# CENTRAL AVENUE SOUNDS:

## Art Farmer

Interviewed by Steven L. Isoardi

Completed under the auspices
of the
Oral History Program
University of California
Los Angeles

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None.

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CONTENTS

BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY

PERSONAL HISTORY:

**Born:** August 21, 1928, Council Bluffs, Iowa.

**Education:** Jefferson High School, Los Angeles.

**Spouse:** Mechtilde Farmer, deceased; two children.

CAREER HISTORY:

Played flugelhorn and trumpet as sideman with:

Lionel Hampton

Horace Henderson

Johnny Otis

Oscar Pettiford

Floyd Ray

Gerald Wilson

Lester Young

SELECTED RECORDINGS:

Art

The Art Farmer Quintet

Art Farmer Septet

Art Worker

Blame It on My Youth

Brandenburg Concertos

Central Avenue Reunion

Farmer's Market

Foolish Memories

Gentle Eyes

In Concert

The Jazztet: Moment to Moment

Live at the Half Note

Maiden Voyage

Manhattan

Meet the Jazztet

Mirage

Modern Art

On the Road

Real Time

Something to Live For

To Sweden with Love

Two Trumpets

Warm Valley

When Farmer Met Gryce

You Make Me Smile

## INTERVIEW HISTORY

INTERVIEWER:

Steven L. Isoardi, Interviewer, UCLA Oral History Program. B.A., Government, University of San Francisco; M.A., Government, University of San Francisco; M.A., Political Science, UCLA; Ph.D., Political Science, UCLA.

TIME AND SETTING OF INTERVIEW:

**Place:** Metropolitan Hotel, Sunset Boulevard, Hollywood, California.

**Dates, length of sessions:** November 22, 1991 (44 minutes); November 23, 1991 (108).

**Total number of recorded hours:** 2.5

**Persons present during interview:** Farmer and Isoardi.

CONDUCT OF INTERVIEW:

This interview is one in a series designed to preserve the spoken memories of individuals, primarily musicians, who were raised near and/or performed on Los Angeles's Central Avenue, especially from the late 1920s to the mid-1950s. Musician and teacher William Green, his student Steven Isoardi, and early project interviewee Buddy Collette provided major inspiration for the UCLA Oral History Program's inaugurating the Central Avenue Sounds Oral History Project.

In preparing for the interview, Isoardi consulted jazz histories, autobiographies, oral histories, relevant jazz periodicals, documentary films, and back issues of the California Eagle and the Los Angeles Sentinel.

The interview is organized chronologically, covering Farmer's life through the early 1950s, with emphasis on his early life in Phoenix, Arizona, the Central Avenue jazz scene, his year at Jefferson High School in Los Angeles, and his early career as a musician.

EDITING:

Alex Cline, editor, edited the interview. He checked the verbatim transcript of the interview against the original tape recordings, edited for punctuation,

paragraphing, and spelling, and verified proper names. Whenever possible, Cline checked the proper names of nightclubs against articles and advertisements in back issues of the California Eagle. Words and phrases inserted by the editor have been bracketed.

Farmer reviewed the transcript. He verified proper names and made minor corrections and additions.

Betsy A. Ryan, editor, prepared the table of contents, biographical summary, and interview history. Lisa Magee, editorial assistant, compiled the index.

SUPPORTING DOCUMENTS:

The original tape recordings of the interview are in the university archives and are available under the regulations governing the use of permanent noncurrent records of the university. Records relating to the interview are located in the office of the UCLA Oral History Program.

TAPE NUMBER: I, SIDE ONE

NOVEMBER 22, 1991

ISOARDI: Okay, Art, we'll begin our Central Avenue recollections. But perhaps since you came to Central Avenue in your teens, maybe you can begin talking about your beginnings, your roots before L.A.

FARMER: Yeah. Well, I was born in Council Bluffs, Iowa, in August 1928. And my family moved from Council Bluffs to Phoenix, Arizona, when my brother [Addison Farmer] and I were four years old. And then when we were around the age of sixteen we came to Los Angeles on a summer vacation, and there was so much musical activity here that we just decided to stay here.

ISOARDI: No kidding. That's what did it?

FARMER: Yeah. We had one more year to go in high school, which was fortunate. And we just didn't want to go back to Phoenix, to Phoenix High School, because we knew that we wanted to be professional musicians, and this was where it was happening.

ISOARDI: How did your music start? At what age?

