

[0:00:00]

Al Bell: You want me to –

Female: Okay.

Al Bell: Ten, nine, eight, seven, six, three, two, one.

Male 1: **That's** pretty good.

[Laughter]

Male 1: We only say that to people **on the system**.

[Laughter]

Female: You guys are also [inaudible] so [inaudible] everyone.

Al Bell: All right.

Daniel Jacobs: Well, on behalf of Crossroads to Freedom, Rhodes College and the Memphis Rock and Soul Museum, I wanna sincerely thank you for taking the time to share your story with us today. I'm Daniel Jacobs. I'm a graduate of Rhodes College and I'm honored to meet you and hear your story.

Al Bell: Well, thank you.

Bradley Bledsoe: I'm Bradley Bledsoe, a junior at Rhodes College, and honored as well to meet you and hear your story. Today's interview will be archived online at crossroadstofreedom.org, our Web site. Okay, let's start off with some basic biographical information to get us started. For the record, can you please state your name?

Al Bell: My name is Alvertis Isbell. I'm professionally known as Al Bell.

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Bradley Bledsoe: Okay. If you don't mind telling us, what year were you born?

Al Bell: Nineteen-forty.

Bradley Bledsoe: Okay. Where were you born and raised?

Al Bell: I was born in Brinkley, Arkansas and my parents left Brinkley when I was five years of age and moved to North Little Rock, Arkansas and I was raised up in North Little Rock, Arkansas.

Bradley Bledsoe: Okay. Now let's talk a little bit about your experiences growing up. Can you tell me about the neighborhood you grew up in?

Al Bell: Well, I grew up in, believe it or not, at that point in time what was a quasi-integrated neighborhood when segregation permeated the South and America, but our neighborhood was, I suppose you would say, semi or middle class for that era type neighborhood.

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And what was so interesting about it is that the streets that we lived on, well, the corner street that we lived next to, which was a street called Hazel Street – that was the name of the street – and we lived on Broadway, but on Hazel Street between Broadway and Second Street was where the churches were. That's where some businesses were located and our – and the homes were in the same area and ironically from Second Street to Washington Avenue, which was just the next block up, that area was called Korea after the Korean War. So in that area what you had was the clubs and the pool halls and the places where the guys went in to gamble.

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And every Saturday night we knew that there was gonna be some sort of excitement in Korea because the people would come and go in the clubs and things and end up having just a little bit too much joy juice, you know, and lose control of their self-control because it had control and as a result of it, from time to time somebody got hurt in Korea, but what was so interesting about it is that – and I remember this going back. Two things I remember going back as a child. One was people would be in Korea and they would walk from Korea, which is Washington Avenue, to Second Street, between Second Street and Broadway. They could have been cursing between Washington and Second, but between Second and Broadway, you'd never know that they came outta that area because everything changed about them until they got two blocks away which was where the railroad crossings were and that was the respect and they could be drunk.

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There was one guy that came through the neighborhood every Friday night and that we would say, “Here comes old Two-Step” because he would come and take two steps forward and then that alcohol would push him back one step and you can imagine how long it took him to get that one block. *[Laughter]* But that was the kind of neighborhood that I grew up in where we all knew each other, all related to each other and blocks apart, just one block apart, but different – totally different lifestyles but respect for both. I never had any concern or fear of going from my block through Korea because I had to go through Korea to get to where we caught the bus because the bus was on Washington Avenue, and I’d go through Korea just like it was in that other block and the people in Korea respected the people in the other area, which was really a beautiful part of life.

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And I look at some of the things that are happening in America today and things that I’ve experienced over the past, and you see people with different attitudes, different ways of thinking and how they conduct their lives and living different but then having respect for each other because even though that, you know, we didn’t – my family – I came from a long line of Seventh Day Adventists and they were strict disciplinarians and all of that and even though that was how I was being raised, I still had respect and appreciation for those people that came there in Korea every Friday and Saturday night and those that lived in that area and had all of their beverages and felt good and all of that. I respected them and appreciated them for being – that’s who they were.

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And as I reflect on those kind of things and I look at our country today, which is becoming a beautiful multicultural society, probably the most beautiful on Planet Earth because we have representatives of just about every ethnic group here in America today, and I’m hoping that we can continue to evolve and have the kind of relationship and respect for each other and all of the different cultures like I experienced just within those two block in my neighborhood as I grew up because I know how it affected me in life and if we can have that as we continue to evolve as a country, it will make us, I think, probably one of the most beautiful and respected nations on Planet Earth. *[Cut 0:06:41]*

Bradley Bledsoe:

Okay, let’s talk a little bit about your educational experiences. Where did you go to grade school and high school in Little Rock?

Al Bell: Well, I started off, thank God, about one, two, three blocks from where I lived at a Catholic school, St. Augustine Catholic School.

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And I received grades one through four, a marvelous education, and the nuns there at that Catholic school were also strong disciplinarians, and they had no reluctance at all about ensuring and taking the necessary steps to cause you to appreciate how you should be conducting your life and how you should be conducting yourself in class. I remember on one occasion where I was sitting and I happened – there was a young lady sitting next to me, and I turned and said something to her at a time when I wasn't supposed to be saying anything in that classroom and Sister Superior, as she was called, walked over to me and said, "Alvertis." I said, "Yes, Sister." She said, "Put your hand on the desktop." And I put my hand on the desktop. She says, "Now ball up your fist."

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And I balled up my fist and she took that ruler and went bam! And I never made that mistake again. *[Laughter]* And I saw others make the mistake but not learn the first time around and they ended up in what was called the cloak room, and the cloak room was where when you came in if it was, you know, cold or raining or whatever, that's where you hung your jackets and your coat and all that kinda stuff, and if you ever had to go to the cloak room, you prayed because they had straps in the cloak room that were about that big and with – and I don't – and those sisters were very strong, athletic, and they had no problem really giving it to you, but at the same time, they gave us an excellent education. They taught us also how to be entrepreneurs because what – and I didn't realize it at that time.

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But on an annual basis they would have what you call bazaars and they used the bazaars to raise money for the school and that's where they got people in the neighborhood and those that had children in school there would bring and collect all year all kinds of things where they would be available for sale at these bazaars and they would get them, bring them. It was there. They brought them for free and whatever it was sold for – and some of the same people would come and buy 'cause they would see things that they wanted, but that's how the school raised money, but it was our

responsibility to go out and get the people to come, meaning the students. We're talking grades one, two, three and four, to go out and carry the word out to people and get them to come and do that, and also they would have a booklet where they would want you to spend – I think it was – I've forgotten exactly what the amount was. It may have been five cent a page for about five pages in a book.

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And you'd get – you would get the book and you could come there during the bazaar and they had a big wheel that they would turn and great prizes in the back if the wheel stopped on your number, and it would be the number that would be on the little card that you had, and that's when I used to hear them say, "Round and around she goes; where she stops, nobody knows." And everybody would sit and wait on to see if it was their number 'cause you would always get much, much more than you had paid, you know, to buy that booklet, and I learned and got the entrepreneurial spirit there. I learned the spirit of really camaraderie and working together in grades one through four and the influence of the Catholic Church, which I did until – I came from a line of Seventh Day Adventists and had that in me at that time and so I couldn't – Catholicism just wasn't, quote, "my shtick."

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And I'd got onto the point where father, for some reason or another, thought enough of me to want me to become an altar boy, but I just – I couldn't – at that age, I couldn't – I didn't feel comfortable doing what I saw the altar boys doing. I mean it's nothing wrong; I just didn't feel comfortable doing that, so I didn't become that. That was grades one through four and then in grades five through nine, I attended a Seventh Day Adventist private school and there each morning our first class was the Bible, and it was where we studied the Bible and very well organized and each day we had to learn a Scripture. We had to learn that Scripture. It was given to us that day.

