

SS041.mp3

Tom Beckner- This is Tom Beckner along with Joan Beifuss and Bill Thomas at the CME headquarter on south parkway. Today is August the 15th, 1968 We are interviewing Mr. Ben Branch.

Bill Thomas- This is tape 1, tape 1, Ben Branch who is leader for the operation breadbasket. We are at CMA church and the interviewers are Tom Beckner, Joan Beifuss and Bill Thomas and this is august 14th...

Joan Beifuss- Try 15th.

Bill Thomas- 15th. Basically trying to recreate history, never did feel what really happened got out. This is kind of the , can you tell us briefly, how did you get involved and what points did operation breadbasket spring, and how did this happen.

Ben Branch- If you are wanting reference to how did operation breadbasket get started.

Bill Thomas- Your (muffled)

Ben Branch- I had been following Dr. King since 1957. I was teaching then in Mississippi, Tupelo Mississippi.

Bill Thomas- You were teaching, music?

Ben Branch- Right. District supervisor (muffled)...And at that day and time most negro teachers were afraid to take a stand on anything civil rights because of the fact of being insecure, whether or not they are going to have a job.

Bill Thomas- Let me interrupt and go back maybe even a little further, are you from Mississippi?

Ben Branch- No I am not from Mississippi I am from Memphis, Tennessee. This is my home.

Bill Thomas- You grew up here.

Ben Branch- Grew up here, worked here, up until about 4 years, 5 years ago, I left.

Bill Thomas- Went to school here?

Ben Branch- Went to school here, I went to Douglas High School. With principal L.C. Shot. I went to Tennessee State University in Nashville Tennessee, Lemoyne College, and I did a little bit of graduate work at University of Chicago in the summertime.

Bill Thomas- You went from here to Chicago?

Ben Branch- Yeah I did.

Bill Thomas- Had you had a band then?

Ben Branch- I had a band when I left here and I left the band here.

Bill Thomas- I see, so you formed another band in Chicago.

Ben Branch- And formed another band in Chicago.

Bill Thomas- Ok then in 1957, that was when you first met Dr. King, can you tell us about that?

Ben Branch- I had asked politely at some of the rallies when he was speaking variously in these cities and sometimes I was playing professionally and we were right in the same city, so I would go out to the rallies. The thing that he really stood for was actually something deep down in me. Actually, I was trying to find out where I could be of some service to the movement myself. This was the thing that brought me as close as I am now to the movement because of the fact that the (muffled) in Memphis, in some respect I couldn't identify because of the fact that they hadn't gone into this aspect of it. When I got to Chicago I went to a meeting of the operation breadbasket which was give a slice of bread to your community, Dr. King had a seminar their for the businessmen.

Bill Thomas- Now Jesse Jackson he was not in on it at that time yet?

Ben Branch- He was at this time he was. He as not a national director but he did, the businessmen organized themselves in Chicago. Then they selected brother Jesse Jackson because he didn't have a church to be the leader. And he was a young man and he was very dynamic and he was very well read.

Bill Thomas- He still is very dynamic.

Ben Branch- That's right. This is how I became involved. We only had about maybe 25 or 30 people coming to the meeting at that time, and we were trying to pick up everything in the community that every profession. Doctor, lawyer, electrician, garbage men, exterminators, bankers, musicians, it just so happened I was the only musician there in the meeting, that saw fit to go. I spoke tot hem about helping the negro musicians. It always has been said that the negro musician and the white musician, they all had a common brown. Today national TVs and you don't see the negro leaders per say directing the orchestras on the network shows. This was the thing that I started talking to him about. He was a young man and immediately hears what I am talking about. So he says, well maybe we should try to organize them, get a group of them together. Well I already had. I had a professional group organized and everything myself then we kept records and everything. ;

Bill Thomas- And what did you call the group then?

Ben Branch- At that time I called them Ben Branch and the down homes.

Bill Thomas- And the down homes?

Ben Branch- Right because most of them was from down south. Mississippi, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Tennessee. And this was the name, I mean I am Ben Branch and the Down Homes. So I put my foot in and we organized operation breadbasket. By the time we were trying to see what we could do with the musicians and had organized them we had 75 of them. We had so many we had to split them up in the orchestra, had two orchestra groups. This is how we got started.

Bill Thomas- They would volunteer to play at various functions.

Ben Branch- You see we have our annual, we have our meetings every Saturday morning. At that time we had, we start off about 10:00 pm at university of Chicago. We met there until the place got too small and Chicago, and then we went to Chicago Theological Seminary. See because Jesse was attending school there..

Bill Thomas- Jesse was attending..

Ben Branch- Yes he went to Chicago Theological Seminary. That's why we were having a meeting there and quite a few of the professors were on Jesse's staff and are on his staff today, and they were encouraging him to have the meeting there. So we had the meeting (muffled) and now we have changed places 3 times. We have some maybe 5, to 6 thousand people every Saturday morning about 7:00 that come out. Coming out in Chicago that early on is quite something... (muffled).