FARMER: My music started before I started to go to school, actually, because my mother [Hazel Stewart Farmer] used to play the piano for the-- My grandfather [Abner Stewart] was a minister, and she used to play the piano in the church. We lived in the parsonage, and I used to go to the church

with her in the afternoons when she was practicing the coming week's hymns. And after she would play, well, then I would get up on the piano and I would try to play, too. I thought all you had to do was just put your fingers on there and music would come out. [laughter] So that was my introduction to music.

ISOARDI: So this was early. You're just a few years old.

FARMER: Yeah, maybe three or four years old or something. And then when I started elementary school, then I started to study the piano. A piano teacher would come by the school once a week and give the kids lessons. That was my first study.

ISOARDI: Was that something you wanted to do then? Your mother didn't have to force you into it?

FARMER: No, no. She never had to force me. I don't know why; there was just something that seemed very attractive about music. She never had to say, "Come and practice your lessons," no.

ISOARDI: Really?

FARMER: No. I never felt it took that much. It wasn't a chore. I didn't realize how much work it actually took. It was just fun to me.

ISOARDI: Was Addison also playing then--

FARMER: Yeah.

ISOARDI: --and as interested as you?

FARMER: He wasn't quite as interested as I was, but it was the-- Actually, in reality, it was the tradition of black, what we would call middle-class or some kind of middle-class families to have a piano. Well, not only middle-class but almost-- There was a piano in houses in the United States. This was before the days of television, you know. Most houses had a piano, and somebody could play something on the piano.

ISOARDI: People had to entertain themselves then.

FARMER: Yeah, right. Yeah, that's the way it was. You'd play the boogie woogie, somebody'd play the boogie woogie. And always some kid had to practice piano. You heard about that. "Practice your lesson, now." [laughter] So it was common. But I think I was the most interested at that time.

And then later on, a few years later, somebody-- We had an extra room that we rented out, and there was a man who just happened to have a violin in his trunk. And he said, "Well, I have this violin here. Maybe you might like to have it." And I said, "Sure, thanks."

ISOARDI: He gave it to you?

FARMER: Yeah, he gave it to me. It had a little hole. A rat had gnawed a hole in it by the F hole for some reason, but that didn't mean anything. [laughter] And this was during the time of the WPA [Works Progress Administration],

so the WPA had all kinds of people employed, you know. Teachers teaching people-- I remember going to an art school where you could learn how to sculpt and paint.

ISOARDI: You did?

FARMER: Yeah. In Phoenix.

ISOARDI: Really?

FARMER: And there was a man teaching the violin. I had lessons from him. He was in the neighborhood, and he gave me lessons on the violin. So I played that for about a year, maybe a little longer. And I also studied in the public school, the violin. I remember when our class graduated from grammar school, I played the march for the students to march in.

ISOARDI: On violin.

FARMER: Just me with my violin. [laughter] So that was the first instrument.

Then there was a church there, a Catholic church, that had a very active priest, and he organized a marching band in the church. And I wanted to be in the band. I couldn't play the violin in the band, so I wanted a horn, but there were no horns available. The only horn that was available was the bass tuba. So I said, "Okay, I'll take that one."

ISOARDI: Really?

FARMER: And I played that for about a year. Then Pearl

Harbor came, and guys started being drafted, and other horns became available, so I shifted to trumpet. Actually I shifted to cornet at the start, because that was open, and it was in the same key as the tuba and the fingering was the same. So that's how I--

ISOARDI: So it was kind of a pragmatic choice, then.

FARMER: Yeah. I played that for maybe a couple of years. Then I bought a trumpet and started playing with a little school band around Phoenix, Arizona, and going out and listening to the dance bands when they came through on their one-nighters and got to meet some of the people.

ISOARDI: What kind of music were you interested in then? I guess probably in your early years it was probably formal training?

FARMER: Well, formal training--

ISOARDI: And church music?

FARMER: Well, church music, but my main-- That was-- I realize that the formal training, like everyone who starts on the instrument-- If you have any kind of teacher, you start with the same things that the classical players start with. But my main interest at that time was swing music, you know, the big bands, dance bands. That was what really grabbed me.

ISOARDI: Who did you like?

FARMER: Well, what we heard on the radio the most was

Harry James and Benny Goodman. We heard quite a bit of Duke Ellington and heard Stan Kenton and--let's see--Jimmie Lunceford. As far as the trumpet, Harry James had the most exposure. And I certainly liked him; I thought he was a great player. I hadn't heard Louis Armstrong at that time.

ISOARDI: Not at all?

FARMER: No.

ISOARDI: No records?