[0:11:56] *Cut*

And the next day when we came back to school, we had to say that Scripture committed to memory in a 24-hour period of time, and we did it. We did it and enjoyed doing it and it would – there was – the general attitude was if you didn't do that something was wrong with you because you – I mean with your peers. Something

was wrong with you if you didn't come back and have your Scripture committed to memory that next day, and I'm – additionally, there was a – I know the – academically, they – there was the same level or maybe even a bit more than what I had received at the Catholic school. It was also there where just across an alley and up about a half a block was the public school which was Dunbar High School, and I'd get an opportunity to sit there and I think this was my first really influence with respect to music.

[0:13:03]

I would hear it in church and all of that, the hymns and what have you, and that was fine, but the band would come and rehearse and I could hear them as we would sit there in class and somehow or another it was – it captured my imagination and I learned how to start playing the drums just like the drummer with my finger, and I could play – you know, I played the drums just with – they'd be out playing and I'd be playing the drums with my finger. I couldn't – I never did get past playing me with my fingers, but at least I could play them with my fingers. So I – there also the – we were borderline vegetarians, so the best that we were allowed to eat or which was a part of the doctrine in the church was fish and chicken and the rest – that was it.

[0:13:58]

And I remember on one occasion where we had a transfer of instructors. I love fish, by the way, so a transfer of instructors and the instructor was a strict vegetarian and she didn't allow you to come and bring – 'cause we brought our own lunches, and eat anything other than, you know, vegetables. And on one occasion, not being aware of this and my mother not being aware of this, I got some of my favorite food, which was some fried brim – you know what a brim fish is? – fried brim and I came and when I opened that up, oh, she just exploded and I couldn't eat that so I had to go without my lunch, and it bothered me for a long time and I would see her in church every Sabbath, but I must admit it took me a long time to forgive her [*Laughter*] for not letting me eat my fish and go without food.

[0:15:05]

Daniel Jacobs:

So going back to music, you know, that's the first experience of hearing the band. When did you start getting more involved with music and –?

Al Bell: My musical training background experience, etc. came at Scipio A. Jones High School. Now that's after I left the Seventh Day Adventist private school. Senior high was at the public school in North Little Rock, and I was fortunate enough to become by my junior year president – state president of the National Honor Society, which meant I was – you know, I was four point across the board, and I was elected student council president.

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And the way I got elected, some of my girlfriends – my friends were – and still are – were primarily females. One of the reasons for that was because, you know, I went out and I tried to run track, tried to run the 100-yard – I'm sorry, the mile and I mean the guys were so superior to me until I had to go somewhere and sit down and I knew I wasn't gonna ever catch up, and I went out to play basketball and there was a guy on the basketball team named Eddie Miles who was a superior basketball player and back then he could shoot what today they call the three-pointers. He could do that back then and all I would end up doing is sitting on the bench all of the time, so I said, "To heck with this. Forget it." So I went to the other end of the building and make sure that the courses that I ended up with was biology, science, chemistry, physics and I was back there with a bunch of girls with all of that.

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And they encouraged me to run for president of the student council and this was my first political experience, so I – one of the problems that we had on campus at that time was the school – and I'm sure it was – in retrospect, it was a budgetary problem more so than a health problem – health issue, and that was there never was enough salt on the tables in the cafeteria and kids were always complaining about it, so I ran and committed to them that if they elected me as president of student council that I would make sure that the school had salt on every table in the cafeteria, and I mean I made a big issue out of it. Fortunately, the principal was kind enough to [*Laughter*] accommodate me after I was elected, but he made me at that time president of the Audiovisual Aid Society.

[Cut 0:18:03]

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And the Audiovisual Aid Society was the organization on the campus there that controlled all of the motion picture projectors as well as then the record players and when an instructor wanted the

motion picture projector to play a film in his or her class, they had to come to me in order to get it because I had complete control of that, and if you wanted the record player then you had to have me with the record player because the principal would not allow the record player to go anyplace without me there overseeing it and handling it. No one else could touch the record player. Well, we got to a point where the kids started wanting to have in the multipurpose room – after the baseball – basketball games and football games, they wanted to have record hops.

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You know, now we call them discos and all that kinda good stuff, but it was a record hop then and finally I was able to persuade the principal to do that, allow us to do it, and he did but, you know, the rules, “You have to go in yourself, so that means you’re gonna have to come here at night after these games and you’re gonna have to go in that multipurpose room and play the music yourself.” So I said, “Okay.” Well, the problem was when I first said okay – and I didn’t realize it – we didn’t have any records to play, and I went back to talk to the principal about it. He said, “Well, we don’t have it in the budget, so we can’t go and buy records. You know, you ought to ask for it and figure it out yourself.” And so I went back and started talking to some of my friends and telling them what the problem was, so I was able to start collecting during the week records from everybody and I’d play them after the game in the multipurpose room.

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And after doing it for a while and watching people dance and react and how – ’cause I was elevated on the stage with the record player there and the speakers, you know, on the side. I watched them react and how they were reacting to that music and at some times some would come and tell me, “Be sure you play X and give me particular record.” And it got to the point where I started asking them, “Well, why do you like The Platters? And why is it that you like ‘Run, Red, Run’ by The Coasters? And why is that you like this and why is it that you like that?”

And they would tell me why they liked certain records, and the girls would really tell me how – what they thought about a record and what it meant to them, so I started getting a feeling for how music and how this music was affecting people, and after a while, I said, “Well, let me just get a microphone.” So I got a microphone and put the microphone up on the table and the record player there

and their records, and I sat down in my chair behind it and I talked to them about the music.

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And this is for Patricia and Patricia said this about this and Patricia likes John Doe and blah, blah, blah – I don't wanna call their names here – but that went on and it got to the point where I got good enough to where the guys that were basically the wallflowers that didn't really want to dance, well, the girls had told me enough about specific guys and music that the guys liked and music that – guys that they liked, so I knew how to play that record, dedicate it to the girl and call the guy's name and the girl would go get the guy. [Laughter] And he'd come out on the floor and dance. That's how I started getting into music and learning about music. On one – what I did on one occasion, I put together a talent show between that Dunbar High School in Little Rock and Scipio A. Jones High School in North Little Rock.

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I knew the president of the student council there at Dunbar and he cooperated with me and we went to Dunbar Community Center in Little Rock and put on this talent show that I called radio station T-O – no, I called it T-O-U-G-H, radio station T-O-U-G-H, Tough, meaning it was tough. That was the word for when you really, you know, had it going on and we had just had at that time the first black radio station to open up in our town where we could hear some of our music. It was radio station KOKY, and I got the leading disc jockey on the station and the station manager and the head of the music department there at Jones High School to be the judges, so I went to Dunbar Community Center and set up my chair, and I would bring them all up on stage and announce them and all of that and talk about them, each one of them, 'cause I had the information on them and they'd go on and perform and then off the stage, and I'd bring the next one on.

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Well, after it was over and we had our first-, second- and third-place winner, the manager of the radio station – his name was Ed **Phalen** – he said, "Listen, Alvertis" – that's my first name, Alvertis. He said, "I want you to come by the radio station Friday. I wanna talk to you." I said, "What?" He says, "Yeah, come by the radio station. I wanna talk to you." I said, "Okay." So that Friday after school I caught the bus, went by the radio station, went

by his office, and he said, “Sit down.” He said, “You know what? You have an unbelievable gift to gab.” I said, “What?”
[Laughter] I didn’t know what he meant. He said, “You have a gift of gab and I’m gonna make a disc jockey outta you. I want you to come here Sunday morning.” This is Friday. “I’m gonna – I want you to come here Sunday morning and you get here at 5:00.

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“And I’m gonna have Hal Hartley” – which was one of the full-time jocks – “to be here with you and you’re gonna do that gospel show for me on Sunday morning and we’re gonna pay you to do it.” I said, “Okay, fine. Great.” *[Cut 0:24:11]* So I got there and, of course, that was during the time when you had to get your third-class, I believe it was, license with the FCC because we had to really sit and run our boards at that time, not like it – you know, it is today. You had to be – really be an engineer.

