



presents:

An interview with

**Bill Myers (WILSON County)**

**African American Music Heritage Project: Wilson County**

Researcher: Susan S. Hester

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**“By my being 74 years, old, a senior citizen, it’s not what I read, it’s what I know, because I lived it. I was there when it happened. I was there when the minstrel shows came through; I was there when we were riding on the backs of those trucks.”  
–Bill Myers**

*This interview was conducted at the Oliver Nestus Freeman Museum, of which Myers is the Director, in Wilson, North Carolina, after Myers provided a brief tour of the collection and grounds of the museum. Bill Myers is the founding member of local R&B/Jazz band, The Monitors, who will be celebrating their 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary in January 2008. Myers, served in the Wilson County school system as Band Director, Principal, and Superintendent, and is member of St. John AME Zion church in Wilson. He is currently retired, but active in his church, in the Wilson community and performing with The Monitors. We began our conversation with Myers’ biographical oral history.*

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00:16 BM: I was born in 1932, which is obviously the time of the Depression, so the things that I learned came out of that period. My mother passed shortly after I was born, so I’m told that I was a very sickly baby and that my grandmother then took me over to nurse me back to life. I had rickets and a lot of other illnesses that I shouldn’t have had, basically. But at any rate, I say that for this reason, when she was there, she had a piano at her house, and she noticed early that I seemed to have some talent as far as picking out things on the piano. As we looked back into the history of our family, it was my dad’s daddy who was the only one who I knew about who had any kind of musical ability. I brought this horn to show you. This is a C coronet right here. This is the horn that he played in church every Sunday. I used to, as a little, boy, try to play this but it never would play. During that time—and I tell you about my birth—because during that time Louis Armstrong was like *the* musician of note, so we would get other little boys out on the street and try to mimic what Louis Armstrong... and we would go...*(blowing into the horn playfully)* Just like this. Never knowing that this thing would actually play. I remember way older, as a teenager, I guess, before I found out that the valves were put in here backwards and that’s why it wouldn’t make a sound.

SH: How did that happen?

02:08 BM: I don’t know. I think maybe my dad or somebody was trying to oil it and tried to put it back. If you ever put in a valve wrong it won’t play. But if you put them in right, *(blowing horn melodically)*, then it will play. And this is what he used to play in church every Sunday, and he’s the only one that I can trace that had any type of musical talent, but this grandmother, loving as she was, was determined that I was going to live and something was going to happen to me in music. So she arranged for me to take piano lessons, at fifty cents a lesson. I took them from a lady named Mrs. Lena Cherry. I had to ride my bicycle over to her house; she lived way over on the other side of town. Some days I went and some days I didn’t go, and I regret that now because sometimes I’d take that fifty cents and go to the movies, or something like that. But anyway, Mrs. Cherry started me trying to really learn the piano. I had another uncle who would come in; he couldn’t read music, but he could pick out things very simply. And I tell you about the

birth date again for this very reason, because this is also the time that Duke Ellington was very hot, and we would hear Duke Ellington on the radio. And Duke Ellington's theme song was "Mood Indigo;" that was the song that he always played. Well, my uncle showed me how to play "Mood Indigo" on the piano. Now, mind you, I didn't know how to read a note, but he showed me where to put my fingers. (Motioning with hands playing notes on the piano), and I learned to do that. My grandmother would say, "This boy evidently will play something after awhile." So she got me the music lessons, and I started. Pretty soon the people at the Sunday school at my church in Greenville wanted me to start playing for the children at Sunday school. This made me learn a different hymn every Sunday from the hymnbook because we sang a different hymn. So that increased my reading ability. I went to high school later, to Epps High School in Greenville, North Carolina. And I tell you that because everybody there, including the teachers, were very afraid of the principal. His name was Mr. Davenport. Mr. Davenport was a stern, dictatorial type of leader, and it was either his way or no way. So we were all scared to death of him. And I remember to this day he came to the classroom door and said, "Boy," pointing right at me with his long fingers. He said, "Boy, come here," like that. Scared me to death! I said, "Oh, my God, what did I do?" And he said, "Go down there and tell that man I said to put you in the band." "Me?" He said, "Tell them I sent you." "Yes, sir."

05:05 SH: How did he hear you?