FARMER: Well, no, I hadn't. I hadn't heard any records when I was in Phoenix, and he didn't get any exposure on the radio like other people did for one reason or the other. Harry James, of course, was a very fine player, so he was the first one that I was really made aware of. But then, let's see, Artie Shaw's band came through on a one-nighter, and Roy Eldridge was working with him.

ISOARDI: Oh, boy.

FARMER: I met him, and he was a wonderful person.

ISOARDI: Were you playing cornet then when you--?

FARMER: Yes. He was a wonderful guy. He came by-- No, no, what happened, the band came in town a day early. I was playing in a little club, and he came by there, and he sat in on the drums first. And then he went to his room and got his horn and brought his horn back and played. And then the next night, well, at the dance hall, the Artie Shaw band played the first dance from nine to one, and then

our band played from like two to five, because there was a thing then called the swing shift, where there would be a dance held for the people who were working on what is called the swing shift at night--where they would get off at midnight. They would get off from work at midnight and then they would go to a dance. So we played then. So the guys from Artie Shaw's band, they stood around and listened to us.

ISOARDI: You guys must have been the best band in the area.

FARMER: We were the best because there wasn't any other one. [laughter] Of course, we really thought that we were great, you know, but we didn't know. But these guys were standing around listening. At that time I thought they were listening in awe, but when I look back on it I figure they were listening in shock. [laughter] But Roy was a great person, you know.

ISOARDI: Really?

FARMER: Yeah. In fact, a lot of guys-- When the bands came through, we would go to where they were staying and introduce ourselves and ask them if they would like to come by our house for a jam session.

ISOARDI: Really?

FARMER: And some of them would, you know, and they were very kind and gentle and helpful. There was never any kind

of stuff about "Oh, we're tired and too busy" or something. They would come by.

ISOARDI: You can't imagine something like that happening today--some of the finest musicians being in a neighborhood and just sort of-- I mean, the opportunities don't seem to be there as much.

FARMER: Well, no, but the bands don't exist anymore. But there's a certain kind of community inside the jazz area, jazz neighborhood, that's international. And there's a lot of mutual help going on. There always has been. This is what's kept the music alive until now, because it's been handed down from one person to the next. And as long as a young person would show that they were sincerely interested, nobody would say, "Hey, go to hell," you know, "I'm busy!" I never had that kind of experience with anyone.

ISOARDI: Wonderful.

FARMER: So these guys would come by the house and they would give us whatever help-- You know, if you knew what questions to ask, you would get the answers. A lot of times you didn't know the questions. But whatever you'd ask, they would help you.

And there was an army camp that I was working in after school. Of course, they had an army band and they had the marching band, and part of the marching band was a swing

band. I met some of the guys in the band, and they would come by the house when we had a rehearsal. One of the guys would write arrangements for us to play. He's still active back in the East.

ISOARDI: Really?

FARMER: Yeah. So it's another case of people being helpful.

ISOARDI: Was Addison playing in the band then?

FARMER: Yeah, he was playing bass then. And through that type of exposure to people in the jazz world and hearing the music and loving it so much, we came over here on a vacation because we wanted to hear more music. And then we saw what was going on and we just couldn't see ourselves going back to Phoenix.

ISOARDI: You and your brother came out by yourselves for vacation?

FARMER: Yeah, yeah.

ISOARDI: So there was nothing like that in the Phoenix area? There were no club scenes?

FARMER: No, there was just this little club that we were playing in. It was like a little what we call a "bucket of blood."

ISOARDI: Was that the name of it or your nickname for it?

FARMER: No, it was our nickname for it. [laughter] It was just a place, you know, a little bar where you would go

in and play. I don't know what we got paid, but that wasn't important, you know. Maybe five bucks a night or something like that. But then there was so much happening over here, we just couldn't go back. And the center of it was Central Avenue. You know, there was like-- If you come from Phoenix-- Phoenix still had wooden sidewalks in some areas downtown, you know, like in the Western movies. If you come from that to Los Angeles, to Central Avenue, well, Central Avenue was very exotic. It was like going into a bazaar. [laughter] It's like you're going directly from Idaho to Baghdad or someplace. [laughter]

ISOARDI: So how did you get out here? Did you guys take the bus? Or did you go by train?

FARMER: Well, my brother came first, and then I came over with another guy who was coming over here on a vacation. He had a car, so I just came over with him. My brother already had rented a room in a house, you know, because a lot of people rented rooms, so I just stayed with him.

ISOARDI: Where was that at? Do you remember?

FARMER: Oh, that was--let's see--around-- It was right off of Central Avenue, say, around in the fifties somewhere, around Fifty-second Street, I think it was.

ISOARDI: Okay, so I guess you were near Lovejoy's or--?

