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An interview with

**MACEO PARKER (LENOIR County)**

of Kinston, North Carolina

Interviewed by Sarah Bryan

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Transcribed by Sally Council

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*Present are saxophonist Maceo Parker and interviewer Sarah Bryan.*

MP: I'll try to go back as far as I can remember. This is before like leaving out of the house. There was always a piano, it seemed. There may have been some broken-down drumset or something, and maybe prior to then – I'm talking like four, five, or six years old – you know, there were pasteboard boxes, and something like sticks or whatever, coat hangers, that you could use as drumsticks or something, just to hit the boxes just to make some kind of noise or sound. But I can always remember my brothers running and playing, and making sounds that we thought were musical sounds.

And I remember banging the piano. My mother said – now this has to be between my age of, let's say, five and ten – and I remember a little bit of this, wherein an adult could come and play piano – I mean actually play – and I would just stand and watch, and watch, and watch, and watch, and could barely reach over where I could see the keys, but I could just watch and watch and watch. And I had the ability to remember exactly where each finger would go for the first chord, and the second chord, and the third chord. I don't know how I was able to do that, but I was. And I'd stand and I'd watch and I'd study, and I'd stand and I'd watch and I'd study.

And then, from very early on, I could easily remember melodies to songs. I do remember it seemed like it was always religious songs – songs from the church, or something. We used to call them spirituals. But the person would come, they'd play piano, and maybe somebody would sing – my parents probably would sing, my mother and father, or whoever was there – and then after a while they'd just stop and then just start talking, maybe in another room. And then I'd sit at the piano. I'd just climb up and I'd play what I remembered. And that was when they said, "Goodness gracious, listen to this child."

I could somewhat tell by their amazement in my ability at that time that perhaps I was onto something musically, perhaps. And that's when you find out, you know, when you're a kid, you just feed on the way whatever you do affects others. And then, again, it was always fun, because it was always brothers. You know, we'd run together, play together, whatever, sleep and eat and everything together. And we were like – *[shows brothers' heights in descending order, all very close]* – just like that. *[Laughs]*

SB: There were four of you? Is that right?

MP: Yeah. Except for the last one, I think we skipped a couple pegs. We were lucky, really lucky, as we were growing up. Now we were about, let's say, between ten and fifteen, and that's when we decided to start choosing an instrument, a particular instrument. I chose the saxophone, and the reason I chose the saxophone, because – first of all, it was piano. Now, I got to take piano lessons. Okay, with the big piano book up under your arm, you go to this instructor's home, and there's always somebody leaving and then there's somebody coming behind you. I think I may have said this before somewhere; they were always girls! I was really uncomfortable with that. I was like, "Oh, my goodness." You know, you look around, "Oh, man!" Seven years old. "I don't know about this." But I knew I loved the piano – but where are the guys? *[Laughs]* Okay.

And then I remember being really excited about my first parade, where you had marching bands marching in the street, for whatever occasion. You had the high school homecoming parade, or maybe Christmas parade, or Thanksgiving parade, or whatever. But all that pomp, and loud – man, that was like, goodness gracious, like New Year’s Day, or waking the heavenly host. [*Hums first bar of a march.*] And all those drums, the loudness and the fullness and all that, that was like, goodness gracious – that was really good for me. It was really good. So now I’m looking for the piano. “No, no, no, piano is not a parade instrument. You’ve got to choose something [else].”

“Okay, well, maybe I can play that thing there,” which just happened to be saxophone. But we were lucky in that once we chose the different instruments – I had a trombone-player brother and a drummer brother, which you already [met], and then me – we were lucky in that we had an uncle who had a band. Often they would practice or rehearse at our place or some other place, but we were always allowed to go there and listen, listen, listen. And again, I had a real big ear and I could hear those melodies. And stuff that we’d try to learn, then I could always, “No, no, no, it wasn’t [*sings a few notes*], it was [*sings slightly different notes*]. I do remember being really excited about music and about performing, and about the ability to play the instrument.

But at an early, early, early age, like in the very beginning, it was nothing like what I started experiencing, say, between the ages of, let’s say, eighteen and twenty-one, twenty-two. It was a whole other level of excitement and expectation and all that stuff. But when we got to a point where we could form a group and play and perform different places – during elementary school, pre-high school and all through high school – there was a sense of sort of achievement, because it seemed like we didn’t have to compete with the other guys our ages for the small jobs like bagging groceries at the store, or folding newspapers, what I call the common, more – whatever - jobs.

And again, again where the pride came in with us, there was always three. Whatever money we made, it was always three times. If we made ten dollars, fifteen dollars, or twenty dollars, or twenty-five dollars, it was always times three, because there was three of us. And man, that was–

SB: That must have been real money then, too.

MP: Yeah. And it got to the point where we could work three nights a week, like Friday, Saturday, Sunday. It was like, “Whoa. Okay, this could be all right.” And that happened as far back as I can remember. We were lucky, where we never had a job. I never to this day have ever had a job where you punch the clock, you’ve got to be there at a certain time. There’s always been something musically.

Now, I’m trying to remember some of the older people, and trying to – it seems what happens is, if your interest is there, up to a point, then you try to hear as much as you really possibly can, whether it be somebody playing live or whether it be something that you just hear on phonographs or records or whatever. And somehow you sort of form from that, you form what kind of feel or group or concept you want to do. I hear musician A or B, I’m not sure if I want to play like A or B, but I really like D or E, and maybe G, and so forth. So you sort of do that, and sometimes you do it subconsciously where you don’t really set out to do that, but as time goes on you sort of like, “I don’t remember choosing E, but I do some similar stuff as musician E or group E or that particular music.”

SB: It snuck in somewhere along the line.

MP: Yeah. And then you find out it's common for that to happen. You know, like a musician just prefers a certain style rather than some other. But we try to hear everybody. There were some people that you sort of questioned their *[laughs]* – some of them, you know, it got to the point where you started questioning their sanity. There was a couple of guys that would walk around with their saxophones all the time, playing down the street by themselves.

SB: Local folks here?

MP: Yeah. And you, “Goodness gracious, why does he have his saxophone all the time?” You know, like *[sings a few notes]* going from one side of town to the other. And not for spare change, just because that's what they felt like they wanted to do. And back then, the expression “over the top” wasn't out, but it kind of makes you wonder, “Oh?” And you think “Well, I love music and I like performing, but not to that extent,” where you just play all the time like that, you know.

And then there was a trumpet player who played, and his name was Papa Root. I don't know if my brother mentioned him or not. But he used to dress just kind of spiffy all the time – matching tie and shoes and socks and all that – and he played trumpet, and he would sort of play outside too. And that trumpet would get your attention, *[sings a few notes]* with maybe the Louis Armstrong style or something like that.

But let's see if I can go down the list of some of them. Now, these people were like, while we were like ten, eleven, twelve, thirteen, fourteen, fifteen, these people had to be at least thirty, thirty-five, forty. There was a man, a piano player – a great piano player – named John Telfair. There was another piano player named Nat – *[pause]* oooh.

SB: Kornegay?

MP: Could have been! Played locally. Might not have been Kornegay. But he had a daughter named Baby Lou. Seems like her name was Marion something. I can't remember her last name. There was a trombone player who was not that much older than we were, by the name of – this is way back – by the name of Hatch. Hatch? No. Grimsley, last name Grimsley. Played in school. Sister named Pearl who sang.

SB: Oh, I've met her.

MP: Yeah, her brother.

SB: Robert?

MP: Bob? Bob Grimsley? Robert!

SB: Okay.

MP: Is that the name you said?

SB: Um-hmm, yeah.

MP: Yeah, Robert Grimsley. That's it, but they didn't call him Bob.<sup>1</sup>

SB: Okay. I didn't know he was a musician. I'd heard about him being an actor nowadays.

MP: Is that right?

SB: That's what I've heard. On what level, I don't know.