BM: I think he had heard *about* me. He had never heard me, but I think maybe he had heard that I was beginning to play the piano a bit. So he just said, "Tell the man I said to put you in the band." Well I went to the band director, who incidentally, the band director was white who had come to the black school to teach one period a day to try to get a band started. It was obvious that he really didn't want to be there, but it was part of his contract, so I went down there, and he said, "What do you want?" And I said, "Mr. Davenport sent me down here to tell you to put me in the band." He said, "Well, what do you play?" And I said, "I don't play anything." And he said, "Well, what do you want to play?" So I looked around and I said, "How about the drums? That looks simple enough." So he handed me two sticks. This is all he really did. He handed me two sticks. He said go back there and beat on the drums. He never showed me how to hold the sticks; he never showed me how to put on the strap. He never showed me *anything*. He said, "Go back there and get on the drums." Lucky for me, I guess, there was another guy named B. Webb who was there who had been playing a little bit. So I watched B. Webb. He said, "This little symbol right here is a rest. When you see that, don't play. But when you see the little dot here, that means you hit the drum." I'm serious! It was weird! (Laughing) I said, "What?" He said, "Yep. Hold them like this. Go left and go right. Don't do much at the same time, go left or go right when you see that..." So by watching B. and looking at these notes, I learned to beat the drum, and that's what I was doing, literally *beating* the drum, not playing, but I was beating the drum. I said, "There's got to be a little more to this." So on my own, I started to improvise a little bit because I would hear things on records. I'm still listening to Duke Ellington and Satchmo on the radio. Now, something else is happening in my life at this time, because there is another kind of music being played in Tennessee. It's called "Randy's Blues Hour," or something, but you can't get it

on the regular radio. He only comes out of Tennessee late at night. And most black folks would go to the radios and you had to tune it *very finely*.

07:22 SH: Was it [W] LAC? Is that what it was? WLAC?

BM: I don't know. I really don't know, but it was "Randy" somebody. You had to really tune in and you could barely get it, see because the music was banned from the regular radio stations. It was called "race" music. Regular disc jockeys could not play this music around here. But we would hear the blues being played like every night. And we would say, "Hey, there's another kind of music being played up here; that's good stuff. We want to hear this." But like I say, it was race music and people would not let you play it locally, but we were hearing it. Getting back to my Sunday school thing, there was a teacher there who wanted to take me to New York City as part of the Sunday school convention. I had never been to New York City, but that was an eye-opening experience for me because when I got there she took me to Radio City Music Hall. I got a chance to see the Rockettes- I had never seen anything like that. I got a chance to hear this guy play a magnificent organ; I never heard the thing like that. I got a chance to go to the Apollo Theater, and there was this guy named Willis "Gatertail" Jackson playing saxophone and his style was what we call the "honking" style (mimicking horn) take one note and just play it like that. But at the same time he did a lot of physical gyrations- he'd jump up on the table; he'd jump off the table. Jump off the stage. Run to the back to the back of the auditorium, and the people were going crazy because Willis Gatertail Jackson was doing this. And I saw that, and I said, "By Gosh, that's good stuff!" So I came back home and I wanted to play the saxophone, but never had a saxophone. Folks could not afford a saxophone. So the same grandmother knew a guy who played saxophone. He was like the village troubadour. Every Christmas he would walk the city of Greenville playing Christmas carols. His name was James Thomas Edmiston, He would go down every block, playing "Silent Night," "Hark the Herald Angels Sing," "Come All Ye Faithful," and people looked for this every Christmas.

9:37 SH: So he only played Christmas songs?

BM: Just Christmas songs. Well, no, at Christmas, but he was in a band called the Elks Band. The Elks Band was taken from what they were doing in New Orleans. The practice was if there were a funeral there would be what you call a "turnout session." There would be a wake first, what they call "sitting up." You would go to the house of the deceased and you would sit up with the family all night long. They would serve food and drinks and you would have to stay up the whole night. Then the next day would be the parade. You would go to the funeral, a very sad, dirge-type march, playing something like "Nearer My God to Thee" very slow. But coming out of the church, it would be really lively, with, "When the Saints Go Marching On," that kind of thing. And I loved that! I would follow that band wherever they went, and James Thomas was in the band. And I would walk along and I'd hear trombones. I just loved that. I said, "Boy, this is what I want to do." I knew then that I wanted to be a musician. Nothing else was on my mind except playing music. There was even another guy there who played blues guitar. Mo Griffith, was, I think, his name. He used to chew tobacco and sing the blues, and I

would follow him everywhere he went. I would sit right down on the ground and watch him play the blues because that's what he did. I was fascinated by this music. So, my family can't afford a saxophone, so my grandmother asked James Thomas to show me how to play the saxophone. He says, "Well, I'll just leave the saxophone at your house. I don't have time to teach...I'll just leave it at the house." He just left it there. He never showed me how to put it together, how to put the reed on. He just said, "Take it." So one night he got really, really drunk and he came to the house and he completely took it apart, took all the springs off, everything. And there were a hundred pieces laying on the table, and I said, "How are you going to put that back together?" He said, "I can't do it when I'm sober, I've got to do it when I'm drinking." (Laughing) And he put it back together, and I was so taken in by him taking that horn apart and putting it back together, I had never seen anything like that before. I was determined then, I really want to learn the saxophone.