Joan Beifuss- Where do you meet now in Chicago?

Ben Branch- We don't really have, actually have a meeting place because of the fact that every place we go in to have a meeting (muffled). So we don't have a place to say our next meeting will be at the international amphitheatre, because in fact the growth, it is growing so rapidly.

Joan Beifuss- Do you try and get young kids involved? See because Jesse was attending school there..

Bill Thomas- Jesse was attending..

Ben Branch- Yes he went to Chicago Theological Seminary. That's why we were having a meeting there and quite a few of the professors were on Jesse's staff and are on his staff today, and they were encouraging him to have the meeting there. So we had the meeting (muffled) and now we have changed places 3 times. We have some maybe 5, to 6 thousand people every Saturday morning about 7:00 that come out. Coming out in Chicago that early on is quite something... (muffled).

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Joan Beifuss- Do you try and get young kids involved?

Ben Branch- We have, we have. We have a school, operation breadbasket. For the smaller children, the infants as well. 5 to 6 years old on up to teenager do have a school for them to go to on Saturday morning. We have a program for every profession, and this is how we got started with the orchestra. Dr. King in the last speech he made in Chicago, it was at the Chicago Theological Seminary. I guess we had about 4 or 5 hundred people there in the seminary in the morning.

Bill Thomas- Do you remember about when this was?

Ben Branch- This was about maybe February, I think maybe last of February. We had just begun to start to play at the Newby's Den, organized a group to play at Newby's in Chicago. This was somehow a different church when you had a band playing gospel music and we played Jazz also there at the church. SO it is a different concept. A very different concept of what goes on in the church in terms of Jazz music and also.

Bill Thomas- The musicians I take it yourself are actually Jazz musicians?

Ben Branch- We are Jazz musicians right. We make our living on this everyday and on Saturday mornings we go and whenever we have to play for a rally, at any part of the country doesn't matter we go.

Bill Thomas- Is the transition from Jazz to spiritual is that difficult or is it natural or what?

Ben Branch- What I would say that it is not with negroes because our jazz is somewhat the same as our church music. All in the church, it is the same because most of the affiliates we have come from the church and moves off into the jazz, so it is the same area.

Bill Thomas- Soul music both...

Ben Branch- It's not the same.

Tom Beckner- I notice last night it was really beautiful how you started out mostly just jazz and everyone joined in, it was very spiritual...

Ben Branch- At first this is my concept when we were getting this together. The very first time I played for Dr. King I actually played, I had talked to him about it when we had the show going across the country last summer. Carlo Fontane, Ricky Franklin and Marlon Brando. I don't think we had 16 (muffled). He said, all you have? Let's look into it. He was interested. So this last morning he spoke in Chicago in February last spring, we had just begun to start playing take me on to things and hard times in jazz tune (muffled) Atlanta Georgia right from Ray Charles. I think this tune Jesse Jackson loved, so we started playing that one and we started playing prisoner's love because of the fact it was actually saying, take our hand and lead us on. The song actually says the thing that we would really like to portray God take our hands and

lead us through all of these trials and tribulations, this is what the song is really saying. It is a curious thing I was really thinking the other day here is a song I have always dreamed of that one day I, when I was kid I always wanted to sing this song in church. I always wanted to, and this was fully the hype around the mission was to do this in church, to sing this song. Just to show you have faith and you believe in god, how sometimes things can really come about that you are just not really aware of. Now this has been a part of my life all of my life with this one song and all of a sudden everything just came into my life and I often think about it everyday. And I played this song that morning for Dr. King and he said wait a moment, play another. Play another chorus. I played one more chorus and he said, play another chorus. You know that was when he got through speaking, (muffled) tears were coming out of all of our eyes, we had about 500 people there that morning. Seldom different presidents of several different universities.

Bill Thomas- Now let me get this straight I am sorry. The song itself is written by a composer in where?

Ben Branch- Really he is from Alabama.

Bill Thomas- Is it an old hymn relatively?

Ben Branch- It is a very old hymn. It is so old it is public domain now in Tennessee.

Bill Thomas- Was the composer a black man?

Ben Branch- It was a black man, Doss, William Doss is his name. This had some thing to do with the slavery periods of negro. Just as the other songs did. They had there little meanings you know. They sing cotton fields and things like that because not white people can understand what they saying, but they were talking to one another. Come to a meeting tonight, steal away...they were actually saying come to a meeting tonight, we are having a meeting tonight and things of this sort. And they understood what they were saying among others but the master didn't understand what they were saying, but they did.

Bill Thomas- So the song was as much already a familiarity to you?

Ben Branch- It was, it was, it was familiar to both of us.

Bill Thomas- Before we get into that too far not quite understand operation breadbasket. Is it under SCLC is it a function of SCLC?

Ben Branch- It is an arm of SCLC.

Bill Thomas- Then when the poor people's campaign was first started was it understood you would go to Washington? Was this part of it? What I am really trying to get at is how you got down here?