FARMER: Oh yeah.

ISOARDI: Yeah. Not too far from the big corner.

FARMER: Right. I can remember pretty well the first day, that evening, I went to Central Avenue. That block where the Downbeat [Club] and the Last Word [Cafe] and the Dunbar [Hotel]--all those places--are, that was the block. And it was crowded, you know. A lot of people were on the street, you know. Almost like a promenade. [laughter] I saw all these people. Like I remember seeing Howard McGhee; he was standing there talking to some people. I saw Jimmy Rushing, because the [Count] Basie band was in town. And I said, "Wow!"

ISOARDI: So they were just hanging around.

FARMER: Yeah, yeah. Of course, you heard there was a place called Ivie's Chicken Shack. Ivie Anderson?

ISOARDI: Right.

FARMER: There was Lovejoy's and the Downbeat, the Last Word, and this big club-- Alabam. The Club Alabam.

ISOARDI: So you're walking down the avenue on your first night. What's the first place you went into?

FARMER: I think the first place I went into was the Downbeat. Howard McGhee was there with Teddy Edwards and another tenor player by the name of J. D. King. And Roy Porter was playing drums, and the bass player was named Bob Dingbod.

ISOARDI: You didn't have any trouble getting in. I guess you were only sixteen then.

FARMER: No. Well, I was sixteen, but we were tall for our age. And it was crowded, so we just sort of walked in and stood around and stood up next to the wall.

ISOARDI: Now, I guess they were playing bebop then.

FARMER: Yeah. As far as I know, that was the first organized band out here that was really playing bebop. Dizzy [Gillespie] and Bird [Charlie Parker] hadn't come out here yet at that time. I think Dizzy had been out here with other bands, but he and Bird hadn't come out with the quintet yet.

ISOARDI: So those guys were playing bebop before Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker came out here.

FARMER: Absolutely. Certainly people were playing bebop. We were playing it; we were trying to play it before Dizzy and Bird got here.

ISOARDI: When was the first time you became aware of it? Was it through records in Phoenix?

FARMER: Yeah, I guess the first time I became aware was when I heard a record by Bill [Billy] Eckstine's band.

ISOARDI: Oh, yeah.

FARMER: Because he had these guys in the band. That was the first time I became aware of it. But I didn't actually hear any records with the quintet until I got here, and then one of the kids played me a record with Dizzy Gillespie. Oh, I'd heard Charlie Parker on the record with

Jay McShann also. But then the real concept of the music I didn't become aware of until I heard a record with Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker and the quintet on something like-- I don't remember the name of the label, though.

ISOARDI: Savoy [Records]?

FARMER: No, it wasn't Savoy. I think it was Music Craft or something like that. It was Guild. I think it was Guild. They had tunes like "Hot House" on it. So that was the first thing.

ISOARDI: Well, it must have been a shock in a way, then, musically walking into the Downbeat and hearing that group.

FARMER: Well, it was a shock, certainly, but it wasn't a-- It just sounded good to me. It didn't sound like-- I didn't have to ask myself, "Gee, what is this? Do I like it or don't I like it?" because my mind was completely open at that time. I still hadn't even heard Louis Armstrong, but I hadn't heard anything that I didn't like. Everything I heard I liked.

But it was just-- At this time was the beginning of, let's call it, at the time, the bebop era, but it was also the beginning of the rock era in a certain sense, rock-pop, instrumentally. Across the street from the Downbeat was a place called the Last Word, and Jack McVea had a band over there. There was a guy in Los Angeles by the name of Joe Liggins. He had a group called Joe Liggins and the

Honeydrippers.

ISOARDI: Right, wrote that great song.

FARMER: So you'd call this-- I guess you might call this like a jump band, a jump group.

ISOARDI: So they were going on when you got there?

FARMER: Yeah. Well, they had this very popular record called "The Honeydripper," and it was very, very simple music. It didn't have any of the harmonic complexity that bebop had to it, but it was very popular. So while the be-bop thing was going in one direction, which was musically complex and has some quality to it, I would say, well, this other thing was going in a completely different direction. Very simple, and people could-- The average person could get something out of it without any effort, you know.

ISOARDI: Right, right.

FARMER: So that's where things started going in a different direction.

ISOARDI: So you sort of see it as the music being sort of one, say, swing up till that time, and then sort of splitting off like that.

FARMER: Yeah, yeah. Well, that kind of music didn't have any interest to me.

ISOARDI: Not at all?