11:55 SH: When you learned how to put it together?

BM: I learned how to put it together. So, the next year, the most phenomenal thing that ever happened to me happened in my life. This white band director left and a new band director was hired, his name was Bob Lewis. Bob Lewis went to school at Virginia State in Petersburg, Virginia. I had never met a man like Bob Lewis. He was a sharp dresser, a very debonair guy. When he would drive, he would drive sitting up with his hat on the corner. I just admired everything this guy did. His shoes were shined every day. And he played the saxophone. I wanted to be just like Bob Lewis. He was my idol. I worshiped this man.

12:44 SH: How old were you at this time?

BM: I was maybe, 8<sup>th</sup> grade.

SH: You were still in the school band?

BM: I'm still in the school band. But I don't want to play the drums anymore; I want to play what Bob Lewis plays, you see. But now I have a saxophone at the house, too. And Bob Lewis played the saxophone, too, so I said, "Please show me how to play this horn." He started to teach me, and he moved me from the drums to the saxophone, so I watched everything he was doing, I got under him and watched his fingers, watched his mouth-everything he did. I just had to copy everything he did. So by this time, my other piano teacher Mrs. Lena Cherry passed away, so now I am given to another piano teacher named Mrs. Albright [sp?] who also happened to come from Virginia State in St. Petersburg. So I had never seen Virginia State, but now I am determined, now more than ever, that I wanted to go to Virginia State. I don't care what happens, I have to go to Virginia State.

[Brief pause. Bill greets visitor walks into museum]

So I'm determined that I'm going to go to Virginia State, so I spend all my time preparing to go to Virginia State. I had no money, but that's where I wanted to go. I started to get better at playing my horn because I started doing what I saw Gatertail Jackson doing in the Apollo, taking the one-note and hopping it. And people started to think that I was very good, because I was more show than ability. That was the style of playing during that time. And my nickname in Greenville was "Popeye," Everybody called me Popeye. And they would say, "Have you heard "Popeye" play?" Everybody would come, and people would start to hire me and pay me, so when you made five dollars, that was big-time money. When you played a "nickel" gig is what you'd say, and if you ever got paid a "dime" gig, or ten dollars, that was a big-time gig during that time. So my name and reputation began to spread around in Greenville.

SH: How did get that name?

BM: "Popeye?"

SH: Yeah.

15:00 BM: Well, I was supposedly very strong when I was a little boy, and he was a cartoon character and as he would eat spinach, he would get stronger. I would wrestle the boys, and they would say, "Get him, Popeye!" And the name just stuck with me. So, people would say, "Have you heard "Popeye" play?" People would come to hear me play, and I would get up on the table and jump off the table and run to the back. People were making lines behind me. One night I ran out of the building and ran around the building and came back in, and the people right behind me, clapping hands, and saying, "Blow, Popeye, blow!" Even back at this time, there were minstrel shows that would come to town. One of the famous ones was the Silas Green Minstrel Show. Another was the Winstead Mighty Minstrels. I started playing with the Winstead Mighty Minstrel Show in Wilson. We would get on the back of the truck and go around to try to excite people who were coming to the big tent shows that night, go out in front to play to get the people to come in, and then we would play inside before the show. This was happening. And I even did a little tour with them, but I couldn't take that; that was too much for me. There were no places for us to stay as black folks. You had to eat any place you could, and any place you go you would have to go to somebody's house to ask them for a pail of water so that you might bathe. I said, "I can't do this."

16:35 SH: Were you still a young teenager?

BM: Yeah, I'm still a young teenager, trying to do these kinds of things, but saying, "This is not my life." I would not do that. But I joined some bands in Greenville, we would play the clubs in Greenville, the Tropicana Club, The Blue Moon Club, The Red Rose Club, and I was playing in all those clubs as a high school person. I even played for my own high school prom. I didn't go to the Prom; I played for the prom with these bands. During this time with the band, my reputation is out there as somebody who is pretty good at playing the horn, so now it's time for me to graduate from high school, and I am determined I want to go to Virginia State. I don't even know where Virginia State is, but