Ben Branch- It was understood that I would be a part of it at Dr. King's request. After he sent for us to come to Memphis.

Bill Thomas- When was that?

Ben Branch- That was April the 2nd when he was here for the garbage strike.

Joan Beifuss- Now why did he send for you?

Ben Branch- Well for moral support. His moral.

Joan Beifuss- He was going to use your orchestras here in Memphis?

Ben Branch- That's right, for moral support just as we do at all rallies. But this was the very first time officially that we had played other rallies, but not him requesting us to go.

Bill Thomas- Around the country?

Ben Branch- No primarily near the Chicago area.

Bill Thomas- So basically this was the first time you kind of went on an extensive sort of trip.

Ben Branch- Right, right. When he brought us to Memphis, that was the first time.

Joan Beifuss- How many men are in the orchestra?

Ben Branch- Really I don't have now, I only have 6 men in. I have about 5 functioning men..

Joan Beifuss- Is that how many came down with you to Memphis?

Ben Branch- Right, right.

Bill Thomas- Six or five?

Ben Branch- Five, I mean six. 2 drummers, an organ, 2 saxophones and top (muffled).

Bill Thomas- We have your record incidentally and now the people who are listed as playing last request is this the members of the band that came down or...

Ben Branch- No actually six men really traveled with us at all times. There were other men who were members of the orchestra who do not function with us in our capacity to travel.

Bill Thomas- Can you remember Mr. Branch the names of the fellows who came down?

Ben Branch- Dave McCullough from Oregon, Wayne Bennett, we had another fellow who is not here today because in fact an obligation to a job, and he was here with us when Dr. King was assassinated. That was Al Fook, he was playing trombone. Myself, and I think Jean Boasch on saxophone. At the time we came down there it

was only the five of us that came when Dr. King requested us too. There were others that were supposed to have come but a job enabled them too.

Bill Thomas- Did the band come by it self or with Jesse Jackson's group or how did you get in?

Ben Branch- Jesse Jackson, they were already here. You see what had actually happened when we had the first march and it somehow or another turned out to be something else and Dr. King became very disturbed about it and he went to Atlanta calling all the people from around the country that was on his staff to discuss this situation just as Jesus did with his disciples. He was in the garden of Gethsemane, same thing happened to Dr. King he was in the garden of Gethsemane, he didn't know whether to come back to Memphis or whether to stay home. He was trying to determine whether or not to stay or to come back. Because he really wanted God's will to be done and determine if he was preparing to come back.

Bill Thomas- This is really a soul searching time for him?

Ben Branch- Definitely. This was a very strange thing to us, after we got here the way it happened, the way he sent for us to come because of the fact the march was (muffled). We were very disturbed over it. But he sent for us and we came and we went to play for a rally earlier that day they wouldn't let us play.

Bill Thomas- Now how did you get here?

Ben Branch- They flew us down because in fact they wanted us to come right away.

Bill Thomas- And so then you came in, did you come in on April 4th or was it before?

Ben Branch- No we came in on April the 3rd.

Bill Thomas- The day before. What time did you come in?

Ben Branch- We came in during the storm.

Bill Thomas- Oh at night.

Joan Beifuss- When Dr. King was speaking.

Tom Beckner- I am surprised that your plane could land.

Ben Branch- Well it did not land, it went in. Went in to land and all the way in to land and another plane had wrecked before us. It told the man to take us back out because we were going in. Because he was going in, he was going in. They kept us on to Mississippi.

Joan Beifuss- Did you go down to New Orleans that night?

Ben Branch- Yeah...

Joan Beifuss- My husband must have been out on the plane with him.

Ben Branch- We went on to New Orleans from there and (muffled) 7:30 right.

Tom Beckner- So you couldn't land here at all?

Ben Branch- No.

Tom Beckner- So you went on to Mississippi. How did you get from there to here?

Ben Branch- Well Jesse Jackson drove us from Jackson Mississippi to New Orleans, we spent the night there and we came back from New Orleans the next morning.

Tom Beckner- You got here early in the morning.

Ben Branch- Early, early, early. About 8:30 something like that.

Tom Beckner- Of the 4th or the 3rd?

Ben Branch- The 4th.

Tom Beckner- The storm was the 3rd. That is pretty good I didn't realize that.

Joan Beifuss- I wish I would have known my husband was on the plane with you.

Ben Branch- But anyway, back to the hotel.

Joan Beifuss- Now what about you were going to play a rally that night?

Ben Branch- That night. We were going to play the night of the 3rd when Dr. King made his last sermon, because he told me that day that they waited, a long time for us that night to get in and we just never got in. That is what he was telling me on the platform, you know after you talk...well really we were just talking in conversation when the incident happened.

Tom Beckner- Could you go a little bit through that day Mr. Branch?

Ben Branch- We got in at 1, I called my mother she came down and picked me up. I hadn't seen her in a couple of years.

Bill Thomas- She lives here. And who is she?