So Hal Hartley came there that Sunday morning, showed me where the records were. I didn’t know anything about the gospel music. He identified some of the songs for me that I should be playing, showed me how to run the board between 5:00 and 6:00 and at 6:00, he was – okay, about 10 minutes ’til 6:00, he said, “You got it,” went on and kicked it on the air and from that point forward I played gospel music on Sunday morning, but the thing that I did that caused me to understand it quickly was as the people would call in and request, I’d pick up the phone and talk to them just like I did at Jones High School.

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And I began to understand why they liked certain records and how it affected them and all of that, so I knew what to say and what to do and how to really organize the music that I was playing ’cause I had the freedom to do that. Pretty soon, I was doing morning gospel on Sunday and afternoon jazz. They put me in the jazz slot and, of course, I had to learn about that and I learned there by going over to Philander Smith College and talking to the alphas and the kappas who were the ones that had the big frat parties on campus and at their frat parties they would start off – I found out later on – playing jazz and they’d play the jazz until about 10:00 and then 10:00 they went from being sophisticated to B. B. King and to Jimmy Reed and all of the blues and all that kinda stuff. But I learned jazz from them and that gave me my insight into what to do as far as programming jazz and then, of course, as the people would call and talk to me, the same.

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And I got to the point where they lost the morning jock on the station and they brought me – by this time now I had graduated from high school. It was the last part of my senior year and getting ready to attend college there, Philander Smith College in Little Rock, and I became the morning drive jock on the station, and I had listened to the personality jocks that had been on the station and decided, well, I wanna do that, too. I don't wanna just play the music. I wanna put my personality in – put a personality into the music, but in listening to them I would hear things that they would do that would irritate me and I figured it would irritate the audience, so what I would do back then is I'd take the records and I'd listen to them over and over again, write down all of the lyrics so I would know all of the lyrics and listen. I knew what the drummer was doing, what the guitar player was doing, even started hearing things where there were mistakes made but still ended up being on the record.

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Now I heard all of that and what I did, though, it – I didn't have a great sense of timing or anything but I had a good feel, and it allowed me to play the music and I would know at a certain point, okay, I got a break. I can say, "Ow." And I could say, "Feels good." [Laughter] So what else you wanna do? You know, that – but I knew the music well enough to speak into the music without it, you know, interfering. I became a part of it, and I'd talk back and forth to people and I'd hear what they thought about the music and thought about what I was doing, but I realized after a while that there were guys coming in from St. Louis, from Chicago, from Memphis, from Nashville, from New Orleans, from Houston, Texas and Atlanta, Georgia coming all the way to Little Rock, Arkansas to see me, to get me to play their music and spend money to do that.

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And I got to thinking about that. I said, "You know, they must be making money some kinda way with these records." I said, "I gotta figure out what this is 'cause something is going on here." Well, we had one record store in town, Moses Melody Shop, so I went and started talking to the people at Moses about the business side of it. I had already been going to Moses to see what was selling and watch people in there to see what they were buying and

what they were talking about as they were listening to music and all of that, but I went and they appreciated it because it was helping them 'cause I was playing on the air the product of the records that people were responding to and reacting to in – you know, in the record shop, so they didn't have a problem talking to me, and I found out then that they got the product from the wholesalers in Memphis, so I started coming to Memphis and sitting and talking to the wholesalers here in town.

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And that's when – while I was coming here, I heard what I thought was one of the most unusual and unique disc jockeys that I've ever heard on radio in my life and his name was Dewey Phillips and Dewey Phillips at that time was really being sponsored by Sam Phillips who owned Sun Records, the birthplace of Elvis Presley, and I'd drive into Memphis and hear Dewey Phillips, say, "Grab a wheelbarrow full of goober dust and ram it through the front door and tell them Phillips sent you." Bam! And he did a record.

I said, "That one is brilliant. What has he done?" And I'd hear him do his commercials, and I mean it was just – it was, I mean, just absolutely entertaining, unique and all of that kinda good stuff, but I learned from the wholesalers the wholesale part, so I understood what the wholesaler – how the wholesalers brought – bought the product from the record labels, sold them to the retailers and the retailers' markup and all that kinda good stuff, so I started getting the fundamentals of the record business.

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I left radio and college and headed in 1959 to Midway, Georgia and joined up with Dr. King at the Southern Christian Leadership Conference workshops in Midway, Georgia and studied there as a student teacher for quite some time with Dr. King, and I won't get into all of that, and eventually left for – well, I guess – what's the best way to put it? For – well, as Dr. King put it, what he was doing had to take place before I could do what I was wanting to do and what was in me, and what was in me was, I think, something that – I know something that was put in me when I was in my mother's womb and before I came out.

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It's – I call it economic empowerment and economic development. That's something that's just in me. Well, at that time, doc was

about passive resistance and not about that, but as a student teacher, was busy teaching what I knew about that and what I felt about that, and I – so I left and came – well, I can't do it like that. It's – I don't feel comfortable not telling you this. I don't know, 'cause it's a part of my life that's very significant and important, and it's also a part of my life that I don't talk about that much and people don't know that side of me. [Cut 0:31:51] They don't know the – those pursuits in my life nor do they know the theological side of my life and how deep I am involved in that.

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But what happened was in '59 there was this young man to everybody else but an older person to me, 'cause I was just 19, called Martin Luther King that was inspiring and influencing a lot of people because they appreciated his fight for liberty and justice and equality for all people, and the hope that was in his messages and what have you, and it got my attention as a youngster, so I went to Midway, Georgia and became involved there. At that time, though, I had just come out of the experiences in 1957 in Little Rock where we had the so-called school integration crisis which got to be pretty rough at that point in time.

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And I – as a part of my culture, I early on carried a switchblade knife. You know what a switchblade knife is. I carried a switchblade knife. I mean, you know, have multi purposes, you know. You can cut – you know, you can peel your apples and your pears and cut your carrots and you can – but I carried that switchblade knife, so I went into Macon, Georgia – not Macon, into Midway, Georgia with this switchblade knife in my pocket, joined up with Dr. King, and he didn't know I had the knife, and did my teaching and serving as a student and talking when he wasn't around to the students about my philosophy as it related to economic development and economic empowerment and all that kinda good stuff. And one occasion, doc came in and assembled a march so we were going into Savannah, Georgia to march.

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And we were organized and marching down on Main Street in Savannah, Georgia, singing, "I Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around, Eye on the Prize." I ain't gonna let nobody turn me around, etc., all full of enthusiasm and all that, and on each curb from the curb back to the stores, nothing but people mostly. I

mean just a wall of people that had different skin tones than ours and that had looks in their eyes that were not kind looks, and I was on the front line left flank, so as we were marching up the streets, there was a guy in front of us. He was about six-two and he was looking right at me and he was saying, “You N this” and “You black SOB” and you blah, blah, blah, all kinds of names.

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And he was just raising Cain. Well, you know, that didn't bother me. Words didn't bother me. I mean so what? But as we got closer and I was about three feet from him, he went and spit on me and before I knew it, I was in my pocket and out with my switchblade knife and after him and after all of these people like a nut and, fortunately, Hosea Williams and a black lady at that time who wore an afro – it's the first time I'd ever seen an afro – came into the crowd of people and got me, rescued me. I didn't know I was being rescued 'cause [Laughter] I just reacted to this dude, you know, and anyway, we broke up the march and I had violated a cardinal rule. We went back to Midway that evening and doc came and sat down and talked with me.

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He said, “You know, Alvertis, the – this is about passive resistance and we are a Christian organization, and the first problem I have is that you're carrying that switchblade knife that you had today.” And, well, first – I mean with Dr. King calling me in, and that in itself was enough to make me shake all over 'cause I didn't know what the results of that was going to be, but when he said that to me, I don't know where it came, but it came into my head. I said, “Well, Doc, you know, Jesus had a disciple with him called Peter and Peter carried a sword. [Laughter] And that sword then was comparable to a shotgun.” So – and, of course, that – I mean that just – he just – he laughed, I mean, just uncontrollable laughter.