MP: Yeah, yeah. He played trombone. There was a guy – I'll start getting these older ones now – Carson Best. Now, has anyone mentioned Willie Moore to you yet?

SB: Yes, and I was hoping you could clear up my confusion about him.

MP: Okay.

SB: I'll tell you what my confusion is first, and then please tell me what you think is important to record about him.

MP: Right.

SB: I've heard about a Willie Moore who would have been, apparently, a prominent regional musician when you were coming up, with a TV show and a band. I've also read in an old back-issue of *Living Blues* that Willie Moore recorded acoustic guitar blues in the '30s. This would have been like right around 1930. And somebody, some editor along the line had put down a footnote that this was Willie Moore. And whether that's just flat wrong, or there were two Willie Moores, I can't figure out.

MP: May have been two Willie Moores, because this Willie Moore was a drummer, the Willie Moore who did the TV show, and had the band, and all that stuff. He was sort of a showman drummer – you know, with all kinds of theatrics and stuff. You know what I mean? And some people like that, like everything. And he sang, you know, from the drums. I'm trying to think if he got up from the drums to sing. It would have been hard, because otherwise somebody else would have to play drums. But I know they'd pull the microphone up, and he'd sing, you know, blues or whatever. "Hey baby" – boom! – "What have I got to do?" – boom, boom! – "To make you love me too?" And then, "You got to go with me Henry all night," he'd play [*drum*], "You got to go with me Henry all night, baby." I don't know how he came around to having that TV show, but they were clean, and it was nice. And I remember always Friday night or whatever it is, got to watch, turn on the *Willie Moore Show*.

And then you had like other groups, and then you could sort of pick and choose, like, you know, "I heard Willie Moore's group play 'da-da-da,' and I heard the other group play the same song. Now, let's see. I'm not sure which one I like better, but if I had to play it, seem like I wouldn't do it exactly like that." You know?

This is the stuff kids go through as you come up. But at the same time you appreciate those that came before you, because it gives you something to sort of pick and choose. You know, "I'm not sure about that sound," that, again, musician A gets, "because I heard another sound, and I kind of like the one –," you know, like that.

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<sup>1</sup> Pearl (Grimsley) Christian's brother is actually named Bill.

So you start working on, “Yeah, well, I like the mannerisms of this one and that one.” And, you know, “Louis Armstrong has the handkerchief when he plays. You know, I really like that, so I think I might do that!”

So you kind of have a period where you go through this, and then other people see them and then, you see, you can tell the influences because, “Oh, that person must like da-da-da because he –,” you know. A lot of people say they see a lot of, in my mannerisms, Louis Jordan. He was an alto sax player. He had a song called “Ain’t Nobody Here But Us Chickens.”  
[Laughter]

But there was no video back then, and I think television came right around – let me see if I can get this right – right around [figures] – between ’50 and ’55, I guess. Right around in there where you start having – could have been a little bit earlier than that, but that’s as far back as I can remember, you know, when we had the different variety shows. Even Nat King Cole had a show. And then they had something called *Hit Parade* a while back that you always had to [watch]. Ed Sullivan and this other guy. *Ed Sullivan* was a variety show where people would come on and sing and play and do all kinds of stuff. Sunday nights, I think, or Sunday afternoons.

SB: Who were some of the other folks, on a national level, who influenced you, or who you liked?

MP: Let me see if I can just go through as many as I can remember, you know, from here, locally.

SB: Okay.

MP: My uncle’s band was called – well, his name is Bobby. Well, his actual name is Robert, too, just like the other guy we were talking about, the trombone player. But he also played drums. And something that I knew, but I hadn’t thought of in so many years, was that my uncle, Bobby Butler, Robert Butler, who was a drummer, had a band; Willie Moore was a drummer, had a band; each one of them married sisters. And I knew that for a while, but I hadn’t thought – you know how you haven’t thought of it for a long time – until the other day when I was here having that function. “That’s right!” This kind of thing.

That must have been great, because in a small, small, small way, there was like a little bit of competition, but it’s almost like a barrier or something that you can’t really see, but it’s there. Because I’m playing over here on this side of town, and you’re playing over there on that side of town, and we really hope that we can draw more people than you. I mean, you don’t actually say it, but that’s the thing. And then you have people who would sort of ping-pong, you know, be over here for a while, pay those two or three dollars or whatever it is. Then they go, “Yeah, it’s not happening.” It goes, “Oh, it’s really happening over here.” You know, this kind of thing.

All of that was part of it, too, to the point where when we got into it, like that sort of circuit kind of a thing, it was the same kind of thing. You know, we’re playing over here. And the same guy that was here when I first met you, sitting at the same table, he had a little group. His name was Sonny Bannerman.

SB: Oh, I visited him, yeah.

MP: Yeah. In fact, he's a saxophone player. But he actually started playing in my uncle's group. That's where he started.

SB: He was a Blue Note?

MP: Yeah. Let me think. There was somebody – now these people were long, long before me, I mean, like long, long, long before me. But I still remember their names. I never heard them play. There was somebody named Zack Green that played saxophone, but I knew some of his kids. And – let me think, now, let me think. There was a guy named, and I believe that may be him in one of the pictures out there [*in photography exhibit at Kinston Arts Council, photo of a man standing in front of a school bus*], named Jim Henry Jones, that played trumpet. Now, all these people are from right here, from Kinston. Miss Perry, somebody mentioned her, I'm sure. See, you start having people like from the education side of it, the school thing, and then like local people. There was a guy who I never heard play but I understand he was pretty good, upright bass. What was his name? [*Pause*] Hmm. I can't get it. Oh, my goodness. Oh, boy. Maybe it'll come to me before we finish.

One of my influences was a saxophone player, one of the teachers, came down from – was it Lancaster, Pennsylvania? I think. But anyway, Banks. James Banks was a saxophone player. And he, I think, was the first that made me sort of really take like, really, interest in myself, because he noticed something in me at a very, very early age.

But I liked, from listening to all the recordings that you could hear, or what you could hear on the radio – there was a program that used to come on called “John R.” or something. No, he was a DJ. He used to play everything. He played comedy stuff and a little jazzy stuff and blues and all kinds of stuff. But he came on late at night, and we'd stay up and try to get him. Came out of Tennessee, and somehow we could pick him up, somehow. Had a little bit of static in it, but [*laughs*] we could get it.

But before we got to the point where we could buy our own records, we'd have to just listen to, you know, like knock on somebody's door and say, “Oh, you're playing? Okay. Do you mind if we come in and just listen?” “Oh, yeah, no, come on.” You know, they'd play it, and you'd hear big band stuff, or – but I got into Ray Charles really early – really, really, really early. And he came to perform here. I'm trying to think if it was once or twice before we graduated from high school. I mean, Ray Charles, my goodness!

It was a lot of segregated stuff back then, too. I used to think it was so silly, especially when Ray Charles came. They had him perform in a tobacco warehouse, which used to be plentiful here in Eastern North Carolina. I mean, tobacco warehouses would be almost everywhere. [*Laughs*] And some promoter would make a deal with whoever owned the warehouse, and they'd take the tobacco and move it over a little bit, or out in the next thing. A big old, big old floor, and build some kind of little stage. But they would have a rope, like a big, thick rope like maybe from a ship or something [*laughs*], and have it in the center of the stage, down the thing, and then all the way to the back. They'd have black people on one side, white people on the other side.

And I, you know, remember as a kid saying, “I don't understand this. What's the difference in the rope? I don't understand.” And then, you know, like this. [*Demonstrates*] This is the stage, and the rope is like this, all the way back, and then you've got white people over here, black people over here. But you've got Ray Charles over here! You know what I mean? And you're listening at the same time. You know, when you're young you don't really

understand what's going on, and all that. But, you know, you just try to make it make some sense, and then keep going from there until you start getting older and then you start realizing and picking up on stuff, you know, conditions and all that stuff.