I got to go. Bob Lewis was my idol, and I want to be just like Bob Lewis. By this time my father has remarried, he's married a lady named Arga Barrow [sp?] who was a school teacher in Greenville, and they are determined to help send me to college. They sent me to Virginia State. And I got there. Well, Virginia State sits up on this hill, far above the Appomattox on this lofty hill. I got to Petersburg not knowing where to go and I saw a bus that said "Virginia State." I got on the bus, with my footlocker, everything I had. Obviously, we had to go to the back of the bus. By the time we got to Petersburg, the bus was loaded, and I'm way on the back of the bus with all this stuff. And they said, "All off for Virginia State!" So everybody had to get off the bus to let me off the bus, with my footlocker. Oh, they hated me! (Laughing) They called me all kinds of names. Now I gotta go up this hill with all this stuff, so I drug my stuff up there and this guy said, "Boy, where are you coming from?" I said, "I'm from Greenville, North Carolina." (Laughing) He said, "You must be right out of the country from someplace. Couldn't you get a taxi to come over here, or something?" No, I did not know that. So anyway, when I got there, I didn't have a horn, because the horn didn't belong to me, so I showed up to be music major without an instrument. They had never seen anything like this, "You come here to be a music major without an instrument?" You don't even have a horn, and I said, "No, sir, I do not." He said, "Well, we're going to give you a job." So they gave me a job cleaning up the football place, when the football players would come in and get muddied up, I'd clean that room. So I did that and worked, but also he gave me a horn in the marching band. I had baritone saxophone in the band, so I would use that horn. And Fort Lee is located in St. Petersburg, so I started playing with bands over at Fort Lee. I met people like Joe Kennedy and Amand Jamal who were famous musicians who were playing the military, so I got a chance to be a part of professional players. Now all of the sudden these guys are saying, "That's not the way to play the horn, you don't honk and play one note. You gotta play..." by this time, we're in the 50s, and the man that you play now is like Charlie Parker and Sonny Stipp [sp?], and Donald Byrd...all these people. These are the musicians of note, and if you don't play like this, you are lame; you are square, get out of my face (laughing). I had been listening to...Louis Jordan...they has been my people, but now I've got to change my whole outlook of what I'm doing. So I did. I made that adjustment and I started to play the be-bop because be-bop was in, very strong at that time, and then from meeting these people and being around the military people, I began to grow, and I was a music major. I graduated in 1955 from Virginia State, went to the military as a second Lieutenant, because I was in ROTC program. They sent me to Fort Benning, Georgia, and I graduated from the camp there and then they sent me to Korea. While in Korea, I was like isolated from music because I was with the troops. We were only about five miles from the 30<sup>th</sup> Parallel, with very few chances to get to hear music. But I took my horn with me. I finally made enough money to buy a horn. I took it with me over there. So people used me to play for their birthday parties. Any time someone was having a celebration, I would go play just solo saxophone. And then the Chaplain there found out that I could play the piano, and he wanted me to ride in the Jeep with him as we went from camp to camp for the church services. So we'd get in the Jeep and go to camp to camp providing religious services for the troops. I even organized an all-military choir. Also while I was there I got a chance to play in some of the backup bands because movie stars, like Rita Moreno- not Joan Collins- but what was her name- Judy Collins? Anyway, movie stars would come and they would use people

who could play, who could read music so I got a chance to be a part of that. I also got a chance to play with meet a guy named Chevy [sp?] Thomas from Brooklyn, New York. He was a saxophone player- so was I. And he said, "I'll tell you what we should do. When we get out the military, let us organize a band. I've got some connections in Omaha, Nebraska. What we'll do is, we'll play in Omaha-we won't play in New York City, that's a mistake. We want New York to ask us to come. We're going to be so good that they are going to ask us to come to New York." And he said, "As soon as you get out, you come to Omaha." And that's what I did. I got my discharge and I went to Omaha, Nebraska. And we were going to play in off-Broadway houses out there. We were going to become so great in Omaha that New York was going to come to us and say, "Come here and sign a contract in New York City." Well, I hadn't been home in two years, obviously, because I'd been in Korea, and I came to Greenville, North Carolina and my folks said, "Don't go to Omaha, Nebraska. There's nothing but cold; nothing like this. Don't do that." I said, "Well, this is what I want to do; I want to play. I gotta do this." So anyway, my father heard there was a job opening in Elm City, North Carolina. I didn't know where Elm City was located, it's right near Wilson County, it's only maybe forty miles from Greenville, but I had never heard of it. But I said, "All right. I'll go interview for the job." I didn't even have a car. I borrowed a friend's car over there, and sure enough they hired me on the spot. And I said, "I'll do this one year to satisfy my parents, but then I'm outta here; I want to play, I want to be a performing musician."

23:34 SH: And you were teaching?

BM: Yes, I'm teaching now. I got a degree and I'm teaching music over in Elm City at Frederick Douglas School in Elm City. Stayed there, and I had never seen anything like this in my life. I got over there, and there was no gymnasium, the kids were actually playing basketball outdoors in the wintertime in those short little suits outdoors. "What is this?" I ran into kids who had never been to Raleigh, who had never been in a movie theater, who had never seen the ocean. And I said, "Oh, my goodness, this is a whole other world. I had not seen things like this." I got caught up in that because these kids need some help. They think that this is the end. Their whole aspiration was to be the janitor, that's what they wanted to be. The young ladies only thought about having babies, that was their whole purpose.