[0:36:59]

And afterwards, after he stopped laughing, he said, “You know, you have some of the finer qualities of Marcus Garvey in you.” And I said, “Oh?” 'Cause I didn't even know who Marcus Garvey was or what he was talking about. He said, “But I must tell you something.” He said, “You – what you don't appreciate and don't understand is that the rest of the world does not know that we even exist in America as a people.” He said, “We now have television and what has to happen now instead of you talking to these people

about how to defend themselves and all of that kinda stuff and I know you had these guys to come in from Savannah with these dogs trying to teach them how to defend themselves against dogs.” And I did; scared the daylights out of me, too.

Daniel Jacobs: You brought in people to –

Al Bell: To bring dogs in so they could teach –

Daniel Jacobs: They could fight.

Al Bell: – the kids how to defend themselves against the dogs.

[0:38:01]

Well, that lasted for about 10 or 15 minutes because when they came in with these dogs, man, I looked – I hadn’t seen a dog like that close up and with them right being – no, no, no. That’s all right. That’s all right. **He’ll pet.** But he knew about it. I didn’t know that he knew ’cause I thought I was doing it, you know, secretly and my way, but he knew about it and he raised that that night. He said, “I must tell you what has to happen with passive resistance and with us, Alvertis, is that we have to be beaten with the clubs. We have to be bitten by the dogs. We have to have the water hoses on us strong enough to knock us down. We have to see each other being hung and hanging from trees and many of us have to die and the world can see that on television.

[0:38:57] Cut

“And what happens then, Alvertis, is that the world begins to recognize that we exist in America as a people, but they also see how America is treating us.” He said, “Now that is what has to be done first. You don’t understand that. I understand what you’re doing but that – what I’m doing has to come first and then what you’re talking about doing with this economic empowerment and economic development, that can come next, but what I’m doing has to be done first.” Well, by that time I had settled down. I was just 19 years of age and I said, “I understand, Doc. I understand and I have violated you and I apologize for that and I’m sorry, but I love you. I love you and I won’t interfere any longer.” I loved and respected him and he loved and respected me and I knew it.

[0:39:56]

But I left about 3:00 that morning and went on out of Midway into Nashville, Tennessee, to Brown's Hotel in Nashville, Tennessee, and called a guy that I knew here in Memphis at radio station WLOK named Dick "Cane" Cole and asked him if he had a job. I wanted to go back into radio and he said, "No, I don't, Al, but as soon as there's an opening, you got it." And, oh, I don't know, a couple of months later, maybe not that long, Dick "Cane" Cole called me and I was back here in Memphis, Tennessee on radio at WLOK. I was doing morning drive and afternoon drive, which was unusual but great for me 'cause I loved it, and during that time is when I got a chance to meet some of the people at Stax Records and go by and seeing on one occasion what I considered a phenomenon. David Porter, which was one of the writers with Isaac Hayes, would come by the radio station to see me from time to time.

[0:41:00]

And I said, "Take me by so I can see this studio, this recording studio that you all have over there." Because by then I had started my own record label called De'Voice, D-E apostrophe V-O-I-C-E, De'Voice Records, and I had gone back and gotten a couple of – well, a group that was in high school with me, the **Acklin** Brothers, and recorded really a great record on them and a band that was popular in the state of Arkansas, **York Wilburn**. I had done a recording on them, and I was helped by a gentleman by the name of Red Matthews who was a white guy that I ran into accidentally here but he had had a big hit record at that time called "White Silver Sands." And I don't recall exactly how I met him, but he took a liking unto me and vice versa and started teaching me how to produce his way and aided me.

[0:42:00]

And that's how I was able to get this music recorded on Safice, but David – and David – I wanted to see the Stax Studio because I was playing and hearing some of the music that was coming out of there and David took me by Stax Studios. Went by one day and as we went in and he opened the door to Studio A, I looked back and in my head now is this funky music that I had been hearing on "Do the Dog," you know, and "Green Onions" and "Last Night" and what have you, and he opened the door and here are these four guys in here, two white guys and two black guys. I said, "Whoa, what is this? You mean to tell me that these guys are making this sound, these two white guys and these two black guys?" I mean it just freaked me out. I couldn't – I mean I was in awe, awestruck.

I mean I feel at this moment what I felt looking in that door. Now remember, we're living in a segregated environment, racism permeating, you know, the place.

[0:42:57]

And here are two black guys and two white guys inside this studio here on McLemore playing music together and making that funky music that I'd been hearing. I just couldn't – I mean I couldn't rationalize that in my head, but I grew to – honest to God, I did. I grew quickly to appreciate there's something magic going on here. Later on, I found out, once I came to Stax, their background and all of that and how you really had a cross-fertilization of [inaudible] musical influences and that combination plus the studio itself and how they had to record in there is what gave rise to that unique sound that came outta Stax. But at any rate, David asked me – I got a offer for a job in Washington, D.C. at WUST, so I discussed it with David Porter, who would come by all the time talking to me, and David said, "Man, listen. You should take that job. You should go to Washington." I said, "I don't know, man." "No, man, you need to take that job and go to Washington."

[0:44:01] *Cut*

And I didn't understand his motivation at that point in time, but he came back a couple of days later, said, "Man, listen, you should take that job and go to Washington. They're not playing our music up there and here's all of the releases that we have out right now. You need to take that job in Washington and go up there and start playing our records in Washington so we can really get our careers going." [Laughter] He did it and he convinced me to do it.

I had begun to, you know, think about it 'cause it was – I mean, you know, going to Washington, D.C. I'd been to Little Rock and Memphis. You're talking about Washington, D.C. I don't know whether or not I can go in there and compete with those boys. Well, David convinced me. He didn't recognize it at that time how much it was, but – I don't think he did. But I went on into Washington and started playing Stax music there, getting reaction on it. I started even playing Otis Redding who had never been played in that area and that kinda music wasn't being played in Washington, D.C.

[0:45:00]

And the music that came out of the South wasn't being played there. They were playing the do-wop music and Motown, and I

was all the way out of line and out of order, but I immediately started getting reaction 'cause people hadn't been hearing that music and it was music that they wanted because the people in Washington, D.C. came from Maryland and from Virginia and from Alabama and all across the South. They're Southerners there just like in Little Rock and in Memphis, Tennessee, and they were hearing something, you know, that was natural for them to react and respond to and very quickly I began to grow in the ratings there on the station. I remember on one occasion a guy – oh, I cannot think of his name now, but anyway, he was out of Nashville, Tennessee and he had a record label, Dial Records, and an artist, Joe Tex.

Daniel Jacobs: Hmm. Yeah.

Al Bell: Yeah, and had a record that – his label was distributed by Atlantic Records, also.

[0:46:03]

And he had taken his record to Atlantic for them to distribute it and they told him, “No, we can't distribute that because it sounds too churchy and it's not gonna make sense for us to release it in the marketplace 'cause nothing is gonna happen with it.” And he called me and said, “Al, you know, I got a great record, I believe. I'd like for you to listen to it and see if it's something that you think will sell.” I said, “Okay.” And he sent it to me and it was “Hold On to What You Got.”

Well, the next morning I went on the radio, and it was just a dub, no recordings, and I would – every half hour I was playing – from 6:00 to 10:00 every half hour I was playing “Hold On to What You Got” by Joe Tex 'cause it was such a great record and doing all of my talking between and telling people to call me and tell me what they thought about it and they would do that and I'd say what this lady said and that lady said and some – I had some calls where people would call and say, “Okay, you've played that record enough. Stop playing it.”