Ben Branch- Mrs. Haddie Branch. She lives out north east on Hollywood. Hollywood subdivision out there. She came down and picked me up, I introduced her to reverend Jackson and various members of the staff and I just left them to eat and I went out there for a...well I guess I was there and I put my feet in the bath tub that is as far as I got. I ran the water and put my foot in the bath tub and was called come on back we have to play for a rally. Comes to the point we go to play for the rally and they wouldn't let us play.

Bill Thomas- Now where was this?

Ben Branch- This was out at firestone at the union meeting.

Bill Thomas- What happened out there?

Ben Branch- Well the, well I know they were white people, that is all I know. They said we couldn't play there and I know I played there before I left for dances and all that. He said they don't allow music in the hall. What kind of hall is this if you don't allow music. What do you have here, it's the union hall. I know you got to have some singing or praying or something sometime. You got to get these guys together. He said well ok we (muffled), but they didn't want us to play so we didn't play that day. So I went to bible shop, I got so many friends here it took me a long time to get back to the hotel and they were calling everywhere for me. And my mother was calling for me she thought I was...

Bill Thomas- Was there a rehearsal that day?

Ben Branch- Yes there was.

Bill Thomas- Do you remember when did it begin?

Ben Branch- We had a rehearsal that afternoon in the Lorraine hotel upstairs. Every (muffled) you knew Dr. King had a tremendous amount of young ministers and all of them want to sing. So they all up there singing.

Bill Thomas- We had talked, the people we had talked to would have been the reverend Billy Kyles. Did he drop by there?

Ben Branch- He was in the room wit Dr. King, he (tape glitch)...I don't know there are so many of them I don't remember. You know the only ones I can remember were the ones trying to sing, because they try to tell you how to play. They would try to tell us, look you are down south you guys up in Chicago you can't play like you play up there. The guy kept pushing me you know, so I, Jesse doesn't like for you to (muffled) he always want you to catch him with an element of surprise. So I said don't say anything just wait till tonight, they will see, they will see. This guy keep sticking these pins in me, I was just waiting for him to stick a pin in too deep you know. I said, this is my hometown, I played in one night club here for 10 or 12 years and it was full every night, 1,200 or 1,500 people.

Bill Thomas- What club was that?

Ben Branch- Carries Club Tropic County out in Thomasville, 1331 Thomasville. I played for several affairs in Memphis state. I am trying to think of one of those fraternities I played for out there, let's see Phi Beta Sigma. Delta Epsilon, well Alpha Chi and something like that. I played for several of those at Memphis State.

Tom Beckner- Did you see Dr. King earlier in the day?

Ben Branch- I did.

Tom Beckner- Do you remember under what circumstances or what was said?

Ben Branch- Well not, no more than, we were just coming in and trying to get situated. (muffled) We never had the opportunity to talk later no more than when we came out. We were up there rehearsing and we were trying to rehearse with Jesse Jackson because he does have a style, he has an idea about singing. And today Reverend Jackson he does and sometimes you can train a person if he has an idea about style. Training about his music or something about that, and he cannot perform because today you have so many people who cannot sing and will not focus like Chris Styles and make a lot of money. This wasn't really the idea of making a lot of money more about getting the job done. And he is such a dynamic fellow.

Bill Thomas- Reverend Jackson is he a vocalist does he sing or anything?

Ben Branch- Well he doesn't want to but he tries very hard to all the time. So we were trying to (muffled) and Dr. King sent for us to go to dinner, out to Reverend Billy Kyle's house. I had my kids with me...

Bill Thomas- Oh you had your youngsters with you?

Ben Branch- They were out in the car, sitting in the car.

Bill Thomas- Can you tell us their names and their ages?

Ben Branch- Brenda Rashaun Branch and Sanford. Him and my little girl was sitting in the car.

Joan Beifuss- How old are they?

Ben Branch- I am embarrassed.

Bill Thomas- They were outside on the street then?

Ben Branch- No I was in the parking lot. Right, parked at Dr. King's room, they were sitting out there waiting on me. So I heard.

Bill Thomas- (muffled question)

Ben Branch- Yeah he sent for us we had rehearsal.

Bill Thomas- Had the band itself come down?

Ben Branch- Yes we came on down and I told him I was leaving to take the kids back. He said don't leave here because we have to be over there are such and such a time, don't leave.

Joan Beifuss- Was the whole band going to the Kyle's for dinner or just yourself.

Ben Branch- No the whole band wasn't going because they had already eaten, I was the only one and I didn't want to go because I wanted to go eat with the kids. When I

got to the car, Jesse and I was walking on back across and he was telling me don't leave. And when we got to the car I hear Jesse say our leader. Dr. King was coming out of the door, he and reverend Billy Kyles. And I looked around, I was looking for the handle on the door, and I looked around. Dr. King, Jesse was such a coming fellow he said, Dr. King here is old Billy Branch you know. And so Dr. King said yeah that's my man, that's my main man. He was telling me man look tonight, tonight. You know he talks real slow anyway. I want you to play that precious lord tonight like you never played it before. I said Dr. King I do that all the time. But he said, but tonight especially for me I want you to play prettier than ever. So then he got after Jesse about putting a tie one, said something to Jesse about putting a tie on.