24:37 SH: And what did they say when you took them to the beach?

BM: I'm going to tell you about that. I said, "We have to do something about this." So, I started doing things. I took them in my car and we started doing things, took them to see the Ice Capades- they had never seen this. It just blew their minds that people were actually skating and floating and looking so graceful on ice. I said, "Yeah! You can do this." And I went to take them to ocean. They had never seen the Atlantic Ocean. I said, "The Atlantic Ocean is only two hours from here, come on." So I got a bus, took them down there, and we got down to the beach, walked across there and I said, "There it is guys. There is the Atlantic Ocean. Think about it." And after some silence, someone said, "Is that it?" (Laughing) I said, "What do you mean, 'Is that it?'" He said, "Is that what you brought us to see?" I said, "Yeah! I wanted you to see the ocean. You had never seen

the ocean! You read about the Pacific Ocean. And here is the second largest ocean. That's the Atlantic Ocean! Look at the waves..." They were not very impressed, but I felt that I needed to do that. They needed to see something; they needed to get out of their own city and see something and learn that you can do other things besides being the janitor- not knocking the janitor- but I want you to think higher than this and do some bigger and better things than this. So I got caught up in that, and I saw that I was making a difference in some lives and I didn't leave. I stayed there and stayed there and stayed there and stayed there to organize the band, and they started doing things, to build up some pride. They thought that they were the best band in the world. I took them to Carolina for Band Day. I was elected as the first minority band director at the University of North Carolina. They went up there and this is what they call, "Band Day." And I was the first minority to ever do that. Those kids marched in there like they were Michigan State or somebody, you know? There wasn't but about 35 of them, but they were so proud. They were about the smallest band there, but I never will forget that day they were so proud that they didn't care. The other bands were like 100, 200 strong. But those 35 marched in there strong, and that's what I wanted them to do. I told them that they were just as good as anybody, and I would make them say, "Where're you from?!" "Elm City!" They would shout that back to me because I wanted them to have that sense of pride, that even though they came from a very small place, they were just as good as anybody. I said, "God gave you some lungs, gave you some lips, and whatever you need, so you can have the ability to play just as well as a kid in Wisconsin, just as well as a kid in Los Angeles. It doesn't matter where you live; it's how well you play. That's the attitude that I want you to have in here. I don't care where you come from, but we're going to play, that's what we're going to do. And, well, there it is. They started doing those things. And later, as I said, I got elected as the first minority band director for the all-state band, which is a nice honor to bestow on me. I also won the state award, for what they call the Terry Sanford Award, for innovations in teaching, because I would have to do different things to bring it out. These kids had never seen an opera. And so I said, "We're going to produce our own opera." We made it up, did orchestral parts, the singing, and the whole deal and filmed it. And showed it to the student body. This is what the opera's about, it's like singing of story. And later I wanted the chance to take them to see an opera, just to get their minds going. So anyway, I started getting awards. That was not my intent; I never did things to get an award. But people started to give me awards, so later, they asked me to be the Assistant Principal there in addition to being the music teacher because what happened is that the principal died, died in my arms. They called me to come to the office, because of my military training, they thought that I could revive the principal- and I knew a little about CPR, and I worked on him and worked on him and blew and blew and blew, but it was too late.

SH: What happened to him?

29:17 BM: He had a heart attack and died right here in my arms. It was a bad day. So at any rate, the doctor came over, the superintendent came over and, and made the guidance counselor the principal, and because I was there, he asked me to be the Assistant Principal. I didn't have any administrative training, but I was a man, and they asked me to do it, so I did that for years. I was a music teacher and the Assistant Principal.

SH: That sounds like a busy term.

29:43 BM: Very busy. Well, integration came and some of us had to be moved to quote “the white school” across town. I was in that bunch. They wanted me to go and take over the band in that program. That first year was kind of traumatic for me because it was the year that integration was not popular. It was not against me personally, but because I was black, people started to get out of the band, whites started to not sign up for band. They didn’t want to be in the band, so we had a hard year that year.

SH: What happened to the band, how did the kids feel at Elm City?

30:24 BM: The black kids, I took them with me, because what happened, they made Frederick Douglas an elementary school and the other school, the high school. So I went over there, took the black kids and they were in the band, but the white kids started to get out of the band. And during that I said, “Oh, this is awful.” But I see he hasn’t given me a chance. You don’t know if I can play a note or not. Give me a chance to see what we can do here.