[0:47:02]

I'd get on the air and say, you know, “I got calls saying, ‘Don't play this anymore. You've played it enough.’ And I always wanna satisfy my listeners.” Bam! Joe Tex again, “You had better...” [Laughter] By the time I got off the air that morning, Schwartz Brothers, the record distributor in there, had ordered

30,000 records. They placed that order to Atlantic Records. Atlantic had the order for the 30,000 but didn't have the masters and no records. Buddy Killen. I've been trying to think of his name for several days now. That was the guy, so they had to get in touch with Buddy Killen and fly – get ready chartered planes to get down to Nashville to get the masters, to get back, to get to the plant to get the records manufactured quickly to satisfy that order and the rest was history. Well, the station manager told me – Daniel **Dina** – he said, “You know, Al, people in Washington are much more sophisticated than what you are accustomed to.”

[0:48:03]

“Black people here are much more sophisticated than black people in the South where you come from and this music that you're playing on there is not really the kinda music that they wanna hear, so you decrease that kind of music that you're playing and if not, we're gonna have a problem.” He said, “I thought on a couple of other occasions when I spoke to you about it that you would change it.” Well, maybe he had spoken to me about it, but I don't – I didn't recall at that point in time, but anyway, I went up – in the morning I did the 6:00 to 10:00 show and that 6:00 to 10:00 show in the morning, I did it from Bethesda, Maryland on the golf course because the transmitter and the tower was out there on that golf course. I mean, yeah, on the golf course and I had to do the show from out in Bethesda in the morning. So I went out that next morning.

[0:49:00]

We had a private local line from downtown. The station was located at 815 B Street in D.C. and the private local line where you pick up and, you know, back and forth. We'd communicate back and forth and I went out, went on the air that morning, picked the local line, took the receiver off, put the outside lines on hold and got on the air and started playing my music. I took a record that had been broken in the South before I left called “Rock Me, Baby” by B. B. King and, I don't know, it was 15 or 20 minutes or so, I was playing, “Rock Me, Baby” by B. B. King and I was coming outta “Rock Me, Baby” by B. B. King and playing “Further on up the Road” by Bobby “Blue” Bland and coming outta that and playing “Big Boss Man” by – and then I started getting on the air and telling people – I said, “The gentleman that owns this radio station, Daniel Dina is his name, says that people in Washington, D.C. don't wanna hear this kinda music.”

[0:50:03]

And I'd play some more and after I while I got it worked up pretty good. I said, "I want you to call and tell him what you think about this music. His name is Daniel Dina." And I had his home phone number. "This is – call him at home and tell him what you think about this music." Bam! "Rock Me, Baby." [Laughter] Anyway, by the time – well, close to 10:00 the engineer had made it out to the transmitter and said, "Man, I got this call from Mr. Dina and he said for me to come out here and get you and put you off the air."

Daniel Jacobs:

Hmm.

Al Bell:

I said, "Oh, really?" He says, "Yeah." He said, "I think your job may be in jeopardy." I said, "Well, you know, whatever. That's the way it is." Well, I said – opened up the lines and everything and the minute I opened up the line, that private local line, it rang and it was Martha in the office. She said, "Mr. Dina wants you to come downtown immediately."

[0:51:00]

'Cause many times when I got off, I'd go back home, refresh myself and get ready for that afternoon show or go and listen to some music and all that kinda good stuff, so I headed downtown and after I got, I guess, within four blocks or so of the station, couldn't find a park – place to park because there were cars all over the place, and I couldn't understand what was going on. I drove up and I couldn't get within a block of the station. I couldn't even get through because that whole block was – there were cars there. [Cut 0:51:33;29]

So I parked and got out and walked through it and went on and as I got to the front of the station, I looked and I saw all of these people out in the streets, all over the street, and I walked on up in closer and all of a sudden – now Mr. Dina was about five-two. Mr. Dina hollered, "There he is! That's the superstar!" He had a cigar about that long, big green cigar. "There he is! That's Al Bell! That's the superstar!"

[0:52:00]

"Come on in, Al. Come on in. Al Bell, ladies and gentlemen. This is Al Bell." What was going on? [Laughter] He stood out there with me and asked me to go around and shake all of these people's hands and give them autographs and talk to them and

what have you, took me inside the station afterwards and gave me a raise and next thing I knew he had pictures of me on every bus in Washington, D.C. Inside the bus was pictures of me and the times that I was on the air and all of that.

He made me assistant general manager [*Laughter*] and never said anything else to me about my music and the playing of my music on the station. One of my favorite listeners at that point in time was a lady named Eisenhower. Her husband was the president and she would listen to me and have the people that – black people that worked there in the White House to call me and tell me to play records. I didn't know at first it was her, but later on they told me that it was her and what she wanted me to play.

Daniel Jacobs: Really.

[0:53:00]

Al Bell:

And I was playing this good old Southern soul music in Washington, D.C. and whatever and breaking the Stax product in Washington, D.C., got Otis Redding so hot that he could come in and play at the Howard Theater and all of that kinda good stuff, and in doing that, I was getting Stax hot. I was coming in and out of Memphis recording. I started my second label, Safice Records, S-A-F-I-C-E, and Eddie Floyd was signed to my label there in Washington, D.C. and I talked back and forth with Jim Stewart who was the founder of Stax, the S-T of Stax, and – about the music and Jim had gotten to the point where they would record some music and he'd send me a dub in Washington for me to listen to before they made a decision to release it because he respected my ears. Well, he called me on one occasion and told me; he said, "Man, Al, we have a problem. We're \$90,000.00 in debt and about to go under.

[0:54:00]

"We're gonna have to file bankruptcy and Atlantic isn't promoting our product and Estelle and I" – that was his sister, Estelle Axton, the A-X – said, "Estelle and I talked and we'd like for you to leave Washington and come on in to Memphis and promote our product, take over and establish a promotion department because these disc jockeys out here respect you, and we believe that if you will call them and promote our product that we can sell product and maybe turn the company around and in doing so if we achieve that, then we'll give you – we agree to give you an equity interest in the company." Well, I had my own label which was distributed by

Atlantic just like Stax, but I knew that Stax had something going for it that was different from all of the other records that I was playing.

[0:55:00]

I mean there was something about it and about those two white guys and those two black guys that I had seen in that studio and a dear friend of mine, Joe Medlin, who was national promotions at Atlantic Records but also had come from the singing and producing side of the industry, I'd called him and discussed it with him, and he said, "Well, Al, I think you should seriously consider going to Memphis because, you know, the way you think from a marketing standpoint and the way you think musically and the way you think about this business," he said, "I think you can go down there and be successful because that company there has a bottom sound that's unlike anything else in the industry. No one has that bottom sound like those people down there at Stax." He was talking about the kick drum and the bass. He said, "And that to me is just something that's worth millions. You should take that job."

[0:56:00]

So I called Jim back and told Jim – I said, "Okay, Jim, you know, I'm gonna consider taking the job. I'll talk to my wife." So I talked to my wife, so she said, "Well, if that's what you wanna do, okay, fine." I called Jim back and said, "Okay, I talked to my wife. She said okay. How much can you pay me?" He said, "Well, I can pay you a hundred bucks a week and Jerry Wexler agrees to give you a hundred bucks." Well, that was \$200.00, so I was making mid-five figures at that time in Washington, D.C. I said, "Oh, my goodness. I know my wife isn't gonna buy this."

[Laughter]

This is a problem. But fortunately, and I'm thankful that I was blessed to have the kind of helpmate that God has given me, and she agreed. "Let's go if that's what you wanna do. I'm with you." So we came to Memphis, Tennessee.

[0:56:58] *Cut*

We got in to Stax and in about nine months we had turned it around from that \$90,000.00 in the hole to generating about – in fact, in excess of a million and a half dollars at a 12 percent royalty rate and what gave rise to that was I was in tune with the people

and they were so great and unique there at Stax until they were recording great product and it was in the can. So I came in and started going into the master tape library and having the engineers to come out and just start playing the music for me and started selecting from that music and releasing that music in the marketplace because I just knew – all the way back to Jones High School, I just knew what people wanted to hear 'cause I had talked to the people about the music that they like and love and that's what allowed me and, of course, as we started selling, it started motivating them.