FARMER: No, not at all. Because my attraction to music basically was the swing era with the big bands--Jimmie

Lunceford and Count Basie and Duke Ellington--and that was a high level of music to me. It had a lot of things going on. And things like "The Honeydripper"-- It was just completely watered down. It's like TV; it's watered down to the lowest common denominator, something that's made for idiots, you know, for morons. That's what the whole pop music has become.

Now we're at what we call rap, which has less music in it than any music of all time. You know, a very well known classical composer and teacher named [Paul] Hindemith has a book called--what is it called?--Elementary Training for Musicians. And it begins, he says, "Music has three elements: rhythm, melody, and harmony, and they are important in that order." But if you take rap music, it only has one. That's rhythm. Now, the guys are saying their little speech, their poems, in a monotone. There's no melody there. There's no harmony. It's just that rhythm and the words. So that's what it's become.

ISOARDI: But it almost seems-- It strikes me, too, that in a way it makes sense, because music plays much less of a role in the school systems now, it seems.

FARMER: It does.

ISOARDI: So they don't have the instruments, and they don't have the Sam Brownes, and they don't have people encouraging them to develop musically and play. So in a sense they're producing what music they can with what

they've got, which is essentially just their voice without any--

FARMER: Yeah, well, there's a lot of these kids-- A lot of school dropouts never cared about anything anyway. But anyway, they're looking for a means to express themselves. They have that, so I can't blame them. They're dealing with what they have to deal with.

But the music that I liked was more complex. The big band music had a lot of depth and profundity to it to me. So it was a natural movement from big band to bebop as far as I was concerned. It really pleased me. Plus the fact that at the end of the war [World War II], big bands started fading away because of one reason or the other. And one of the reasons was the music became too complex for the audience, for one thing. The economic situation was against it--the cost of moving a band around the country. Plus the fact that the record companies and the promoters thought that they could make as much money with five pieces as they could make with sixteen or seventeen. They could put a singer in the front. Until then, well, the singer was just someone who would sit up there on the bandstand and smile and got up and sang one chorus on a song every now and then. That goes for Frank Sinatra and whoever else was up there. They would just get up and sing one chorus and sit back down again. But then they became more and

more popular and salable. So the big bands faded away. And in order to stay in music, you had to be able to work in the small group. To work in a small group, you had to be able to play a decent solo. My first ambition was just to be a member of that sound in a big band. I would have been very happy just to be a second or third or fourth or first trumpet player, whatever. At that particular time, I would say it was beyond my dreams that I would ever become a soloist. I would be very happy just to be in it, at least to start off with. But then in order to stay in music I had to be able to play solos, so one thing led to another.

ISOARDI: So let me take you back then to that first night on Central. Did you spend the whole night at the Downbeat? Or you cruised down the avenue a little bit?

FARMER: Yeah, I guess so. Yeah. I was going from one place to another.

ISOARDI: To see what was there.

FARMER: Yeah.

ISOARDI: Did any other places strike you other than the Downbeat in terms of what you heard that night?

FARMER: Well, I didn't really go into the Alabam, but I passed by there. I heard the big band sound coming out. That was a place where you had to buy some kind of ticket to go in. I couldn't buy a ticket, you know. And I went into the Last Word and listened to Jack McVea, who had more

of a sort of a jump band entertainment type of thing, which wasn't as interesting to me as what was happening with Howard's group. Plus, Howard was a great trumpet player. That's about my only memories for the first night. And there were a lot of people our age hanging around. One thing led to another; we would meet guys. But that was the heart of it right there.

ISOARDI: How were you and your brother surviving?

FARMER: Well, we would get some jobs, but that first summer-- Well, there was still work available, because the war was winding down. We got jobs doing other kinds of work. I remember me having a job in a cold storage plant. [laughter]

ISOARDI: Oh, for the summer that might not have been so bad. [laughter]

FARMER: Stacking crates of fruit and vegetables. We were kids, you know; we didn't take anything seriously. A lot of the time we didn't have any money, and we got thrown out of rooms and things. We got fired from that job because we started throwing these potatoes at each other. [laughter] Me and my brother and a couple of other guys, we just had a little fight in there. [laughter]

ISOARDI: What did your folks think about all this?

FARMER: Well, they-- My mother-- My father [James Arthur Farmer] was dead then. We were living with my mother in

Arizona. She said, "Well, if you want to stay over there-- Well, I wish you'd come home, but if you're going to stay there you have to go to school and get your high school diploma." So we promised her we would do that. So she said, "Okay." So that was in the summer. When school opened, well, we went over to Jeff [Jefferson High School] and enrolled, which was-- I'm glad we did. [laughter]

A lot of good players were still in the army, and there were still some big bands around getting some shows. I think the first job that I got in Los Angeles was with Horace Henderson. Horace Henderson was the brother of Fletcher [Henderson]. I don't remember how I met him. I think that he came by Jeff one day, and I was out on the playground. He said, "Come over here." I walked over there, and he said, "You're Arthur Farmer?"