Bill Thomas- Excuse me if I interrupt. Now when Dr. King first came out did he come out by himself or...

Ben Branch- No, no he and Billy Kyles came out.

Bill Thomas- Kyles came out and were they the only ones on the balcony.

Ben Branch- They were the only ones standing there talking, and reverend Billy Kyles walked off and you know if you were standing there, say I was talking to a fellow and say the conversation was not directed toward to you may have a tendency top walk off. So our conversation was directed to Doc and then Jesse was standing there beside me and Doctor was talking to me and he would say something to Jesse and then he got right back on me. He said man I tell you tonight I want that song, I mean I want you to play it pretty. I said Doc I want you there tonight I am going to do that. He said don't forget I mean it I want precious...and about that time, that is when the bullet hit him.

Bill Thomas- I see, just as his was talking Mr. Branch, did he seem in a good mood?

Ben Branch- Oh yeah we were laughing and talking you know, very happy, very happy. Well really he was rejoicing because of the fact we had made it there. He was really happy to see us there.

Bill Thomas- you hadn't made it the night before.

Ben Branch- Right and we didn't make it the night before and he was talking to me then about it. Saying, I tried to wait on you all last night and I waited and waited and waited. I understand but today you have to play it tonight like you never have in your life.

Bill Thomas- Had the band rehearsed that particular number?

Ben Branch- No we hadn't, it only takes the mood to really get us the job, whatever mood the people are in. Sometimes it is whatever mood we are in. Just like baseball players, somedays you have good days and sometimes you have bad days. We were kind of confident that we were having a good day based on the fact that we knew what was happening after we went out there. You know that afternoon they

wouldn't let us play so we knew if we got an opportunity that night we were going to do it.

Bill Thomas- Was there ever any question as to whether the band might be able to play at the Mason Temple, which is Church of God in Christ?

Ben Branch- No, no question ever because I am familiar with the church of god in Christ because I read up on them, this is the headquarters here. I knew bishop Mason since I was a little kid. (Muffled) because they have offices in that church, (muffled)

Tom Beckner- Is Mason Temple named after bishop Mason?

Ben Branch- Yes it is actually.

Tom Beckner- How old is the temple?

Ben Branch- It should be at least 15 to 20 years old maybe older than that. It was during my high school days that it was built and I graduated from high school in 48', so maybe 20 years.

Bill Thomas- Ok well after the shooting, Mr. Branch what happened?

Ben Branch- About 2 seconds later the sheriff department and the state troopers came from the same direction the bullet came from . Then I don't whether it was two seconds, the minute the shot was fired we picked Dr. King up off the floor, you know when the bullet hit him it picked him up off the floor. He looked as though he really saw the guy that shot him, this is the way looked when he went up in the air. So we hollered and yelled at him, he tried to get up off the floor and we told him to lie down because we saw the folks coming with the guns.

Joan Beifuss- He tried to get up?

Ben Branch- Oh yeah he got up yeah, he tried. We told him to lie down. So he fell back down but all the time he was moving, he was moving his legs and everything.

Joan Beifuss- Did you realize what had happened when you heard the sound?

Ben Branch- Oh yeah. You could hear the shot when it left the gun one and then when it hit him another, a different sound.

Bill Thomas- When the bullet struck?

Ben Branch- Yeah when the bullet struck him it was different sound from the gun's.

Tom Beckner- Who was coming down off the hill the police?

Ben Branch- He the sheriff, I am familiar with Memphis (muffled) I am familiar with the sheriff.

Tom Beckner- But they were up on the hill?

Ben Branch- In the same area around the fire department, on the hill in that bushel. They came down when the shot was fired and we thought they were going to kill all of us then. Jesse he ducked and went around behind the swimming pool, but I didn't duck at all. I didn't duck at all because I was so shocked I was just asking why, something or somebody else but why this man.

Joan Beifuss- Did your children realize what was happening?

Ben Branch- They heard him talking to me before the shots were fired.

Joan Beifuss- Did they realize what had happened?

Ben Branch- They saw it, when it hit him. They were sitting right there looking up at him while I was talking to him when the bullet hit him they were looking right at him.

Bill Thomas- Grim experience for them, did they stay in the car or...

Ben Branch- Yeah they stayed in the car, I am pretty (muffled)...

Bill Thomas- Did you go up on the balcony?

Ben Branch- No I didn't go up on the balcony because I was in shock and at the time all those officers come down off the hill you know you don't want to get anywhere. I was in shock and I just walked out into the street and I just walked around in circles. I knew he was gone immediately, but he wasn't but I just knew he was.....I was just hoping all the time that maybe the bullet just hit him somewhere else and he could live if we could get him to the hospital in time. (muffled) It was a very long time. The city police were (muffled) so they were patrolling around there all the time. When they got the sub machine guns and all this stuff and when they came out with the guns on us...