[0:57:55]

'Cause what I did was I came in and put a big thermometer in – on a poster board in the doorway so when you came in you had to come past this thermometer and I calibrated it in record sales and dollars and each day I'd come in and at the end of the week and put that red in it and at the top it exploded into heaven and each day these guys would come in and they'd see that red up on the thermometer so they knew that more records were being sold and more dollars were being made and the enthusiasm and the morale changed and they were in 12 and 14 hours with their sessions and all of that and great music was being produced and the rest was history.

Daniel Jacobs:

And so were you in the sessions, too? I mean were you helping people – you know, you talked about how you really had this ear for what kinda music would capture people's attention. Were you – when you first started out, were you going in when they were playing recording sessions and giving them pointers?

Al Bell:

Yes, yes. Yes.

Daniel Jacobs:

How did – I mean how did that work?

[0:59:00]

Al Bell:

Yeah. Well, when they were in recording and even before that 'cause I would sit around and talk to them about records that were being played in the marketplace and in my opinion why those records were happening and why people were buying those records and explaining to them what I had learned that the girls had taught me back at Jones High School about this music and what I have understood throughout radio and listening to the guys, but more importantly, the females, so I knew. I mean I just knew and I'd shared that with them and talked about the sound and how the

sound was appreciated and just gave them more insight from my side of the fence and what I knew as to what the secret was to what we had going on there.

Daniel Jacobs: Well, did you have any like particular artists who are really your favorite or like what kind of – you know, what captured your attention?

[1:00:01]

What was the music that was really inspiring you?

Al Bell: There wasn't a single artist on the Stax label or other labels that we ended up with – Stax, Volt, Enterprise, Truth, Gospel Truth, Partee, Respect, seven labels – there wasn't a single artist on there that wasn't my favorite. They were all great unique artists and they all fit in their own category, and if you go back – see, what we did was when we decided we were going to work with an artist, as opposed to telling that artist how they should sing the song and as opposed to developing an arrangement for a song that the artist sang into, we let the artist learn the song if a writer had written it or if the artist had written it.

[1:01:03]

And let them sing the song until they felt the song and we could hear a performance coming from them that was inside and a presentation and exercising their God-given talent and then what would happen with the arrangement, the arrangement was an arrangement that was done in such a fashion where it was influenced by the performance so it embellished and it enhanced how – the artist's performance, so you could listen to Booker T. & the MGs, for an example, and hear them on Rufus Thomas and they'd sound one way. You hear them on Carla Thomas and it sound entirely different. You knew it was Booker T. & the MGs, but it wasn't the same sound. It was Carla Thomas-Booker T. & the MGs, Rufus Thomas-Booker T. & the MGs, and Otis Redding-Booker T. & the MGs, and so forth.

[1:02:00]

But that's what made us unique and that's what made us different in the marketplace, and what happened to me was just as I observed all of these artists, before, you know, I would give my thumbs-up on it, I had to hear something that was unique and different and had to hear that artist exercising their God-given

talent and I appreciated it in each one of them. They were all different and all great and I loved them all. [Cut 1:02:33]

Daniel Jacobs: How do you think the – I mean both as someone who is producing these artists and helping distribute their records as well as – I mean you had some songwriting credits and in terms of – and so actually creating the music.

Al Bell: Yes.

Daniel Jacobs: How did – right. I just wanna make sure I wasn't being incorrect in that.

[1:02:59]

But how do you think the current events at the time – I mean we're talking about the late '60s, and how do you think that was kinda influenced in all those different things that you were doing? How do you –?

Al Bell: Complete, complete, complete influence on what we were doing, but my philosophy was that our music should reflect what was going on in the lives and lifestyles and living of the people that we were recording the music for as our target audience, so it was a social science, if you will, approach to writing the songs and recording the songs as well as marketing the songs, so it was all about what was going on in our lives, our lifestyle and our living. You hear it.

[1:03:58]

It's what – when Dr. King was moving forward and was on his way to Washington with that first march, we were in the studio with a song written by Homer Banks, "It's a Long Walk to D.C. Oh, But I'm on My Way," and so forth and so on.

Daniel Jacobs: And then what about being in Memphis? How do you think that – I mean that's maybe kind of a big question, but how did Memphis and the culture of Memphis influence the music you were making and what you were doing?

Al Bell: Well, you know, what I love about Memphis and what got my attention initially, and I grew to appreciate it even more so over time, there isn't another city in America or in the world, for that matter, like Memphis, Tennessee.

[1:05:00]

You have practically every genre of music represented here in Memphis, Tennessee and it's indigenous because the opera singers and the classical performers and the blues singers and the gospel singers here are different from anyplace else in the world and you don't have as many different genres. I don't like that word so much, but any – so many different genres of music in any other city like here in Memphis, Tennessee. All you gotta do is just look historically at what has happened. I mean the birthplace of rock and roll, of gospel, you name it. It's all here.

[1:05:53]

I grew to appreciate it and I studied it, that it's a part of the river culture which was – you know, when the early settlers and those that came into this country came in on the waters and they would come into the Atlantic and up the Gulf of Mexico into the Mississippi River and up that Mississippi River they came and many ended up here in Memphis because Memphis was the cotton capital and farming was – and agriculture was very big and important in this country at that time. So if you were a performer, musician or an entertainer, you stopped in Memphis because you had the businesspersons coming here, especially those that were dealing with cotton but, you know, other things also. They'd stay here because you could go to Beale Street and you could, you know, get a gig and you could make some money or into some of the other clubs in town because the people were coming here to Memphis, Tennessee.

[1:06:58]

And ultimately, I say it now, it's like it's really in the DNA of the people here in Memphis. You know, you have a tremendous influence of people from northern Mississippi and from north and northeastern Arkansas that are here in this western part of Tennessee. That's, I think, part of the distinction and difference between what is attractive here and what is attractive in Nashville and there's just no other – there's no other place like it and what I love about it is the authenticity. I mean they're just as they are. You know, tonight we've – as we've moved around, we've listened to a very interesting blind harmonica player, you know.

[1:08:02]

And – but you listen to him and you see that he can play that harmonica in a manner that’s similar to a Muddy Waters and seamlessly move from a Muddy Waters to a Jimmy Reed-type sound. I mean that’s just phenomenal, you know, but that’s – you find that here in Memphis, Tennessee, and you don’t find that any other place in America or the world, and that’s what keeps me coming to Memphis. That’s why I’m back in Memphis now because of that. I love it. I enjoy it. [Cut 1:08:41]

Daniel Jacobs:

Another question I wanted to ask you is about – well, if you watch the movie here at the Rock and Soul Museum, you see that one of the things that the artists talk about is how after Dr. King’s assassination – just how that affected them personally.

[1:09:01]

And so I don’t know. I wanted to ask you what – how did that affect you? How did that influence things at Stax and –?

Al Bell:

Well, after Dr. King’s murder and/or assassination, however you wanna call it or whatever you wanna call it, it changed things at Stax, I think, for the first time in our oasis – and that’s what I called it – where you had integration and right outside the door segregation and all of that but absolute harmony on the inside and no one thinking of color or anything ’cause it was about the music and that kept us bonded.

[1:09:58]

But all of a sudden now here with Dr. King being who he was and what he meant to people in general but to African-Americans specifically, when he was killed it made the African-Americans in Stax more sensitive because it was – umm, you know, they knew why and it made the European-Americans more sensitive because, oh, wow, Dr. King has been killed and he’s my friend’s leader and he’s a great guy, so we became color conscious inside of Stax and it had not been there before and it gave rise to – I don’t know.