I said, "Yeah."

He said, "Well, I got a band. I need a trumpet player."

ISOARDI: Whoa. So who hipped him to you?

FARMER: I don't know how that happened. You know, looking back, I can't remember now. But something like that came up. And I got some work with him. And one thing leads to another, and I would work with Floyd Ray. These were the two people that I worked with in that first year.

ISOARDI: So you were able to pay your way, then,

musically?

FARMER: Well, sometimes. [laughter] It wasn't that easy.

ISOARDI: You'd have to move fast.

FARMER: It wasn't that easy, because sometimes we would work and wouldn't get paid, you know. Things started getting weird. I remember I went down to San Diego with Horace Henderson and didn't get paid. And I remember working somewhere around here with Floyd Ray and didn't get paid. That would happen sometimes.

ISOARDI: Really?

FARMER: Yeah.

ISOARDI: The club owners were skipping out?

FARMER: Club owners skipped out, or the people who would put on the dance, they skipped out. That was part of the business, and it still is. But it didn't take much to stay alive. Rent was very cheap, you know, and food was cheap. If you could get a gig every now and then, you could make it--if you didn't have any habits. We were too young to have any bad habits. [laughter]

ISOARDI: Did you notice bad habits--people with bad habits? Or was it something you just never crossed?

FARMER: That first year, I didn't notice. I heard about it, but I didn't see any of it. I didn't see anybody doing anything.

ISOARDI: So what was Jeff like?

FARMER: Well, Jeff to us was a great school, because we had gone to the schools in Arizona which were totally segregated then and very limited, which I never will be able to overcome--the handicap that you get from that kind of education. Because I wanted to study music. There was nobody there that could teach me. I never had a trumpet lesson.

ISOARDI: In high school in Phoenix? There was no music at all?

FARMER: No. In the high school that we went to, there was one lady, and she was teaching English and home economics and music. She could play piano, but she didn't know anything about trumpet at all. And one thing she told me one day I never will forget. She said, "Boy, you played more wrong notes than anyone I ever heard in my life." [laughter] That was the only thing I ever learned from her. And she meant well, but she just didn't have the knowledge, you know. She couldn't tell me what to do. I developed bad habits. And when you develop bad habits at an early age, and playing the trumpet is a physical thing, it's hard to overcome that. You know, if a guy starts off from the ground floor with the right type of teacher, he's really at an advantage. But if you're in that kind of environment and it-- The system wasn't the only thing at fault, but we didn't like living in a segregated

environment where-- There were no professional people in this environment other than teachers and doctors and preachers and things like that. No one said, "Well, look, if you want to be a musician, you have to take lessons." I never knew you had to take a lesson. I didn't go out and-- If I had known that, maybe I could have found some white person that might teach me for a couple of bucks or something, but I didn't ever feel that was necessary.

ISOARDI: Really? So you taught yourself cornet?

FARMER: Yeah. Yeah. Bad habits. Like pushing the horn into my mouth, you know, pressure and all, when your teeth get loose and you get holes and sores on your lips. Well, I had to pay for that later on.

ISOARDI: Geez. You know, when I started studying saxophone a while ago with Bill Green, the first thing he said to me was, when I was going to go pick up this horn, he said, "Don't even open the case." He said, "Don't touch anything." [laughter] And he said, "No bad habits."

FARMER: Yeah, yeah. So we came over here and it was a whole new world, this big school there with all kinds of white people, black people, Chinese, Mexican. Everybody was in this school.

ISOARDI: Jefferson is completely integrated.

FARMER: Completely integrated. They had classes where you could study harmony. They had this big band. You could

sign up for the big band and go in there and learn how to play with other people. It was just completely different for us. And you'd meet people your age who were trying to do the same thing, and we would exchange ideas, of course. So it was great.

And [Samuel] Browne was a nice guy. I think one of the things that he-- Well, first of all, I ought to say that he was really ahead of his time. To my knowledge, this was the only school in the country that had a high school swing band.

ISOARDI: Really?

FARMER: Yeah. Back in Chicago, there were two schools there that a lot of great jazz players came out of. One was this school called Wendell Phillips [High School] that Lionel Hampton went to and other people his age, and a school called Du Sable [High School]. Like Johnny Griffin went to Du Sable, and a lot of other guys. You know, these schools--people like Ray Nance went to these schools. Numerous people. But I think that they had marching bands. I don't think that they had swing bands. I might be wrong.