Bill Thomas- They put the guns on you?

Ben Branch- Asking us okay where is he, which way did he go? And that guy was getting away then, while they were down there with us.

Bill Thomas- Did it seem fairly clear to you Mr. Branch where the shot had come from?

Ben Branch- All I knew was it had come off the hill. I knew it came off the hill.

Bill Thomas- You were looking the other way.

Ben Branch- I don't know if it was in that direction or where, but it came off. But when I walked out in the street the police came and all gathered (muffled). If it actually came to that money it had the city. There was no way in the world the guy could hear one of the police officers say the suspect dropped a gun on Main St.

running south. They didn't even go....so I yelled at them and said well what are you out here whispering to one another, why don't you go after him? You having the guns on us?

Bill Thomas- What did they say Anything?

Ben Branch- Well they started walking off, in the other direction and they stopped two fellows.

Bill Thomas- Those two fellows turn out to be student attorneys who are then checking on police brutality incident.

Ben Branch- Oh they were? I didn't know who it was, it was two white fellows and I assumed....they had their hands all up on top of the car. But the guy was getting away because somebody actually saw the guy and told them he dropped the gun on main st., so they picked the gun up out there somewhere, I don't know where they got the gun.

Bill Thomas- Right.

Ben Branch- But a lot of this was contingent that they were doing a lot of stuff for us, we asked them to give us an escort to the hospital and they wouldn't do that.

Joan Beifuss- They had already taken Dr. King to the hospital?

Ben Branch- At this time? No. (Tape Glitch) an ambulance, we asked can we go to and get an escort. They weren't worried about it, they wouldn't even let us off of the premises.

Bill Thomas- So you stayed there, and when and how did you find out Dr. King was indeed dead.

Ben Branch- It was a little bit later before we really found out he was, it was about 7 or 7:30.

Bill Thomas- Reverend Abernathy and reverend Young?

Ben Branch- No they hadn't returned yet, but we got the message, got the call, called the hospital found out. We couldn't get any calls in and we couldn't get any telegrams in they weren't letting anything in.

Tom Beckner- Since you got to Memphis (muffled) theoretically had this supposedly good record of race relations and what not, it didn't but supposedly it did. Were you surprised that anything would happen like that here?

Ben Branch- No, I wasn't really surprised because of the fact that I was born in (muffled). I know the Catholic church just blindly turns. It is a police town, definitely a Gestapo. (muffled) some of them were friends of mine some of them were not, even at that being a friend of mine and telling names you are wrong because they had us all in the same bucket maybe one or two other negros that they didn't pull

out of the bucket, now you can control these negros up here Sam John, we will put you up here, you know what I mean. Certain things they did convict negros on, if they were white people they would not be convicted on. These types of situations, we were very intelligent on the situation but we were getting to the bottom of doing something about it was a really thing about the situation, not the economic situation but the political situation here was so abrupt and so replicated. Very low, man it was a treacherous situation to deal with. You were dealing with your life. When Dr, King stepped up there we knew then that he was dealing with his life. Dealing with his very (muffled). I knew this, from years of teaching school doing work here and playing football and anything else I came through it in this time. (muffled) And we were all on the same level.

Bill Thomas- And at that point this is a racist town.

Ben Branch- No doubt in my mind, I know that, I know that. Even at Memphis state when they had the gray area, where black students couldn't attend physical education classes and still couldn't get in the swimming pool.

Tom Beckner- Still don't have any black students on the football team.

Ben Branch- Yeah the football team, now that just doesn't make sense. The boys that have been to school out here some of the best athletes in the country come out of the schools in the city of Memphis. And you have to go somewhere else really to get them out there.

Bill Thomas- In fact, there was a sanitation worker who was out of Colorado University making headline all over the place.

Ben Branch- Well you get these boys (muffled) out there that made all kind of headlines. This boy came from Manassas and he was playing up there Antwine, Antwine, I think he is with the Boston, the Boston (muffled) out of Manassas high school. There are numerous ones that I could name that had to play somewhere else when you had the facilities right here.

Tom Beckner- Got such a growing program here too.

Ben Branch- Right you have a tremendous growing program, and the negro people have done more with nothing in this town than in any town (muffled). I even went to a school where the books we got had been used by white students for 5 years before we got them.

Bill Thomas- Oh really?

Ben Branch- Every one of them if we got a new book it was because the fact that is was new book but it was out of the white child's curriculum. I taught at a school in Woodstock right out here just on summer. We had to take the boys when new chairs were bought for Frayser high school we would take the negro boys out of the schools out here and go move the furniture into the white school for the white boys.

This was the most embarrassing thing I have ever seen in my life and I refused to do it, the principal and I didn't get along. I refused to take the kids to do that.

Joan Beifuss- Where was this?