[1:10:54]

Sometimes when – in the past when a white guy would say something to a black guy and not even think twice about it, not even consider it, you know, ’cause it wouldn’t, would it irritate him or would it make him feel bad or whatever. They stopped being as liberal conversationally because they didn’t know how it was gonna be taken on the other side and vice versa. It became

more sensitive to and for us as we would go home, for what you had during that time was, one, our oasis but when the white guy left and went home, he went back into his community and he was called a nigger lover. Well, it didn't really bother him. You up there with these niggers all the time. But it didn't really bother him because that was not it. The same thing started happening to the blacks.

[1:11:54]

And that subtly started affecting how we were interacting with each other even in some instances where it was – we were not consciously aware of it, but it was just there. It didn't destroy what we were doing, but it altered and it changed and it wasn't necessarily the same and then what we had to happen to us right after that was, one, Otis Redding, our star, killed in this plane crash and then that was in December of '67 and then here in '68 we had the problem with Atlantic Records.

[1:12:58]

Because we, in our agreement with Atlantic, had said that if they merged or sold the company we had the option to either go along with that merger or sale or we could extricate ourselves from the contract. We had that option and when Atlantic merged with Warner, when they formed W – Warner and Electra, WEA, we decided we don't wanna be a part of that and we wanted to remain independent and we didn't go along with it and Atlantic – you know, I don't know how this happened, whether Jim knew about it or he didn't know about it, but Sam & Dave were not signed to us as artists at Stax. They were signed to Atlantic and since we didn't go along with the transaction then Atlantic pulled Sam & Dave away from us, our second giant star.

[1:13:57]

And also in the agreement it said that if we didn't go along that they would have the right to our catalog. It would become their property, which was all of the previous releases. Well, that's most important to a record company because the thing that allows you to – and you strive to get to this point – to remain viable and maintain that is to have a catalog of records that sell maybe not big volume but they've been hits and they sell every month no matter what, 10, 20, 30, 40, and you get enough of them out there like that. Then on a monthly basis it's generating enough revenue from those sales to allow you to pay your operating costs, your fixed costs and stay

in business until you get the next hit. Well, all of that went to Atlantic, so we end up now with no catalog, Otis dead, Sam & Dave gone and then whatever that was that came as a result of Dr. King's murder. It left us in pretty bad shape.

[1:15:00]

As a matter of fact, the industry said we were dead, that it was over with for Stax. That was the end of it, and I suppose if I had accepted that as fact it would have been the end, but I didn't accept that. [Cut 1:15:19] It was the beginning and it – the combination of Dr. King and all of that caused us to then emerge into something else. We were not that bedroom, if you will, recording company any longer. I had – and we didn't have anything and I had to go out and start finding artists. We were fortunate to have giants on the inside like Booker T. & the MGs, but they hadn't been viewed in that light openly.

[1:16:00]

But I got Steve Cropper to go in and get a piece of product that he believed could possibly be a hit on Booker T. and the MGs and he got it and brought it back to me and said, "It's a great record." I said, "Okay. Well, get a B side." So he got another song. He said, "Well, this one has to be finished, but it's something we can use for a B side." And the remainder of the MGs weren't in the studio 'cause we're still kinda shaky. We don't know whether we're up, down, where we're going or whatever, and I said, "Well, why don't you go over to" – he might have suggested it – "go to Ardent, which was our brother company, and see if you can get the B side finished." And he went to Ardent and the day that he went in they had just finished the commercial session and there was a marimba in there.

[1:17:02]

And he asked Terry Manning if he could play it and Terry said yes. I think it was the first time Terry had ever played it, but he went in and played on it and they mixed it and brought it back and I said, "Oh, my God. That's a smash, the B side." He said, "Oh, no, no. That's the B side." I said, "No, no, no, no, no. That's a smash." He said, "No, I don't know, man. That rhythm feel and all of this."

And he said – I said, "No, **Speed**, that's a smash." He said, "Well, what kinda title would you call it?" I said, "Soul Limbo" 'cause it had that feel and we put it in the marketplace and became a top ten

record and it was one right after another. Eddie Floyd's, "Knock on Wood," Johnny Taylor, "Who's Making Love?" and on and on, and I set out then to put together 28 albums and the purpose for doing the 28 albums was so that our wholesalers would realize that this isn't a dead company.

[1:18:03]

And here's a company now with albums released in the marketplace, so it's worth us investing our time and money in providing the wholesale services for them 'cause we can make money with these people. I mean they – we were comparable to a company that had – you know, had 28 albums as a result of five, six, seven years of operations. We recorded them and several months I had sessions going on at two studios in Muscle Shoals, Alabama, two studios in Memphis, Tennessee, ours and Ardent, and a studio in Detroit all at one time. Out of that came, "Hot Buttered Soul" that I along with Marvell Thomas and Allen Jones produced on Isaac Hayes and we established Mavis Staples out of – in those albums. There are albums that are still selling today. I didn't get to 28. I got 27, but we got them released and in the marketplace.

[1:19:00]

And in doing that, I mean there ended up being The Dramatics and The Emotions and other artists that were different from the artists that we had had up to this point in time and recording in those other studios and I had to in order to be able to get that product done, and if I hadn't gotten it done, these wholesalers were not gonna pay us any attention at all. "I mean, 'Soul Limbo,' yeah, good, but where is – where are your other releases and where are your albums? I mean we can't make any money with you guys." That would have been the attitude, so I had to overcome that and I refused to take no for an answer and would not accept the fact that it couldn't be done and we did it.

Daniel Jacobs:

Yeah. Well, I know it's getting late and I know that we have probably a lot more questions for you, but I'm gonna try to keep it short so that we don't keep you here all night.

Al Bell:

Or schedule another session.

Daniel Jacobs:

Or schedule another session.

[1:19:58]

That seems like – maybe one or two more questions? Okay.

Male 2: Schedule another session for sure.

Daniel Jacobs: And schedule another session.

[Laughter]

Male 2: 'Cause you're not done.

[Laughter]

Al Bell: Oh, I didn't see you come in here.

[Laughter]

Daniel Jacobs: Well, while we have you here, I'm gonna ask – I got two more questions.

Al Bell: All right.

Daniel Jacobs: The first is: What was your vision for Stax, you know, once – yeah, what was your vision for Stax?

Al Bell: To be a record company that released – recorded and released the very best music in every genre. I wanted Stax to reflect what Memphis was, every genre of music. I wanted jazz and we got jazz. The reason – I named the label Enterprise, started Enterprise, and Enterprise – as a matter of fact, I was a *Star Trek* nut at that time. That's where – that was Starship Enterprise.

[1:21:00]

[Laughter] And I named it Enterprise because I was looking into the future. If you notice, Isaac Hayes was on Enterprise Records. Billy Eckstine, which was jazz, was on Enterprise Records and the other jazz artists that we – on Enterprise Records because we were going into all of that and the reason why all of the labels, the Stax, Volt, Enterprise, Truth, Partee, Respect, on Partee was where we were putting the comedy. That's where I discovered and went – Richard Pryor and we had the big album on Richard Pryor called "That Nigger is Crazy" that was the phenomenon and we had Moms Mabley on Enterprise. Respect, we had John Cassandra with "Don't Pat Me on My Back and Call Me Brother"-type

material which is what John was doing which was a poet of sort, and I recorded Jesse Jackson with his litany, "I Am Somebody."