*[A visitor enters museum, Bill greets her and then we resume]*

31:12 BM: So what happened over here, I moved to Elm City High School and I’m now the band director. And I told the kids, “I don’t care who gets out. We’re going to take whatever we have and we’re going to do well. I still want you to have that pride thing. We’ve got to do it.” And pretty soon, the white kids started coming back, now we got a band that’s getting bigger and bigger. You see that picture over there of Elm City High School Marching Band. And it started to happen, and then we started going to concerts and winning contests and developed a lot of pride, to become a real source of pride for the school, and everybody would brag about the band at that school and the athletic teams because the basketball team was winning championships and the bands were doing so well, and that was good for us. But now I’m still Assistant Principal, so now the principal is moved to city office and became one of the superintendents. So now the Principal is moved to central office, and has become on the assistant superintendents, so I’m still assistant principal and band director, so a group teachers came to me to ask me to consider being principal. I said, “Well, no. I have no interest in administration. I’m really a musician.” And they said, “But you know what you’re all about. You’ve been trying to get things in these kid’s heads over the years, and you know where we’ve come from. You need to be our leader.” And I said, “Well, I don’t even have a principal’s degree. You’re trying to make me go back to school!” (Laughing). And they said, “Well, that’s alright. We’ll be patient while you go and get certified to be a principal.” They literally forced me to put my name in the hat to be the principal. So the superintendent came and said, “What do I hear about you trying to be the principal?” And I told him the story, and told him, “Well, the teachers wanted me to do it. They want someone over here that they feel comfortable with, someone who knows where we’ve come from, and what Elm City is all about. We know that we’re a poor little school here, but we have a lot of pride here. I’ve been a part of that, so yes, I will go back to school to get my certification to give me

a chance to do this.” So he said, “Okay, we’re going to do that.” So I did, I went to East Carolina and became certified, got a Master’s Degree in Education to be a principal. I had already been back and got my Master’s in Music, so I had a Masters in Music.

SH: From East Carolina?

33:53 BM: From East Carolina. Then I went back and got a Master’s in Education. Then I went back to do a program at the University of North Carolina called the Principal’s Executive Program. I was in the very first class. Graduated from that, and then I became Principal of Elm City High School. For two years I was principal of Elm City High School.

SH: And what year was that?

34:20 BM: I wish I could tell you. I’m going to say around ’69 or ’70- I really can’t be positive. I have it written down some place, but anyway, I said that I was the principal of Elm City for two years. Then something else happened. Wilson County is going to merge the system. It had been Wilson County, Wilson city, and Elm City—three separate units in this county. And they decided to merge. That was maybe ’72, or something like that...the plan was to make Elm City High School the Elm City Middle School, and build a new school called Beddingfield High School, a new high school called Hunt High School, and there would be Fike High School- three high schools. And the rest of the schools would be middle schools and elementary schools. So my choice of going to Fike High School as an assistant principal or staying at Elm City Middle School as the principal. I decided I wanted to stay at Elm City Middle School, so I had to go to school again to learn how to be a middle school principal. (Laughing) So I did that to stay with what I called my “youngins” at Elm City Middle School, so I stayed there. Stayed for the next twelve years, and I’m glad I did because I knew what I wanted to see those kids do. I still was in this thing; you have to get out of this thing that Elm City is your world. No, the world is bigger than this. I still had kids who had never been on roller skates. I pulled that into the program. I had the skating people to bring their roller skates to the gym because they couldn’t skate out on the country roads. I made it a practice that they were going to the beach every year, they were going to Raleigh for field trips, we’re going to do all these things to get them out of this mode that Elm City is my world. I stayed there and I did that for twelve years. And then, here comes another superintendent who says to me, “I think we need you at the central office, as an assistant superintendent,” I said, “I don’t know, I don’t have superintendent experience. I’ve been a principal.” To make a long story short, I was offered the job, offered basically twice my salary, so I took the position. I became the first minority to be an assistant superintendent in Wilson County schools. I was in charge of personnel; I was Assistant Superintendent of Personnel for Wilson County schools. And I stayed in that job for the next eight years. So I went to the Superintendent, I said, “Listen, I’m a musician, and I play in night clubs and Bar Mitzvahs, and I do all these things. What’s your feeling about this?” To play in places that you may not want your superintendents playing. I would hate for you to walk into a club one night and here I am playing on the stage (Laughing). He said, basically, I don’t care what you do, as long as you provide the leadership that I expect of you. I said, “Fine

with me.” So I continued to play, formed the band, The Monitors. Everything was going well and people were hiring us all over the place. Became the Minister of Music at my church and during then organizing church choirs and during that, doing recordings. We did some CDs; we’re backing up famous musicians, as they would come to town. Our very first vocalist for the Monitors was Roberta Flack. Roberta Flack was a music teacher down in Farmville, North Carolina, and while she was here we used her as our vocalist. We didn’t know she was going to be as famous as she became later, but she was our very first vocalist. And we’ve had some others who went through the same thing. I’m still playing, very much active right now in the music, playing every chance that I get, still doing recordings, still backing up musicians, just, the year before last, was called to be the backup band for the Dells, as they were playing in Durham. People would call me from time to time now to come and play backup. So that’s what I do.

