked out for him, go by, see **Mama** _____. I think Phineas had James to go by and make sure the pianos were tuned. James Williams really supported Phineas, supported me, you know. He was another true – a true genius, a giver, as opposed to taking. He was always paying you and apologizing for great money. You know what I mean.

So everything I do, can do for the unsung heroes of Memphis, Tennessee, mainly Phineas. You know what I mean.

John Bass:

Mm-hmm. Well, just – I don't know. You've summed it up so well. But one of the things that we're interested in is Memphis music, when you think of Memphis music, right, it's great stuff, but it's Elvis, and it's the blues, and it's the wonderful things they did at Stacks and **High**. But the jazz tradition from here is so amazing.

[01:06:59]

John Bass:

And it's great that you're carrying it on. So, I mean, I guess any final thoughts or something you want to say about what Memphis means to the jazz world?

Harold Mabern:

Well, it will always mean, even though we're not getting our just due and true recognition that we know we deserve, maybe some rich millionaire – I'm serious, rich millionaire or trillionaire will realize this and say, “What, all these people – “ and do something about it.

Years ago, there was a legendary drummer named – oh, I can't – his first name was something ____, but they called him Red Saunders. He left Memphis and went to Chicago and because the

house leader band at the most famous after hours club in Chicago called Club DeLisa. That was Red Saunders.

So in closing, maybe one day somebody can write a true story or put up a monument to Jimmie Lunceford and Phineas. If somebody did that, I'd feel justified, you know. That's what I'd like to see happen. Maybe somebody out there can and will do it, or maybe the MacArthur people with all the money they got can give a grant to Rhodes College or something.

[01:08:04]

Harold Mabern: To do a research or something like that. That would be my wish, you know. That somebody can do something to correct the injustices that's been done to the musicians, the few jazz musicians that's been overlooked. **Charles Rogers** is doing quite well. He always was, you know. But there are a few others. I'd like to see somebody recognize the genius of George Coleman more, you know, who deserves it. Because he's a proud man, he won't say anything. But I'll speak up for him, you know, that he deserves much better than he's gotten over the years.

No, he's not poverty-stricken, but recognize would be because – the contribution he made with Miles was as great as Coltrane or Wayne Shorter, even though John Coltrane recommended him for the gig with Miles. So maybe one day somebody will do something for him, you see, while he can still appreciate it, you know.

John Bass: Well, it's so well said.

[01:08:57]

John Bass: Thank you so much for being here.

Harold Mabern: Thank you.

John Bass: We'll work on it, and we'll –

Harold Mabern: Work on it, and –

John Bass: – we just appreciate you being here.

Harold Mabern: My pleasure. Glad to be of help.

John Bass: Great. Thank you.

Harold Mabern: Yeah.

[End of Audio]