But I really, really, really was into Ray Charles. And I thought it was a really, really good experience for me to be able to see first-hand, you know, like getting out of the thing, living conditions, and what they do before the show, and after the show, and packing up the stuff, and la-de-dah, and all this. And you know, you think, "Wow, man. You know, I'm not sure, but ooh – I like some of the stuff, I like the musical stuff, but I'm not sure, I don't know about this getting high thing. I don't know about that."

And then I used to think – I mean, music and performing made me feel like – you know, you'd be so appreciative in the fact that you have an ability to do what you do until, to me, it was almost like abusing that ability if you start taking substances and all that stuff. But then at the same time, I didn't want to be an old prude. If somebody else felt like they wanted to do that, fine, but I have the say-so about what I'm going to do, you know. And that's what I did.

I remember coming home from school one day, from high school, and people were sitting on the porch talking. And, you know, you're walking down like this, and people are sitting on the porch. And I heard somebody say, "Oh, are you going to the show that's going to be next week at the something warehouse?" And somebody else said – the reply was, "No. You know all those entertainers, all they do is just get high and drink, and I don't like that."

And I heard all this, and I said, "You know, boy, if I ever end up being a musician, maybe I can just show people that you don't really have to drink and get high and all that to be a musician. It hit me in a way that was sort of like a negative thing. But then at the same time I wanted to say, "Well, you just can't categorize all musicians as somebody that's going to get high and drink and stuff." Because I knew how good it made me feel to know that I can maybe, perhaps, play something or have a sound that somebody appreciated.

Now, it was almost the same as having the ability to run fast, because I was the fastest runner in my class, too. And at the time I was the fastest runner on the football field. So, you know, "Okay, down, down, everybody goes when I say so, [*makes motor noises - prr, prr, trrrr*]." And, you know, when you *trrrr* at the end, like Richard Gere in *Officer and a Gentleman*, you jump around. Because you're [---]. You can do anything you want to. And there's a sense of, you know, "I won!" And that's the feeling I used to get when I used to outrun everybody. The same feeling like you get when, "Man, that's not bad!"

But then at a very early age, I knew, I was aware of the fact that – you know, people in your family -- you could sound like frogs, but it's, "Oh, that's cute! Oh, my goodness!" You know? But then, when you get that from somebody on the other side of town who don't really know you, to say, "Man, that's all right," *then* you start hearing. You know, because people in your family are going to be a little bit partial. So, you know, you kind of get that, too, so you say, "Oh, okay, well, maybe." Or some complete stranger, says, "That's not bad. That's pretty good." Then you feel like you're sort of on the right road and perhaps you can pursue some kind of career or something, you know, doing that.

There was a time when I thought straight-line, straight narrow line, you go to school so many years, you get a degree, you teach. No deviation at all. The only deviation is what level you teach. It could be the private sector or elementary school, la-da, and little kids, la-da, or college. But you taught! That's it! And for a time, you know, I said, "Okay, well, if that's the

thing, then I'll just figure out what level and how I'm going to teach later, but I'll go to school," and like that.

But then my high school band director that I told you about came in when I was in the eighth grade. He was a saxophone player, and what he did, he came in like half the year, because something must have happened. The teacher that we had had to leave or something came up. He didn't know anybody. He just came in and said, "Okay, you guys are playing out of this something book," or whatever. "Okay, turn to page." He just – yeah, just [thumbing]. And he's looking and he's listening and he's looking and he's listening, and just see who's playing, okay, and then maybe he'd go further, you know, do some harder stuff or maybe some easy stuff, and he's looking and listening. And he could just, you know, from observing who's playing and who's not, you know, like what's going on for the whole thing.

About – seems like it was last year. Yeah, it was last year. Last July, I had my group to come in and play in the gymnasium where we used to do the high school basketball games and all that. And the band room where we practiced, the high school marching band room, was part of that gymnasium. And we used that room as a dressing room for my group. And we were in there, and I could not realize or did not realize how small that room was. Goodness gracious, I can't believe we used to have that whole band in this room! The room was about as large as this, maybe a little bit larger, maybe, but not much. We'd always have – what? – 30 people maybe, 35, 40 people, with big drums and sousaphones and trombones and all kinds of stuff. And we used to cram them into that room. But we were so into the music, we never knew! And he, you know – and I go in there now and I say, "Goodness gracious, the room is not this small, I know!" The same room! The same room, but I could not realize, or did not realize that room was that small.

But somewhere down the line, something is in there, you know, to sort of help you decide, or sort of make you decide, "Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. This is what I'm going to do." And you also have that feeling that, "Because if I don't, it's a waste." Almost, again, like, "I don't really like football that much, nor baseball, or any other kind of sports, but I know I can run fast." And all the rest of the guys know that I can run fast because I can beat them running. So they encourage, "Come on, Maceo! You got to! You got to come!" "Yeah, yeah, yeah," okay, because if I don't, it goes to waste. So that's the same thing, you know. "Well, I've got to," because there's something in there longing to be heard musically, you know.

There was a lot of appreciation here. We sort of appreciated everybody that performed and played and all of that. But there was a little bit of competition, a little bit. And there was a time where we did not understand that. And I think by growing up with brothers, you know, it was almost like a share thing, you know, from Day One. You know, when there's one piece of something, you share it if it's only one piece, and then as you share it, then everybody gets a piece. So, to share somehow just sort of opens you up in other things that come through life or with life's situations and stuff. It's so easy to get through stuff just because of the fact that you know about sharing. Right?

Now, if that situation was different, if you don't know so much about sharing, if you don't have your brothers or sisters or anything, if you're one child, maybe – *maybe*, now I don't know, I'm just saying, you know – then, "This is mine!" "This is mine!" You know? "No, no! No!" You know? Because you can see it in kids when you get them in a situation where, you know, now they're with other kids. "No, this is mine! No, no, you can't have it!" Or, "No, no. Oh, you like this? Okay, you can play with it – for a while." You know, this kind of thing.

[Laughter]

But you make the decision and then you say, “Okay, now I’ve got to make this work because I’ve made that decision,” and, you know, just sort of stick with it, stick to it, stick whatever, go on like that. I think we got to a point where we felt like, okay, “We’ll try to do all – every situation that comes up musically that we can play and perform, we’re going to do that, because we feel like experience is the best teacher.” You know, the more you’re at it, the more you do it, the more you try it, the better you should get at it. And da-da-da-da-da-da, another year is gone, another year is gone, another year is gone, another year.

We started playing – I don’t know if Melvin mentioned this, but I was in the fifth grade. My older brother played trombone in the sixth grade, I was in the fifth grade, and Melvin was in the fourth grade – *fourth grade* – and we were going in the nightclubs. But we’d play, you know, with the adults and the drinks and all that stuff. And we would play my uncle’s intermission, because we’d play [*sings different instrument parts of jazzy tune*]. I’d try a solo [*sings saxophone part*] – fifth grade! [*Sings more of sax solo*] And I remember that because I played the same solo the whole time. [*Laughter*]

But pretty soon, like, sixth grade becomes seventh, seventh becomes eighth, eighth becomes ninth, ninth becomes tenth, tenth becomes eleventh, eleventh becomes twelfth, and then you graduate. And then so on, and then you graduate. That’s a long time. And then you – now you’re in college and you keep trying, you keep trying all this, year after year. You’ve got all these little gigs, and then another year you’ve got all these gigs, and you’re trying. And you say, “Well, you know, I did that last year so I won’t do that this year. Maybe I’ll do this. I’ll try la-and-la.” And you go and get the experience and *boom!*

So, I was well into trying to do my own thing as far as – because I used to ask, “Boy! I wonder why this person played that [*sings riff*] instead of [*sings different riff*]. Why not that?” “Well, that’s what he or she felt at the time.” “Oh, okay. Well, I don’t understand how – I don’t understand.” Now, this is way back in high school maybe or maybe pre-high school. “You know what? It seems like when people play, seems like it’s almost like they’re having a conversation.” You know [*sings different parts of tune*]. Man, that’s so nice! Goodness gracious! “But what? Okay, well, let me try it. Okay, okay.” And you try and you try and you try and you try. The next thing you know, you’re sort of on the – you know, you’ve [---] something and like that.