39:06 SH: Are you interested in playing, if we had some kind of concert series, in the context of this project, are you interested in performing for these types of events?

BM: Oh yes, indeed so. Yes. That’s what I do. I play, and I am very comfortable playing. We play this week, it’s out Pastor’s Appreciation Week, and we are backing up a dance group that’s there. At our choir, we’re singing Thursday night, Saturday night, and Sunday morning.

SH: What kinds of contexts are you most comfortable with, or that you like the most?

39:50 BM: I basically an R&B and Jazz player. I like all kinds of music. I think there are moments that a different kind of music is what you need at that time. And I learned this when I was a principal, kind of by accident. I was reviewing some classical music in the band room—I always had my teachers meetings in the band room—and I had something on by Mozart, a concerto, or something, and it was playing as the students went out and the faculty was coming in. And I noticed a whole different demeanor. Everyone was very quiet. I said, “That’s pretty cool!” (Laughing) And the music is what did that. The music brought out a whole different attitude in people. There are times now that I really want to listen to something complicated, and figure out what’s going on. That’s what my mind needs. I need to hear some Beethoven, and see what he was doing in that 9<sup>th</sup> Symphony, what he was doing with his “Ode to Joy,” get in his head. And then sometimes, I just need to sit down and listen to some Anita Baker. She just sings to me in her way. And then sometimes I just need some Billie Holiday. You have a mood, and somebody can put you in another kind of mood with the music that you hear. So, I really, truly, like all kinds of music. Some I don’t quite understand. I guess I’m too old to understand rap, because I just don’t understand what they’re saying. Our young kids get caught up into the beat of rap. It’s a rhythmic thing. I know about rhythmic hypnosis. That’s a technique. James Brown did it for years. Just played the same thing over and over and let it set you in a groove and you get caught up in the beat of it and you go on with that. And you don’t care what they’re saying. “I’m caught up in the beat of this thing.”

*[Bill’s phone rings. Brief pause.]*

42:18 SH: I just had a couple of questions about, what you were saying, about the kids getting caught up in the beat...

BM: Yeah, I regret that so much because they get lost in the technical parts of the music. They don't want to know about rhythm and melody and harmony, and all those dynamics of music. It's all in the beat, can I dance to it, can I shake my booty... But look what you're missing, I want to learn about the intricacies of music and what makes it happen, and yet, that's not as important to a lot of our youth, and that bothers me. They get caught up in it, and the rappers say all kinds of ugly things, and talking about women, with gangster rap...use all kinds of foul language. How can you get caught up in that when all you're doing is listening to the beat? Because a lot of the rappers don't have any kind of talent, as far as musical ability, but they can rhyme something to a beat. Honestly, it doesn't take a lot of talent to do that, if you just practice a little bit, singing to a beat. So I get disturbed when kids are missing really important parts of music, and its happening all around me, and I can't really do anything about it because it's bigger than I am. It's even working its way into our churches to where our church folks only want to hear that foot stomping, and you miss the hymn, the anthem, those great parts that you really need to be hearing and the great music that they really need to be appreciating, they're missing that part. And I keep trying to teach that. Until the last breath goes out of me, I'm going to keep teaching that. If I'm choir director and my name is on here, I gotta teach this to you. I can't let you get away from the anthems, the hymns, what they are doing here and where this all came from. Because you come and say that this is brand new stuff, but I'm here to say that it's not new. Rap is not new. It's new to the kids because they haven't heard it, but rap started way way, back. My own daughter came home one day, and said, "Dad, I heard the prettiest song the other day." I said, "What's the name of it, baby?" She said it's a song called "Imagination. It's just so pretty." I said, "Does it go like this?" (Humming the tune) She said, "Yeah! That's it." And I said, "That song is not new, baby, this song is so old, I was playing that song in college. What you heard was a new arrangement, a new mix of the same song." She was taken by that. There's so much of that that's being revisited, but you don't have the background because you don't know where it came from. I've been living long enough now to tell you where it came from. You get caught up in this thing that it's brand new. It's not new. There's a segment of music, you might be familiar with it that people call "Beach Music" and people want to do the shag dance. When that music came out, they thought it was brand new stuff, and they gave it a name and started calling it beach music. I said, "No, no. We were playing this music long before you called it something else. We go back to Muddy Waters and T Bone Walker and all of these folks. They were playing that music way before that, but you named it beach music." That's what happened with this. I've been here long enough to be able to tell the difference. Different styles. I am sitting in a graduate class at East Carolina University, and this lady came in with her graduate report, her thesis. She is defending here thesis and I am in the class, and she's talking about the history of rock n' roll, and she goes back, but she starts it with Elvis Presley. And she says, "Elvis did this, Elvis did this..." I'm sitting there just dying by the minute. And I didn't want to mess up a good report, because I knew that you spent a lot of time on it, but because of my age, I lived this, and I tell you, it didn't start with Elvis. If Elvis were alive he would tell you that he didn't create this music. Elvis borrowed it from all these people and he heard this