[1:21:59]

And we recorded gospel. We had Rance Allen and all of that and we had Lena Zavaroni, which was a little 16-year-old Irish girl that we brought in. We had Guru Maharaj Ji and, as a matter of fact, we went and did Guru Maharaj Ji in Texas after they had built the Dome down there and packed it, packed the Dome. He came in, performed and at that point in time FM radio wasn't as big as it is today. It was considered underground, but we had that performance live on FM radio across America and sold albums on him like there's no tomorrow. But the idea was let Stax be the label where you find all of the great unique music that you want – period – just the very best. [Cut 1:22:55]

[1:22:57]

And there's a relationship we had with John Fry, and Ardent was an expansion of that because John – they were getting into rock 'cause the rock artists were coming in and recording. That's why Big Star and Ardent Records and all of that, but that was the vision that I had and that's what we were shooting for, and we had – we didn't have what we had before 1968 with the four guys and that great music that was being produced in there because that had been killed. It had been killed with the death of Otis, Sam & Dave taken away from us, and all of the other things that were going on in society at that time. It just – it was no longer there and something else had to be done. Now we were, I think, very successful in doing that because we came in 1968 where in terms of the value of our master tapes at that time, it was zero.

[1:24:00]

And by 1975, Price Waterhouse, who was our financial consultants and auditors, came in and valued our master tapes at \$67 million, so we went from zero in 1968 to \$67 million by 1975 and that was because of that diversity and what we were doing in album sales. The greatest success of all of that was what had happened, you know, with Isaac Hayes 'cause he went on to get "Shaft," which is what Mike Curb made available for us at MGM and won and Oscar with it and all of that, and we went and did "Wattstax" where we went and did that documentary and had two double-pocket gold albums out of that and as well as the success of the

documentary itself, but it was just us headed into all of those different directions. That's what I envisioned for Stax.

[1:25:00]

As I grew further along in the development of Stax and pursuing that vision, took me a little while but I inside me crystallized my own mission statement and that mission statement was to build the best – not the largest or biggest, but the best – most comprehensive God-inspired recorded music, video, cinema and communications complex the world has ever experienced for the express purpose of promoting and applying the principles, precepts and practices of the Word of God.

[1:26:00]

That was my whole nine yards.

Daniel Jacobs:

Yeah. Well, and then I'm sure that Crossroads fellows will have a lot more to talk to you about, you know, in that time period after – when you were – where you're building Stax and Wattstax and all those different exciting things, but since our time is limited, I just wanted to ask you, what's the future of Memphis music? I mean last year, you're invited to become the chairman of the Memphis Music Foundation, so looking forward, where do you think Memphis music is gonna go? How is it gonna draw on the past of Memphis and Memphis history and past Memphis music in moving forward? Where do you think the city's headed?

Al Bell:

Well, blood is still in the veins. The blood is still in the body, so it's not drawing on the past as much as it is taking what's naturally here and once again bringing it to the attention of the people of the world as we did with Stax.

[1:27:03]

My mandate that I accepted in accepting the position and being elected as chairman of the board of the Memphis Music Foundation was to do what was necessary and provide the leadership to accelerate the growth of the Memphis music industry and we'll be about the business of doing that. That's a day-to-day task. It's not easily done because there's a lotta rebuilding that has to be done and – but that can be done. It's just a matter – given the talent that's here, it's a matter of motivating, stimulating, informing and providing the opportunities for the writers and the

artists and the musicians where they can get back to recording once again.

[1:27:53]

It also becomes a bit more challenging but also an opportunity because our industry now is going through a revolution, if you will, or evolution in another sense, but certainly a transition for the industry that we knew in the past, and how we recorded the music and delivered the music to the consumer has changed as a result of our advancements here from a technological standpoint, because there's not so much now about the CD. It's about the digital download and the emphasis is really – we try to – the industry tries to deal with terrestrial radio or traditional radio, but it's out there in cyberspace now where you're gonna really get the product exposed, so a new paradigm has to be put in place that allows for us to do what we did in the past, meaning achieve the kind of success in the past that we can and will achieve today. [Cut 1:29:01]

[1:29:00]

What we will draw upon from the past is that which is natural for us, and it's obvious that it works because the hip-hop culture took advantage of our past. When you listen to the great hip-hop records, you hear samples from the records of the past and so as a result of that, many of those that have come as a part of the hip-hop culture have the sound of that music in their heads. I've talked to many of the producers and what they did was they would listen to a record that had been produced by another producer, hear that sample or that sound in there and go and research by looking at the liner credits and information where it came from and go and get and try to find in some instances – I had one to tell me he paid \$300.00 to get an album – to get those albums so they could come back and listen to everything else that was on that album.

[1:30:06]

And the company is now owned – Stax is now owned by Concord but they have these hip-hop producers and rap producers coming to them constantly wanting to have access to the masters. They wanna be able to get in and listen to all 24 tracks so they can see what that guitar is doing and what the – so what I'm saying is that I think that the foundation has already been laid. It's just a matter of us now, as it relates to that type of sound, finding a way to integrate the music, if you will, of yesterday, and I speak of now

the live instruments with the new technology of today and there can be marriages made there. But overall for the industry here, it's just a matter of putting that new paradigm in place and we have that designed.

[1:31:00]

And on a step-by-step basis, we'll begin to implement it and put it in place in Memphis and Memphis will, without a question in my mind, achieve more going forward than it has in the past and it'll be good for the music industry. It'll be good for the economy of the city – economic empowerment and economic development. The city has – after many studies, it – about its – studies that enable it to determine what it needed to do as far as its future growth was concerned, they found a three-legged stool and it was transportation/distribution, biotech and music for future growth.

[1:31:55]

So now you have the leadership in this city realizing and appreciating that its future growth is vested in the development and accelerated development of its music industry. What's even more important about it is that that leg, I think, means more to Memphis than music does to any other city because of the importance of music and what it can do with respect to the economy. I mean they've gone back and now looked at what happened during the Stax years with Stax and High and Goldwax and the other labels in town at that time, the kind of dollars that it was cycling through the economy and what it was doing as far as tourism is concerned. You have the tourists coming today into Memphis because of the Rock and Soul Museum and the Stax Museum and all of that. I mean Europe keeps beating a path to this door and cycling dollars through the economy of this city.

[1:32:56]

Well, if we now grow and increase our music industry, we can increase those dollars and as we go through these difficult economic times, it will make it a lot easier for us as a city when we work together in this community to cause that to happen, and I think it will be amazingly easy once we all get to working together and get on one accord and get a good understanding. And in saying that, that means that what has to happen is a lot of people have to be educated because they don't know the music business and it – to the business community it's still a mystique and part of my mission is to provide a servant leadership role that enables me

to put them in a position where some of the mystique is gone and they realize that this isn't a difficult business. This isn't a gamble.

[1:34:00]

It's a great business opportunity. It's a difficult business and a gamble like any business if you don't know the business, but if you know the business, it's not difficult and it's not a gamble.

Daniel Jacobs: Wow. It's been a pleasure hearing you speak. I'm hopeful and I'm sure that Crossroads will have a chance to talk with you again about all the other exciting things that you've done and I thank you –

Bradley Bledsoe: Thank you very much.

Daniel Jacobs: – for sitting down and talking with us.

Al Bell: Well, thank you. Just let me know when and I appreciate the opportunity that Crossroads is giving me to be able to ensure that some of this factual information is properly recorded in the annals of history and that it's known. Otherwise, it won't be known.

[1:35:00]

Much of what I've told you here, you wouldn't know. You can't find that in any book. It's not available and I don't want to be guilty of having been blessed to learn it and know it and realize that you can't go to Rhodes or to University of Memphis or to Harvard, Yale, Purdue, or to Wharton's School of Finance and get this information. If you didn't live it and learn the fundamentals back then, it's not recorded anywhere.

You don't have it and I don't wanna be guilty of having been blessed to know it, learn it and appreciate it and take it to my grave with me. So that's why I say to you I'm an open book. Talk to me. I wanna get it out and once you get all that you get, I still have some more that I have to get out. I'll write the book [*Laughter*] and we'll do the motion picture.

[1:36:01]

Daniel Jacobs: That sounds great.

Al Bell: God bless.

Daniel Jacobs: Thank you very much.

Bradley Bledsoe: Thank you.

Al Bell: Thank you.

Daniel Jacobs: Thank you.

Male 2: You have a gift.

Al Bell: Ahhhh. *[Laughter]*

[End of Audio]