I worked on – what was very, very important to me was sound. I noticed that all students sounded like students. I wanted to sound like the instructor, the band director I told you came in my eighth grade year. I’d hear him play, and *ooo-ooo!* And there were some, like, when I’m in the eighth grade, you know, we’ve still got ninth and tenth and eleventh and twelfth grade students. Sounded horrible, you know. “Goodness gracious,” I said, “Why? I don’t want to sound like students. I want to sound like him.” And that became my most important task that I wanted to try to achieve – to have a pleasing, pleasing, pleasing sound. I wanted to sound professional like him. And that’s what I worked on.

And some of them would be, “No, no. I want to be able to do sixty notes before you can snap your fingers twice, you know.” *Brrrr*, you know. I said, “Great.” But I worked on it and I worked on it and I worked on it. And it took – what? – four or five years of work, work, work. But by the time I graduated from high school, I was sounding just like – you know, I had the sound that I wanted, just like his. I could give you a blindfold test, and you couldn’t tell which was playing, the teacher or the student.

But another thing, like I say, he saw something in me very early on, from the very beginning, to the point where he'd say, you know, during the recess, "You come here!" You know, "Get your cookies or whatever you're going to get and come here." "Okay, Mr. Banks, sure." And then he'd run everybody out of the band room, and he'd just play. He'd play, he'd play, and he'd play. I'd sit there. I'd try to ask questions. He'd say, "Uh-uh. Just listen."

SB: But you knew what he was doing at this point? Did you understand?

MP: He, I guess, was trying to teach me phrasing. But I was not – is that right? I was not really into phrasing. I was into the *sound*. And maybe he was trying to teach me both. I don't know. But I'd run home, you know, after hearing that stuff, because I still had the ability to remember stuff like I did, you know, like when I was young. And I'd run out, "I've got to go!" [*Sings tune*]

Then he got to the point where he started working with us in our band. You know, like we'd go perform different places. We had a place to play in Faison, North Carolina. This is before we graduated from high school. Every Saturday night, I think it was. This guy had a warehouse but he had like a produce warehouse thing. I think the produce was probably pickles, I think. But he would just, like they did with the tobacco, he'd just move everything around out of the way. And he would charge so much for the kids to come in. And that was segregated, too. They were all white kids. But we had kids coming from Virginia.

What were we called? Ulysses Harding and Mighty Blue Notes – or Junior Blue Notes? By then, it was Ulysses Harding and the Mighty Blue Notes, I think. But Blue Notes was the name of my uncle's band. And when we were like kids, we called ourselves Junior Blue Notes. But then, as we got older, I guess we just got away from the Junior part. And then, we got an older guy, Ulysses Harding, who played piano or organ. And he had a car because he had like a driver's license and all that stuff. And somehow we were thinking since he was the oldest, maybe we should use his name, you know, [---] and all that stuff. So we called it Ulysses Harding and the Mighty Blue Notes, I think.

But we didn't find out until like later, later, later – because we weren't into that. We weren't into, you know, "Hey, where you from? Oh, where you going to school? Oh, yeah?" We weren't into that. We were just into performing – that's it – and what we thought and hoped performing well. And that's what we were doing. We used to smile a lot [*laughs*] because we had a lot of fun. And from Saturday to Saturday to Saturday, you know, when you start seeing the same people, you say, "Golly, these people really must really like what we do."

And we'd try to imitate, like, everything that was played on the radio or what's popular that people would buy. When we lived in the projects, there was a community center. And during the afternoons, people would come in, you know, like teenage kids would come in and dance, almost like a – how can I say it? What you call those things? Sock hop, going-to-the-hop kind of thing, you know. They'd do that every day, every day, every day. And we'd stand around and watch them try to dance, you know, [*laughter*] with the flared skirts and the little socks and the black and white shoes and all that. And sometimes the girls with the little bows and pins [in their hair], middle '50s, [*sings bop*], like "Rock Around the Clock," [*sings "Rock Around the Clock"*], you know, and all this. Man, I tell you!

But – one thing that we got to the point where we sort of really could not replace, or didn't want to replace, was the fact that we were really getting experience and trying to do what we thought, you know, how we like. When I say we, I'm talking me and my brothers.

SB: Now, was Kellis part of this also?

MP: Yeah, yes!

SB: And the younger one?

MP: Not the younger one. But just the three of us.

SB: Okay.

MP: And then Kellis sort of went off into the school stuff, you know, the books and all that. In fact, we all knew that he was sort of into that anyway because, first of all, he ended up being president of the student body and he was making a lot of straight A's and stuff. And we weren't really into that. You know, we wanted to play music. We'd do okay, but we were not really into that. It was important to him to at least make a B-plus or an A or an A-minus, something like that. It wasn't that important to Melvin and I. And we'd be going to a gig, and he'd have a *book*. And as we'd – you know, you pass the streetlights – he'd [grab it] [*demonstrates reading*]. I'm serious! And we'd laugh! "This guy has got to be crazy!"

SB: He'd been waiting between lights to get that –

MP: Yeah, to keep reading. And it was some physics book or something stupid! [*Laughter*] But he ended up graduating from the University of North Carolina. This is 1960. No, he graduated from high school in '60. So he went there in '60, '61, '62, '63, like that. And there wasn't a lot of color back then. There was a lot of black and white. [*Laughs*] You look at those footage and stuff, the films and stuff from those times, lots of black and white. There wasn't a lot of color back then. But he ended up teaching law at Columbia. First black – he was the only black in the band at UNC. And he was in that Holy Grail, something, some kind of honor, scholastic honor, some kind of thing.

A&T out of Greensboro sent their band here to try to recruit, and back then, I'd heard about Florida A&M. Man! You know, like with so many steps per minute and all guys. They didn't have females in that band. "*Whoo!* They're serious! I think I kind of like that. I'm not sure, now, but *ye-ee*, let me think about that." I mean, you know, and you just hear stuff. Florida? North Carolina, but *Florida*? But A&T from Greensboro sent their band, and they're a little bit like Florida A&M. But now, okay, what is it? It would cost this much to try to get to Florida, but it only costs this much as an instate student. Ohh, okay. And then they sent their band here, you know, where you can get like a [video on their thing]. "Man, let's go to A&T." "Cool!" So I went to A&T, and so did Melvin.

But now we had gotten to a point where – yeah, let me throw this in before, if I could say some more national stuff, I mean, local stuff. If Sonny Bannerman is playing over here, and we're playing Faison, if we could get back in time, you know, like catch a half-hour or forty-five minutes before they finish, then we can just come in, just sit in and play two or three tunes. And we were all going to do that. You know, it was, "Okay, man, just come on in." All the cats came in and brought their horns.

SB: There was that social thing?

MP: Yeah, yeah. And then it got to the point where they'd try to play something that they thought was really, really hard, or change the key, you know, to some old key that's not familiar. Like something that should be in B-flat. B-flat is – the three keys are like this. You know the three black keys? The one all the way to the right is B-flat. Now, instead of playing in B-flat, they were playing in B-natural, which means you go up to the white key a little bit. Same song, but without telling us. *[Laughter]* You know, everybody says, "What in the world?" And it's not sounding right because they're playing in a different key. We don't know that yet. You know what I mean? "You're pulling some [---]," and then everybody got laughing like you're doing. "We'll fix these kids that come in and want to sit in with our group. We'll put it in something that they're not familiar with."

Then I said, "Okay, so let me – what I'll do is I'll just get familiar with all the keys. Then, when they change –." It worked. I'm kind of familiar now with all of them. You've got to play one of them! You know, like that. But there, again, was that –

SB: A little bit of competition.