music from people who played it a long time ago, and played that race music I was telling you about, playing the blues. He made it popular by this, because you guys bought into it, because you saw all of his gyrations and dance to it, but he didn't create it. The professor knew I was right, and he told me after class that he was glad that I did that. I said that I hated to do it, but I couldn't stand there and let other folks think that Elvis Presley started that, because that's not the way it started. By my being 74 years, old, a senior citizen, it's not what I read, it's what I know, because I lived it. I was there when it happened. I was there when the minstrel shows came through; I was there when we were riding on the backs of those trucks. I was there when we were denied going into this place. I was there. I didn't read it; I know for a fact.

SH: In light of your life in Wilson County, what do you think marks Wilson County musically? What makes it special as a county as far as musical traditions?

48:50 BM: Traditions, I'm sure about. There have been some good musicians who have been through here. You're going to be talking to some of them today. I don't know if we've set up traditions, we have been playing this music for years. And yet, I'm hesitant to call it a tradition. The music goes back to the times when we would go to the warehouses to play, there were big events like the June Germans that people would look forward to because that was a big event. People used to dress up and go to the June German.

49:27 SH: What was the June German?

BM: It was an all night dance, and there would be two or three bands that would play, and it would be once a year, most of them were held in Rocky Mount, but people from all over Eastern North Carolina would go to the June German. You would meet friends there. You would have big bands there like Lucky Millender [sp?]... One band would play and then once they would stop another band would take over. It would be an all night dance-athon. People used to do that and we would have them in the tobacco warehouses. That was mostly a traditional thing that was happening, they don't do that anymore.

*[Brief Pause]*

BM: I don't know if I answered your question about "tradition?"

SH: I guess I'm just trying to get at what makes Wilson County unique musically?

50:28 BM: I guess it's the people who make it unique. We've had musicians who have come through here, and like I said, you'll be talking to some of them today. It's what these people have tried to do to keep music alive, to get people recognized. Whereas tradition, I don't know if that makes us any more unique than Greenville, than Rocky Mount, than Raleigh, or New Bern or any other place. But there is some history of things that have happened, like our own group, The Monitors. We are probably one of the few bands in this country that had been together 50 years. That's unique. Now we have had

turnovers. Right now, I am the only original member of the band. I organized—and Cleveland Flowe—organized the band back in '57. We are still very active; we're playing this weekend in Rocky Mount at the Gateway Center. That makes us very unique because a lot of bands organize and then disband. We were before the Embers; we were before the Band of Oz, the other bands who were very popular. We were before that, and yet, we're still doing it right now.

51:48 SH: What are the current band member's names?

BM: We have Donald Tuxon [sp?], alto saxophone, Gerald Hunter on guitar, Sam Lathan on the drums, Jerome Walker on the bass, Dick Knight on trumpet, Freddy Moore (Moye?) on tenor saxophone, our singer is Mollie Hunter, another keyboard player we have is Clarke Mills, Jr, and I'm playing keyboards now because I was playing saxophone, but I moved to keyboards, because our keyboard player left- that's basically the band right now. But there are a lot of guys that are still around here. Willie Dupree is still living here. Craig Patterson has passed away. Diane Artis passed away, Petie Best passed away, but others are still around here. Gloria Burks used to be with us. Horace Raper used to be with us, Charles Proper used to be with us, Elton Jones is still in town, he was with us. But they had to leave us for various reasons, either they got sick or something happened that they had to stop playing, but the band is still going on.

SH: I look forward to the January anniversary.

53:01 BM: Yeah, we're going to have a big celebration. January 25<sup>th</sup> celebrating 50 years of music.

SH: Will it be here?

BM: Yeah, at the Boykin Center.

SH: Well, I appreciate you meeting with me.

BM: Of course, my pleasure.

SH: Our interview will conclude. Thank you very much.

BM: Okay, thank you.

Recording ends, 53:22