ISOARDI: Gee, that surprises me. New York, no swing band?

FARMER: No.

ISOARDI: Extraordinary. It just seems to me--

FARMER: Well, see, this kind of music wasn't regarded as

serious music in the education system. In Texas, at North Texas State [University], they have a very good musical program there, and I think they started early there. But this was in college. In colleges, like in the southern part of the United States--like in Alabama in the black schools--you had swing bands. Erskine Hawkins, who became popular, brought a band from the school, Bama State [Alabama State University]. There was one. And then there were some other schools like-- Let's see, Jimmie Lunceford was a schoolteacher in Tennessee.

ISOARDI: That's right. That's right.

FARMER: He brought a band out. But these were colleges. To my knowledge, this was the first high school that had anything like this going on, where they had an organized thing that was part of the curriculum. So we would play-- We'd have an hour every day, I think. We would play in this band. We would go around and not only learn to play in that type of a setting, but we would have exposure to audiences also, because we would go around to other schools in this area and play concerts.

ISOARDI: Really?

FARMER: Yeah, during the school day.

ISOARDI: Extraordinary opportunity.

FARMER: Yeah.

ISOARDI: So you would take, I guess, an hour of big band,

which Sam Browne conducted.

FARMER: Yeah.

ISOARDI: And there were other music courses, as well, you could take.

FARMER: Yeah, yeah.

ISOARDI: A full program.

FARMER: Yeah, right. Right. So I was sorry that we came here on the last year. If we'd been here earlier, it certainly wouldn't have hurt. [laughter] But when we were in Phoenix, we didn't know anything about this.

ISOARDI: Well, how much of your school day, then, was devoted to music? It must have been a few hours at least.

FARMER: Oh, maybe a couple of hours a day. But I just remember big band and harmony--I would say harmony and theory. But other guys were studying arranging, also. Some of the students were making arrangements for the big band.

ISOARDI: Geez! What a place!

FARMER: You know, guys who had been there for a year or so in front of us--they were at the level then that they could write arrangements for the big band. And they could hear their stuff played then. So they were really at least thirty years ahead of the rest of the United States.

ISOARDI: Was he the only one teaching music?

FARMER: No. No, there were other people teaching music.

Sure. I was in the class of a woman that was teaching harmony and theory by the name of Mrs. Rappaport. There were other music classes which were--

ISOARDI: What was Sam Browne like?

FARMER: He was a very quiet person. He kept order by his personality. He never had to shout at anyone. He never had to say, "Do this or do that" and you didn't do this and you didn't do that. Somehow you just felt that you should do it. Otherwise you just felt that you were in the wrong place. This was a serious thing. And everyone who was there really wanted to work. They wanted to do what-- They wanted to play music, otherwise they wouldn't be there. So he didn't have any problem with the kids.

ISOARDI: I saw a photograph of him, I guess it was in the old California Eagle, when I was going through the old issues. It must have been in the early thirties. In fact, I think it was about the time he'd been hired or something like that. And it was a very young Sam Browne, but his picture was-- I don't know if I would say he was austere, but certainly serious.

FARMER: Yeah. Well, he was-- Here's his picture. I guess this was taken--

ISOARDI: Oh, this is from yesterday's memorial service.

FARMER: Yeah. Well, he was a quiet guy. You know, like

some people do things, and they put their name in front, say, like "Sam Browne, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah," and they become well known, you know. But he never did seem to be going out for that kind of publicity. You know, he loved music, and he wanted to help kids.

ISOARDI: So music was always first for him.

FARMER: Yeah, yeah. He wasn't like trying to blow his own horn, let's say. And he would bring other people-- Like if somebody came into the town that he knew, he would go around and tell them to come around and talk to the kids.

ISOARDI: Some of the musicians?

FARMER: Yeah. He would get the people to come around and play what we'd call an assembly for the whole student body--free, of course--and then talk to the band. Leave themselves open, like you could ask them any questions that would come to your mind.

ISOARDI: Wonderful experience. Do you remember any guys that you saw who came out to school?

FARMER: Well, during the time I was there, there was Slim Gaillard and a bass player named Bam [Tiny Brown]. They came by one day and played. They were very popular at that time. And then there was an arranger named Wilbur Barranco. He came by one day and played a record that he had just made with an all-star band. It had Dizzy Gillespie on it and other people like that. And he

explained to us how it came to be and things about getting these people and the trouble it would cause everybody to come to be available at the same time.