MP: Yeah, you know, because the girls would come around, and you'd play your little thing, and blah-blah-blah, and all that, and everybody's smiling, you know, and then all this. And then we were a lot younger, too. But college is where it all started, I think, because we had got to a point where now we're interested to see how other people do. You know, like, from the western part of the state, or mainly even out of state. You know, like, how do they play it? You know, and then you come to find out like everybody's similar. You know, like everybody's upcoming thing. You either came up through the church or, you know, like the [dancing class] or whatever, and you just happened to converge on this particular campus and this particular campus and that campus and that campus.

And that's happening all over the state, all over the country, and then you figure out, all over the world. And you've got the same graduating class, and then the same the year before, five years before, ten years after, you know. You're in this class; they're in that class. And everybody's trying to play, and everybody's like that. And then, when you look at it like that, it's like, golly, it's beautiful, isn't it? I think it's really beautiful. And that's why it's so hard to understand how people can have that – you know, they struck this kind of an attitude – because everything is beautiful. Everything – *ooo!*

And then sometimes we would say, "Man, suppose everybody played something." You know, just everybody played something. You know, like, okay, he played piano, he played bass, he played drums, he played this, he played that, da-de-da. But you had to play something. *Everybody* had to play something. "Come on, man. We're getting ready to play a blues in C, a blues in B-flat," or whatever key. "Okay." But unfortunately the world is not like that. But anyway.

Now you've got classes in music, *[sings]* and you've got *[sings]*, whatever, and you have your recitals and all that. Oh, man! Or you've got to do this in order to get this degree to teach, you know. But boy, I'll tell you, boy, we're like funky. *[Sings percussive rhythms]* And man, I'm sorry, but funky is where it is. Man, hey, I just like funky! *[Sings percussive rhythms]* Like that. In fact, we'd try to do stuff like that when we were in high school marching down the street. *[Laughter]* We got a funky beat going. Rather than *[sings traditional march]*, what did we do? *[Sings funky march]* like this, a little bit different.

SB: *[Laughing]* Did they know what to do with y'all?

MP: *[Laughing]* Oh, man, it's crazy. And then my second year, Melvin's first year, they always had like a freshman talent show. And, "Hey, Melvin, be in the talent show?" "Yeah." "Let's – we'll just go just jump it around." "Okay." "And we can do it like we used to do at home," a drum and a saxophone, that's all. *[Laughs]* We were *silly!*

SB: *[Laughing]* That sounds great to me.

MP: *[Sings rapid series of drum rhythms/sax riffs]* You know, just whatever, right? And then we'd stop. And then we'd stop. *[Laughing]* And then I'd go into some African-style stuff. Like, I'd say – just the way we used to do at home. I'd say, "*[Sings African style call]*." He'd say, "*[Echoes call]*." I'd say, "*[Sings different call]*." "*[Echoes call]*." Anything! *[Sings rapid series of call/response]* Right! [Just the kind of way we used to throw it up] and we'd laugh. We're laughing.

Man, we started doing that, and some African people there in the audience started chanting some stuff. And I said, "Wait a minute. Am I saying something? I don't know whether I'm offending these people – *[laughter]* because we've got African students. I'm not used to this!" "*[Chants loudly]*." "Wait a minute! What's going on? We're just joking, having fun! We don't mean to call you out." Man, it was so funny!

And then every one of them, *every one* of those African students just drew straight A's. They were not interested in football. They were not interested in basketball. They weren't interested in girls. You know, unless they – some of them happened to be girls, female students, but most of them were guys. They were just in those books *all* the time, for real, and they made straight A's. It was like, "That's not humanly possible." You've got to go to some social events *sometimes*. You know, you don't have to go to *all* of them, but my goodness, they didn't go to any of them. They just stayed in and studied all the time, which was just a whole other kind of deal.

But we, by having the same last name, became kind of popular on the campus, I guess because of that thing. And Marvin Gaye came through once, needing a band. You know Marvin Gaye?

SB: Yes.

MP: He didn't have a band at the time, and I'm talking '62, 1962. Now, my first year – now, this could have been '63 – but anyway, my first year when I was there – see, you graduate from high school in June. But then you start college in that same year in September – June, July, August, September – of the same year. So, I graduated in '61, but I also started my freshman year in '61. So, actually, freshman year is '61-'62, like that.

But anyway, I get in a band, an extra band, to make money, blah-blah-blah, as a saxophone player, one of the saxophone players. And the guy who was head of that band turned out to be a sergeant in ROTC class or something that I had to take. It was sort of mandatory. All freshmen guys take the ROTC, the military stuff. And I said, "Okay, if I have to do that, then I'll choose Army." This guy just happened to be an Army sergeant. So, that's that.

We'd go out, you know. We'd make a little money, which I thought was kind of nice because we needed it. You needed to have twenty or thirty-five dollars in your pocket, you know. *[Laughs]* And my roommate was not so lucky. He came from Virginia. And he couldn't find a

gig, couldn't get a gig, which meant every time I'd buy something extra or whatever, then I had to buy two because he was there, and you don't have ask, you know. But that's a group, all right, the whole year.

The second year, Melvin comes. There's not really a place for him. So what happens is he gets in a group, but this group is made up of local people from Greensboro, where the school is, where we were going to school. But often I would go where he is and just, you know, learn those guys at this particular club where they played. They were called like the house band at this club. Learn those guys, "Oh, this your brother?" "Yeah." "Okay, come on." Boom-boom. And then I'd go back.

And sometimes he may come over and do like one or two songs or something with us. "Oh, this your brother?" "Yeah." Boom! Like that. So, he sort of knew my people; I sort of knew his people.

And maybe he told you about this, you know, when he first met James, James Brown, because I'm playing, again, with my people out-of-state. He's playing at this particular place. I might have told you this the other day when I first met you. I don't know. But anyway, that's how all that James Brown stuff came about.

But bottom line is you make a decision, or you think, "Man, you know, how did – you know, how did –? I don't understand how Louis Armstrong just, you know, became to the point where he could play over in Europe, you know, and throughout the world. Oh, man! Boy, if I could do that!"

Now, the first thing to sort of wonder is like, "I wonder what it would be like if –" I remember the first thing. Man! Because coming home from school we used to stop in a little sandwich place, you know, put the little dime or quarter or whatever it is in the jukebox and play something, you know, and like that. You say, "Man! Boy, how cool would that be if you could, you know, just go in a strange place, [trip the thing,] and see your own music or hear your – you're on the bottom part of that record, and just put the thing in. That's me! Man! Man, are you kidding me?!" And you're way over here somewhere where nobody knows you, but there's the music or your sound.

SB: And they know that.

MP: That's what happened when we started working with James Brown, you know, and recording with him. Couldn't believe it! Could not believe it! Because here's a small Kinston, North Carolina – that's always going to be. It's always going to be home. But to be able to go, you know, [hear that / here and there] –.

Now, taking it a little bit further than that, it's like, okay – because once you start working with James and then playing in Baltimore and Jersey and New York and all that, Texas and whatever. We went to California, man! I just couldn't even [*gasps*] – you know, and all that. "No, man, we're not going to Europe. Come on!"

But then, you know, time goes and all this, and time goes. Okay, well, that's James Brown, you know, da-de-da-de-da. And then, [*pause*] "Yeah, but just what if? Just what if?" And then, "You know what? I think, I really do think I can do this somehow. Somehow if I figure out how to do it, I think I can do it."

Because what happened was, as I got hired with James as a baritone sax player – my major instrument at that time was tenor saxophone, which was like a solo instrument. And the guy who was playing tenor saxophone got sick, and James was all upset about, “Oh, man, I’ve got to find somebody to play tenor saxophone.” That’s when I stepped in and said, “That’s what I do.”

And then, when I played, *way* back when I was trying to sound like my high school band director, all that stuff came out. You know, he heard that “take command, take charge” style that I had, and all that, you know. So he said, “You know what? I like you on this, and that, and that one, and that one and that one. So, when the saxophone player comes back, tell him I said you’re going to play solo on this one and this one and this. He can to play solo on this one and this one and this.”