Ben Branch- Woodstock. I refused to. These were the kind of situations we were in. Never had to move furniture into school, we got furniture that was used and old, they take the new furniture and put it in the white school. I know because I was a school teacher. These are the things that happened and because one other thing Dr. King start pushing almost of things and they start pushing little things into the school because of the fact they didn't want any problems to present themselves. (muffled) A school like Lester High school (muffled). The kids out there shouldn't allowed to (muffled) They placed the highest rate close together. They put Lester school over there because they have a small community like Binghampton. It is a small little neighborhood that is all. But when all those kids cut to east high school just a few blocks away.

Tom Beckner- Was George Barnes the superintendent of school when you were teaching?

Ben Branch- Barnes, yes. Barnes was superintendant. To teach in the school system if he asked me in person why does negro man go off to major in music, you don't need to major in music. You don't need music training, you are born with it. (Muffled)

Tom Beckner- One of these typical stereotypes.

Ben Branch- Oh yeah, definitely. This is the situation, I have known a long time, this is my hometown and I actually prefer (muffled) I hate it happening. If it was going to happen I wish it would have happened some place else. You can do so long for a long time. Memphis has had a policy that would pressure the city. I remember when they integrated the busses and street cars, the first trial they had ever on...they called the commissioners down and they were just barricaded that day and they sent the NAACP all the way from Washington, here to defend the appeal case after that. The city officials saw that they were going to lose it and immediately they called me out and said the city see fit to integrate the busses. They always do things like this. They said we getting along and we are having problems (muffled) We lost the Ford plant, we lost American Bridge, we lost Firestone, numerous ones that I can name that we really lost. And then the capacity of (muffled).

Bill Thomas- Will you familiar with mayor Lobe?

Ben Branch- Oh yeah he was mayor once before.

Bill Thomas- Did you have any feelings about him?

Ben Branch- Yes I did have them. He was a man that really forgotten from which he came. In some cases most jewish people do forget from whence they came. Some

others probably have, this doesn't have any reflection on any typical person but somehow I relate to them because if anyone knows about being punished the Jewish people know it they really do. But some of them do forget and Lobe was one. He has forgotten from whence he came. I remember the statement he made that all negroes (muffled)

Joan Beifuss- All negroes should be what?

Ben Branch- They were placed and put out on the (muffled).

Bill Thomas- This was a housing thing. It was just a housing project.

Ben Branch- All of them out there in the city, just put them out there. Away from all the white people.

Bill Thomas- This was really...(Muffled).

Ben Branch- His brother couldn't do anything and he tried to talk to him. Couldn't do anything though. I don't know this is something he said he threw him out (Muffled)...but I knew he was very naïve and very treacherously racist when he was here before and that was why he didn't get back here a second time. Somebody came along this time and was interested because he tried to run for governor and lost or senator or something before he tried to run for governor and after that he did run for mayor and he lost.

Tom Beckner- Do you happen to know why he resigned, I know he said it was business but a lot of people said he didn't want to comply with the civil rights act.

Ben Branch- That was it, that's what we said it was the civil rights. He would not (muffled) he was no George Wallis standing in the door, ended up getting carried into jail.

Bill Thomas- Well that night you stayed at the Lorraine that night?

Ben Branch- Yes stayed at the Lorraine that night.

Joan Beifuss- Did you get your children home?

Ben Branch- I got them home that night, I got them home maybe 15 or 20 minutes after they announced that Dr. King had been shot a lot of people started you know rioting and you know.

Bill Thomas- They clamped curfew on (muffled)

Ben Branch- We were going to try go on and go back down and one of the inspector's called downtown and told us not to go that way. So the ministers did not like him because of the fact that you shouldn't stop the fact of people gathering in a church in a situation of this kind, but it's a no. So I got my kids back to the house and I was trying to go back over there and I (muffled).

Bill Thomas- It is quite some distance to did you, were you stopped by the police?

Ben Branch- Yes I was, twice.

Bill Thomas- Did they give you any trouble?

Ben Branch- After I told them who I was they knew then that they put out a call that I was trying to get back out to try to get out of town.

Bill Thomas- So then when did the band leave?

Ben Branch- The band, some of the band left that night. And their families were worried about them so they left that night.

Bill Thomas- And you yourself stayed over?

Ben Branch- I stayed over until the next morning, just then left the next morning.

Bill Thomas- Was this after Mrs. King coming in and the body left and...

Ben Branch- No, no this was not after that we left just before that because of the fact that we had to get some other things done immediately for Dr. King.

Bill Thomas- How long had you planned to stay when you...

Ben Branch- Well we had actually planned to stay the rest of the weekend.

Bill Thomas- I see, and I think the march had to have been postponed until Monday.

Ben Branch- Right we were going to stay for that.

Bill Thomas- And you would have marched?

Ben Branch- We were going to march, yes. Well I have been on picket lines just alone by myself just picketing and playing an instrument myself.

Joan Beifuss- But the band was not playing the march?

Ben Branch- We were, we were going to play.

Tom Beckner- That would have been something new, I don't remember them having a band in the march before?