So, there was a time when I’m playing a few of the solos and he’s playing a few of the solos. But when we did something new, we don’t know which person he’s going to call for solo. And that’s how that “Maceo” thing came about in a lot of the songs, a lot of early James Brown songs. [*Sings*] “Da-da-de-da, Maceo, da-da-da.” That’s telling both of us which one he wants to play.

SB: It was a practical thing. It wasn’t just –

MP: Right, exactly! *But* it became part of the lyric, you see?

SB: Right.

MP: So, as James Brown – after a time, when he started it, as James Brown music went throughout the world, so did “Maceo.” [*Sings*] “Come on, and da-de-da-da-da, Maceo, and da-de-da-da-da.” In essence, [*sings*] “O-kay.” It’s sort of like a green light throughout the world. So, I’ve been popular from the James Brown music because we, you know, “da-de-da-da-da, Maceo, da-da-da.” Whew! And that’s what did it for me. It sort of opened up, you know, just – but it was up to me to do what I had to do to make it work. But I did!

And as I reflect back on, you know, can’t see over the piano yet, you know, and playing [*singing and beating time*] “Yield not to temptation for any sins, da-da-de-da-da-da,” when I’m between five and ten years old. When I reflect back on that, and then look at the fact that I’m playing some of the major festivals in Europe – not only that. Mid ’90s, a big old banner, about maybe where the top of this cabinet is to the ceiling, and maybe about the same length and maybe a little longer: “Maceo Parker and Ray Charles.”

SB: Wow!

MP: Three weeks I opened for him in Europe. Just like, oh, I can’t believe it! There was a time when I was a freshman, before Melvin even came, in Greensboro, Ray Charles played at the – and I went to see him twice a year, you know, in the tobacco warehouse – played once at the Coliseum in Greensboro when I was *so* awed. You know, like, “Man, are you kidding me?” I mean, it’s like – I was in so much awe of these guys, it’s almost like [*gasps*]. I couldn’t get close to them.

One of the saxophone players, an alto player named Hank Crawford played with Ray. In fact, he played when he came here. This guy was dressed so – he had on a shirt and a tie. He had on a brown jacket. It may not have been brown. It may have been sort of like ox-blood, kind of

like this, or maybe beige, maybe, or gold or something. But what I remember about it, he had his boots the same color. “Man, that is so cool! *Oooo!*” [Laughter] Leather boots! “That is so cool.” He come out, and he leaned up against the brick thing, and just sort of put his foot up like this, and had his saxophone, you know, like up under here like this. And I’m standing back about a block. “Man, those cats are so cool!”

SB: [Laughing] And all this time you thought Papa Root was cool.

MP: Yeah! [Laughs] But Ray Charles! And I remember saying – I’m a freshman in college, and I remember saying, “Boy, one of these days, you guys are going to know me. I am sorry.” I did my finger like this [pointing, and speaking slowly], “One of these days, you are going to know me.” Ray came by to get in his limousine to go back to the thing. I think he had a small plane back then, and I touched him on the shoulder, you know. “Oh, man! I touched Ray Charles! Ah, I touched Ray Charles!”

But I got a chance to work with him once during that three-week period. One night I, you know, somehow I asked him, “Hey, man.” “Yeah. Yeah, sure.” “Hey, on a funky little tune, tell Melvin and Maceo to come out and play, take a little one-chorus.” Back in the dressing room, laughing. He’d just laugh, falling, go all the way down to the floor like this. He would almost hit the floor, he was bent over so far like that and laughing.

And then, his saxophone player at that time was called – well, one was Hank Crawford, but the tenor saxophone player was named – used to call him Fathead, but his real name was David Newman. I was musical director of the band for the – what do they call it – Rhythm and Blues Foundation awards. And they gave Fathead Newman, real name David Newman, an award, and I presented the award to him. [---] said, “We’ll let Maceo do it. He’s a saxophone player.” And then I reflect back on when I was [a kid]. “One of these days, I’m sorry, but one of these days, y’all are going to know me. I swear. I swear. I swear. One of these days, you’re going to know me.”

And they know me. [Laughter] And Ray Charles knew me before he died, too. And I felt like that was an accomplishment for real, just like wow. Because, you know, like those things seem to be so farfetched and so far, you know, that – no. No. But then, it’s almost like a determination, like, “No, nothing else can happen except that.” You know, you make it happen.

I remember my mother – because you learn to travel and, you know, what you might call live out of the suitcase or whatever. Then my mother said, “You know, you’ve been calling a lot. And they have these factories here. There’s a place called Dupont. There’s a place called something-something. And I know the person who – do you know so-and-so? Well, his son or somebody’s cousin or something hires out there.” And I remember saying, “Mother. Mother. Mother.”

You see, if I did that, you know, it’s kind of like [gestures]. I remember doing that. I was at her place and I said, [gestures]. That’s all I can do! You know, I said, “Now, what I’m doing, if I play it correctly – you know, I’ve got a vision. If I do it, now, it’ll be like this. I may be here now, but there’s no ceiling. You know? There’s no ceiling,” you know, like that, and I explained to her. She said – but it took her a minute to really hear what I was talking about and – [because I remember staying with her at the time]. But it was almost like a babe in the woods. You have to crawl, you know, before you walk.

But I had that vision, and I knew I had that ability to run fast. And I knew I had that ability to do what I do. And there's another thing that I came in agreement with myself at an early age. I'm not going to try to do everything. Although there are some people who can do like more than one thing and are really, really good at it, I don't know if I want to do that. I just want to be good at one thing. Then I know at least I can be heard – you know what I'm saying? – in this particular thing.

And that's what James Brown heard when he heard me play. He said, "Goodness gracious," because what James Brown heard when he heard me play was – because he said it more than once – is, "You know, when Maceo plays, it's almost like an extension of me, like I'm still on the stage." He can go off and change his clothes or something, and I'm playing, and my concept of playing is almost the same as if he's still there, still singing. He used to say that a lot. But I came up with that concept, you know, because I really wanted to have something to say when I play. And, you know, Prince, he hears that today. You know what? My last birthday I was 64 years old.

But it's still easy to reflect. When Melvin and I first got hired with James Brown, he called us New Breed. He recorded some song and put New Breed in "Papa's Got a Brand New Bag." He just called us New Breed, which was cool. Okay? And people will always – especially me because of, again, because of that "Maceo, come on play your horn" throughout all those records – but all the historical stuff with James, I was there. I went to Vietnam with him. I did the Martin Luther King thing in Boston with him. You know, "Say It Loud, I'm Black and Proud," I'm on that. I mean, you name it, I'm there. I mean, there were a few times – you know, I worked and stopped, and worked and stopped. But all those historical things, the tribute songs and stuff, I was right there. And that will never change, you know.

So when you reflect back on, you know, your beginnings and where it all started and what were you thinking about and different people that sort of helped influence you and gave you a hope and all that stuff. Then I've got to come here and start reflecting back on these things and all these teachers and everybody, you know, all the smiles that I can remember. Like, I played, or we played my high school prom. Prom! [Laughter] Melvin right there got to play drums. Can you imagine my date? I was a senior now, getting ready to graduate, but I'm playing the prom! You know, you play a little while, you run out there, you know. Remember those days? You know, it was crazy! But everybody knew, you know, that's Maceo.

They didn't expect me to hit the ball or pitch a ball or run the football or anything like that. But they knew. But I got to a point where I really started liking football. I really did because I figured out a way where – I mean, there was a time when I didn't know the concept of playing it, but then I did. But it was a little bit too late because I'm graduating from high school now. And I said, "Lord have mercy, I'm a little bit too small and I don't think I weigh enough to play college ball, but I sure love it."

And then, there's a camaraderie, kind of a – almost macho kind of a thing, where you want to show the guys, "This is what I can – hey, I can do this." And that's all it is! That's all it is! You know, like, "I can do that a little better than you." That's all it is. But the real, real good ones get paid for it, you know. And all the stuff about team-this and all that, it ain't that. All they care about is, you know, "I can do it a little bit better than you. I can do it up to this level. Pay me." You know, "Pay me to do it." That's it.

But I did get to the point where I really started liking running punts back. You know, the kickoff at the beginning of the football game, where they kick it *boom!* And the guy catches it

*boom!* And they try to run it back. *[Laughing]* Man, I used to *love* that! I used to love it! I used to love it!

But there was a guy who was actually athletic who played on A&T's football team. And those guys could hit, too. I'm talking about hit – broken legs and all this, bloodied, you know, shoulders and all that stuff. *[Coughs]* He said, "Maceo, even if you're the best football player or running back or whatever or punt returner in the world, it's only eight years, nine years, or something like that, and that's it!" He said, "You'll be playing that saxophone when you're sixty years old. What are you worrying about?" And it's true.

And I've thought about it. They said B.B. King is still playing. Bo Diddley made the news because he had some kind of heart attack today or yesterday or something, 70-something years old.

SB: He did? Did he survive it?

MP: Yeah, so far. But B.B. King, who must be 20 years older than me, or more, is still playing. He comes out and he sits down, and he's still playing. I mean, that's entertainment. People are just going to love him. And you get that. *[Laughs]* I keep telling myself, "Man, I don't think I want to just fall over on the stage." But if I did, it might be at the Holiday Inn or something. I'm not really traveling, but I still do *[sings]* somewhere.

But the whole concept, or the whole, you know, as you come 360 degrees circumference thing, it seems like you always reflect, you know, what you have to reflect back on. There's a lot of love and fun and experiences, you know, different experiences you experience just from choosing music.

And then there may be an underlying kind of a deal, but there is a fraternity/sorority kind of a feeling, even though nobody really says it. But we do all know that we're in the same boat. We're in the same kind of thing. We're on the stage. We're performing on the stage, and there are people who are out in the audience who are not on the stage. So you have that. And then there are unions and stuff. Believe it or not, I belong to a union in California. I think it's called Local 47, a musicians union where you have all kinds of by-laws and all kinds of certain rights and stuff and blah, blah. It's in newspapers and stuff every now and then.

But if somebody asked, "What would you do differently?" Not a thing! Not a thing! I think I would do it the exact same way, because it's been fun. Sometimes somebody asks me, "What do you think would have happened if you had never met James Brown." I say, "Well, you know what? I took what I had *to* James Brown," you know, which means if I had gone over here, I'd still be Maceo. I play like this and play like that whether I'm over there, over there, or over there.

SB: Right. He didn't create you. Yeah.

MP: Exactly. Sometimes I wished I could been around to have known a little bit more about the older people from this area. But, you know, you have to be born and do when you are. But you can only hear stories of – let me see if I can think of that bass player's name. Seems like there was another guy, too, who used to try to play. Beech. There was a guy named something Beech that tried to play saxophone a little bit, had a club, and used to have people come around. There are a few of the older people now. In fact, the guy who sings – I can't think of his name. He was a singer. He was here at that meeting when I first met you.

SB: Oh, was it Wilbert Croom?

MP: Yeah.

SB: Okay, yeah.

MP: He was in a couple of groups, seems like, back then. He would know all those people that I'm trying to name. Robinson? Or did you say William? Did I say Nathaniel? Nat?

SB: Oh, Kornegay?

MP: Kornegay. Did I say Nat, the other guy?

SB: Yeah, or Nathaniel. *[Pause]* How well did you know John Telfair?

MP: He played piano with Willie Moore. Yeah. And I think – I'm not really sure now. I think he taught. Now, I don't whether he taught in school or he taught like in the private sector, but I think he taught. But he was much, much, much older. But it seems like he was connected with the school, seems like he was, in some capacity. He taught something. Didn't know him that well because, like I say, he was much, much older than we were.

SB: Right. I was looking through some old Kinston city directories, and in 1928, Telfair was a doorman at the hotel.

MP: Is that right?

SB: And that got me thinking about just that balance between professional, fulltime musicians making their living that way and folks who'd only have time for it when they got home from a long job. How many of that older generation, if any, actually made their living playing music?

MP: Well, see, I don't know. Not a lot, because I think what happened – the fact that – what I think tried to happen is, if you come up as a musician, you try to do what we did. You know, try to get hired by somebody prominent, you know, that travels and plays and travels and plays and travels and plays and plays and plays, where you could make some kind of decent kind of thing from doing it, rather than just little pocket stuff. You know what I mean? *Or* they would move like to New York or Jersey or somewhere and then play in nightclubs up there.

SB: Right. You could do it locally up there, but not here.

MP: There you go, exactly, exactly. Or just forget about it altogether. Satchel James was what that guy's name was, last name James. Played upright bass. Played a lot of jazzy stuff. But I found out after I left that we and the musicians from around here were a little bit limited. Seems like we'd get to like a level, and then just stop. You know, "Oh, that's enough, that's enough, that's enough!" And would just keep, just stay right there, and like that. Now, I didn't find that out until after I got away and started like going around with other musicians from different places and growing up like that, which is sort of okay, too. But, you know, that's just the way it was.

And then I didn't know just because we were in Kinston city limits that we were actually from the country. *[Laughter]* "This is an oboe." "A *what?*" "An oboe, a double-reed instrument." "[What's an oboe]?" "Here's what it sounds like" – *beeee*. "Goodness gracious, what is that thing?"

And then, after football season my first year at A&T, they made me stop playing saxophone to play flute. Said, "We've got too many saxophone players. Football season is over. This is called 'concert season' now, and we've got too many saxophone players. So I need some flute players, more flute players, so you, you, you, you and you got to play flute." "I don't play flute." "Learn!"

SB: *[Laughing]* Oh, gosh.

MP: And turned their head and kept on going.

SB: Like that's all there is to it.

MP: So I'm going to protest. Yeah! I protest. I sit over there with all the flutes for like three weeks, I guess. He ain't never said nothing. "If that's what you want to do, fine. But you're not going to play saxophone. You're going to play flute." And you hear all this beautiful music *[sings]* and you're sitting over there and not contributing at all. You've got two hundred people there, I mean, beautiful sound. You sit there. *[Speaking very quietly]* "Boy, this is so pretty. *[Because it's still music, right?]* But I'm not contributing at all." So, I like *[blows a few times]*, and pretty soon, got a sound. And then, I know me. Once I learned how to play *[sings a scale]*, that's all I needed. *[Sings more complex tune ("In and Out"?) in high voice]*, which was popular back then, a Herbie Mann tune, I think.

Then I write home or call home and tell the band director, Banks. I said, "Man, I'm playing flute now," and he gets a flute. Then I knew Fathead from Ray Charles' band played flute. So I said, "Well, this is not such a bad idea. I'm almost glad they made me do this, you know, because now I can – you know." Fingering is the same as a saxophone.

Banks got killed before I finished my – probably the summer of my sophomore year.

SB: What happened to him?

MP: He used to love to work on his car, personally. And all the time, like whether anything was wrong with it or not, he was just under there doing something, you know, under the hood doing something. Oh, he could play, too. In fact, he had just got hired – he decided to leave the school system and just got hired with a big band by the name, a guy by the name of Lloyd Price. I don't know if you ever heard of him, but he was part of that – what do they call it? Kings – Kings of Kings – no, Kings – Would Be Kings – something about the Ali fight. *[Note: Price was part of 1974 Ali-George Foreman "Rumble in the Jungle."]*

SB: Oh, *When We Were Kings?*

MP: *When We Were Kings*, yeah. *[Sings]* "Lady Luck, turn your back on me." Lloyd Price was part of that. Banks was getting ready to be part of his job, I mean, his band. I don't even think he ever got a chance to work. But anyway, he was underneath the car, and some kind of way the jack slipped, and it fell on him and stuff. Man, that was bad – whoa. That was a little bit too much for me. But he would have been so proud of me. *[Laughs]* He would have been so

proud of me. He gave me like a senior superlative thing. He gave me an award my junior year that should have gone to a senior. He was just into me just that much. I must have been so much ahead of other people.