Ben Branch- Not professional musicians but they had others. To be perfectly frank it (muffled) even the professional musicians were thinking wow what now. (Tape Damage) More and more aware of it now because of the fact that we requested Dr. King (muffled).

Bill Thomas- How do you compare Chicago and Memphis racially?

Ben Branch- Racially, it is almost as if it was the same. The only thing you have is a little bit better opportunity economically.

Bill Thomas- I Chicago?

Ben Branch- Right. Because it affected (muffled)...He know in the buckle in his voice, (muffled). City Hall. Anywhere. They have meaningful jobs, they don't have substantial, or I would say upcoming jobs. We don't have those in the city most of those are filled by whites. (muffled) Reverend Jackson has come up with a term in organization. (muffled) When you start taking 5, 6,7 thousand people assembling on us at 6 and 7 o'clock in the morning and most of them are professional people, (muffled) even smart at that. (Muffled) He comes, you know he is going to come at you like this. (Laughs)

(Muffled)

Our philosophy is that you deal with people not only on a basis of this color but on the basis of the situation of his behavior. I don't deal with a man because of his color, because you are white. If your behavior in some instances is much better than some of my brothers. We have a tremendous amount of brothers who it's a matter of here what is going on in this situation. This has been a sick Memphis Tennessee. These people have come to place legal people in. In Memphis it is a must that a kid come out of high school, got to go to college. If he does not go to college they look down on you. Because he has to get away from this town because there is nothing for him to do but teach people. He can't got o city government. I was standing one day watching to see how many negros would come out of city hall. (muffled) I just stood there and see how many since I had been gone. It was the same.

Bill Thomas- Same.

Ben Branch- Same.

Tom Beckner- (Muffled question).

Ben Branch- If that had been me I wouldn't have accepted that job because in fact that would put you in a bind. Because you actually can't do the things for your people that you know must be done.

Bill Thomas- You mean you have to deal with the parish...

Ben Branch- I don't have any kind of confidence in Lobe, not any what so ever. No man in the world like Lobe had said things like Lobe had said. Wasn't he even the commissioner once of public works?

Bill Thomas- Yeah.

(muffled-Tape Break up)

Ben Branch- You got Washburn's school in Chicago. That he will go and start talking about (muffled). You have a very poor city school system in Chicago, within the inner city, very poor. They have a well structured program but the people don't fell it to well/ They started structuring the people, and when you start structuring the people this is the thing that has always been in America these structuring people. Poor whites against the black.

Tom Beckner- And yes they have had the school system there as the same thing here too, a lot of the better teachers have wanted to move out into the better suburban schools, or so called better schools. They don't want to get their hands dirty, that's it.

Joan Beifuss- That's the ghetto every time.

Ben Branch- That is the situation you have every time. (muffled-loud echo.) Of course we do have a negro dealership in Chicago, Oldsmobile dealership.

Bill Thomas- Is it just one?

Ben Branch- Just one in Chicago, just one. I think in terms of this they say well we can give them one. (muffled)

Tom Beckner- I suppose it is the thing to do is to have one.

Bill Thomas- When Dr. King was killed here I noticed within a few weeks 3 or 4 ads from auto mobile dealers saying we are proud to announce a new associate in the sales force and a picture of the negro.

Ben Branch- Integrated.

Bill Thomas- Yeah it was right after King was killed it was just as if they wanted a little conscience.

Ben Branch- I tell you I used to sell cars with Schmitt down at Union St. at the automobile center on union. That is where it still is isn't it?

Joan Beifuss- uh huh.

Ben Branch- Boy the white salesmen did not want the negro to up[selling on the floor.

Bill Thomas- Really.

Ben Branch- Oh no we had to hit the streets or sell in the back. Only one negro could come up on the floor.

Tom Beckner- In case a negro came in?

Ben Branch- Yeah so if he came in he would get them. They had hard times. But he fought it and fought it and fought it until it killed him, he had a heart attack one day. He was the first one to have (muffled) This gave the opportunity for me to sell cars

for old man Schmitt. The only thing he as interested in was a dollar. He didn't matter to him who sold the car.

Bill Thomas- You said a while ago, you said the negro in Memphis is too complacent. Or some kind of what not, is this complacent too, but I think maybe it is changing now, but one time Dr,. King came in, was it really...

Ben Branch- This is what we really ran into, a complacent negro who really was not concerned about the (muffled). I teach in your neighborhood but I live in another neighborhood, I am not like you. I think white, I am white. I got (muffled). They never stopped to think where they live, every community that they (muffled)

Tom Beckner- But all that changed during the strike?

Ben Branch- It changed after his death, it did not change it until after his death. We met this problem, this is why he sent us to come in here. He wasn't getting any response from the people. He was troubled though, and it was these people who looked down on the little one (muffled) I didn't know he was working with the city until I got there that day and he and his wife were sitting and they said they were not eating none of the corn bread or nothing that they were going to continue to do it. (muffled)

Bill Thomas- Gee well this is fine. (Tape End)