SB: When you came to that realization about the conversational nature –

MP: Of playing?

SB: Uh-huh, of music -- did the other people you played music with hear that, too? Were they at that stage as well? Or were you having a conversation with people who weren't hearing it?

MP: No. No, this is just some stuff that you just say to yourself. You know what I'm saying, talk to yourself?

SB: Um-hmm.

MP: I almost started looking at it like handwriting. You know, like each has his own handwriting, and you can't change it. Maybe you can. But, basically, like your handwriting is your handwriting, and so on, and so on, and so on. Your interpretation of what it is you want to say when you play is yours. It's yours, and so on, and so on, and so on. I sort of started looking at it like that. But then again, you know, a lot of people have handwriting [they don't like], [laughs] because sometimes I lose my penmanship. "Why can't I write today? Goodness gracious!" [Pause] But I think most of us – and I've got to run, by the way. I've got an appointment.

SB: Okay.

MP: I think most of us who perform, who even play, I think most of us have good hearts and good minds and stuff. And I advocate peace and love all the time. I really do. And I think, and I'll go on record saying this. I really do think – like when, when, when – I mean, okay, it's an unfortunate blah-blah, all that. Okay. But I really do mean this and I really feel this. When you have an administration where war and sending troops and death and destruction and blah-blah-blah, when that's in the forefront all the time, *all* the time, because – that's what it is! It's almost like, okay, "How many troops did we lose through today?" Or "Suicide bomber da-da-da and killed so many." I mean, that's every day, almost to a point where it's like normal. So when you have somebody thinking like this person from Virginia Tech. saying, "Okay, well it ain't such a big deal to do something crazy." Well, what about outlawing weapons? What about having gun control laws? Or what about this? What about, okay, if you've got to have guns, fine, but sell bullets for \$3,000 per bullet? I mean, *something!* I mean, *something* where it's not so easy for a person to – you know what I'm saying?

But I really do believe – now, President Bush, for whatever his concept is, maybe he feels he's got to do what he's got to do, blah-blah-blah-blah-blah. Fine. But I really do think psychologically – I have never had a psychology course, but I really do think and feel that when you turn that TV on to CNN all the time, and that's all you, the first thing you hear, da-da-da, all the time, da-da-da, it just somehow advocates the fact that, you know, "I don't like what da-da-da did. I'm going to shoot him." "I don't like da-da-da. I'm going to shoot him." That's just part of – seems like it's just part of life. You know what I mean? Rather than some kind of peaceful solution. And that's – I guess he can't help what he feels. I can't help what I feel. I feel peace and love. I'm sorry. I just do.

And I think most entertainers and musicians and blah-blah-blah, we just – because I came up with this concept a long time ago. In order for people to enjoy what you're doing and what you're saying and what you're playing, they've got to be thinking, you know, pretty good thoughts and have pretty good, you know, at-ease minds and all that, to even hear what you're saying. Otherwise, they may as well not even be there! You're doing [*sings*], "Some enchanted evening," and they're thinking about, "Somebody ran into my something, and I've got to get them. They live on the other side of town, and they've got so many people in their family, but we're going to all meet, and we're going to have a fistfight." Come on! So what do they care about "Some Enchanted Evening?" [*Laughter*]

But as much as I try – you know, hopefully it balances out, but you need this stuff. It's so important to have – you know, to try to weed through some of these mine fields and stuff – you know, just a little – you know, some violin, a little flute, whatever, a little piano. And then let those kids know, like I say sometimes, "We're all not Michael Jordan. We all can't hit that baseball, and it's all right if you can't hit the baseball. You know, you may be a drummer. You may be a trombone player or something." But it's so important. It is so important.

But it seems like back in the '40s and '50s and '60s, seems like there were a lot of places to play. And that's what we did. You know, we made the rounds, and people were interested in going out and listening and all that. Sometimes, I think maybe I'll try to open a place, you know, to have something where people just can come in and just hear and see somebody actually play, rather than just listen to music from a computer or a box or something.

SB: That would be wonderful.

MP: I'd invite some people that I know to come in on some special nights and just play, you know, to give people that whole tradition of performing.

SB: Given, say hypothetically, boundless resources, what would be the ideal way to bring the proper recognition to the musicians here?

MP: Well, you would have to have some kind of outlet, some kind of – well, first of all, I would, if I had the money and the building – you know what I mean? Somebody said, "Okay, you've got all kinds of money behind you," okay, boom! Okay, boom! I've got the time. I've got to get me a building, get me some equipment, boom, boom, boom! The first thing that I'd do is just invite people that I know, you know, and then put their [flyers out there]. You know, da-da-da is going to be here! George Clinton is going to be here! Prince is going to come next week!

You know, people will be just, "Golly, I'll be in the same place as he is. I can't believe it! Aih!" And who else do I know? And maybe [*sings*] "American woman, stay away from me," Lenny Kravitz! I was just with him a couple of months ago, whatever it was. People that I can say, "Hey, I need you to come down and just be here just for a day or two." But on the other end of that, have somewhere where people could do their thing but have some kind of direction as to, "Okay, what's next?" You see what I'm saying?

SB: Yeah.

MP: Like, if it's some kind of facility where they can record their own selves, sing their own selves, you know, rather than have karaoke. Like serious, serious, serious musicians, young people who really want to pursue, you know? Or some kind of thing where they can do studies at

ECU or wherever, something like that. Just give them like some kind of direction on where they want to go, how they want to go, and then have some kind of thing where they can do that. I wouldn't know how to do it, but I know that that would be something that I would shoot for. Okay, once you have something that's recorded, then who could pick it up? You know what I'm saying? Just give them like a long-term direction on what they can do and what they can possibly do and like that.

SB: We want to find a way to honor the music from this place, and the musicians, but in a way that's not invasive of their privacy and that brings--

MP: Yeah. Well, you see, music is universal. And we, and everybody else, happen to be from where we are from. But once we start playing, it's the same thing. It's almost like speaking English. You know what I mean?

SB: Yeah, yeah.

MP: So, it almost comes down to: it really doesn't matter where you're from – you just happen to be from there or there or there – but what it is you're saying. How do you play, and like that, and how far you want to go. For instance, going back to the senior superlatives for the Most Musical, along with the female Most Musical. She ended up in the D.C. area with the choirs that like do congressional stuff.

SB: Oh, really?

MP: Yeah, man! And her choirs – she probably ain't even teaching anymore. Different choirs she has had have gone to – she has performed all over Europe, too, you know, with the choirs. And anytime they have something like White House something la-la-la, seems like they always call on her to put the choir together. And like you see the people like [Tony Bennett] come in. Like, somebody so-and-so, and the next thing you see is [*sings*]. It's her choir! It's a choir she's put together. Same little person that graduated with me from high school!

SB: That teacher knew how to recognize talent then.

MP: Yeah, which was different because she was like voice, chorus, and I'm in band, marching and all that stuff. I went to A&T in Greensboro. They went to an all-girls school called Bennett College, but also in Greensboro. [*Laughs*] A thousand years ago!

But I can't say "love" enough, you know, the love for performing and the music and people and all that. I think that's what motivated us all, you know, the fact that you love what you do. You recognize that you have something, *something*, and then you sort of love that recognition and love that something that you do have to keep you going in it. Otherwise, you just kind of throw it – you know, "Hey, man, I used to play da-da-da, but I gave it up." Well, you didn't love it. You know, because if you love it, you know, you kind of keep it going. So that's the difference.

SB: This has been wonderful. Thank you so much.

MP: Oh, you know, I could just go on and on and on.

SB: Thank you so much.

MP: Okay.

[END OF INTERVIEW]