TAPE NUMBER: I, SIDE TWO

NOVEMBER 22, 1991

ISOARDI: Do you remember who some of the guys were at Jeff that you played with there, who were in the band?

FARMER: Sonny Criss was there. I guess he was the best known. Ernie Andrews, the singer, was there.

ISOARDI: Really, when you were there?

FARMER: Yeah, I saw him yesterday. He was in our class, summer of '46, the Helvetians--you know, every class has a name. There was a drummer by the name of Ed Thigpen, who was the year under us.

ISOARDI: Oh, really?

FARMER: Yeah.

ISOARDI: He was a Jeff man? I didn't know that.

FARMER: Yeah, he was. But he was in the class under us. There was a tenor player named Hadley Caliman, who is now a teacher at a conservatory up in Seattle, Washington. Another tenor player by the name of Joe Howard. I don't know what happened--I think he's dead now--but he was writing very nice arrangements by then. Alto saxophone player named James Robinson. We called him "Sweet Pea." He was a very good player. He's not alive anymore, either. Let's see. These are the people that I remember who played very well. There were others around there, and their names don't come to me right now, though.

ISOARDI: Did any of you guys form your own groups or rehearsal bands? Or was it mostly you going out--? By this time you were out playing in commercial bands?

FARMER: Yeah.

ISOARDI: It was mostly that, eh?

FARMER: Yeah.

ISOARDI: That must have been a bit tough. I mean, you're going out playing gigs at night, and then you've got to come--

FARMER: [laughter] The worst thing I remember was hanging out all night-- Of course, the clubs would close around one or two o'clock, and then the first class was physical ed.

ISOARDI: Oh, no! [laughter] That's brutal.

FARMER: And I remember one thing that really-- The lowest thing to me was trying to climb a rope.

ISOARDI: Probably like-- Oh, no.

FARMER: Yeah. And I didn't have the build for it anyway. I remember one little guy would scamper up that rope like a monkey, you know, and I'm there trying to-- [laughter] I couldn't get up there to save my neck. [laughter] And, well, I was starting to work and get these jobs, and I had to go out of town sometimes for a week or two. Well, my brother and I, we were living by ourselves, so [when] we couldn't go to school, we would just write our own excuses. I'd say, "Please excuse my boy today because

he has to do such and such a thing." And sign it "Mrs. Hazel Farmer," you know. Because the school didn't know we were living by ourselves.

ISOARDI: Oh, really?

FARMER: You know, they didn't know what we were into.

ISOARDI: So you applied forging your mother's name on all the documents.

FARMER: I don't remember forging her name as far as applying, but I remember forging her name on these excuses.

So we didn't have any trouble. We'd go out for a week or two, go to San Diego or San Francisco or whatever. [laughter] Come back and go back to school, everything is okay. Then I got this offer to go on the road with the Johnny Otis band and the school year wasn't out yet. And my mother had told me I've got to get that diploma. So I went to the principal and I told him, I said, "Look, I have this chance to go on the road with this band. This is the beginning of my career and I really don't want to lose it. I really need this. If my work has been okay, I would like to be able to get my diploma. I would like you to please consider this and write a letter to my mother to that effect." And the guy was nice enough to do it.

ISOARDI: Oh, really?

FARMER: And he said in his letter, he said, "If all the boys were like your two boys, this school would be a better school." And I said, "Would you put that diploma in the safe just in case you're no longer here?" And I went back there ten years later, and that diploma was in the safe.

ISOARDI: Oh, geez! [laughter]

FARMER: It was more than ten years. It was more than ten years. I came out here with Gerry Mulligan's group like around '58. This was in '46 when I left. I came back in '58, and that diploma was in the safe, and I went over there and got it. The principal was gone. Sam Browne was gone. He was at another school. But the diploma was in the safe. And I got it.

ISOARDI: [laughter] Well, that's good. Any other thoughts on Jeff that come to mind and we should know about?

FARMER: Well, Jeff always had a great track team. You know, Jeff's track team was feared throughout the whole Los Angeles school system. And somebody at this funeral yesterday said the swing band was just like the track team. It was held in just as much awe as the track team--going all around the schools playing, you know. Because none of the schools had anything like this band. And the track team was beating everybody up. But I remember about Jeff, like, the saying was if one of the schools came to Jeff and won, they would have to fight their way home.

[laughter] If they won the match, they'd have to fight going home.

ISOARDI: [laughter] That's good. That's good.

FARMER: But it was a nice thing. It was a pleasant memory. Of course, we were, let's say, operating at a handicap compared to the rest of the kids, because we just couldn't go home and tell our parents that we needed money to buy the class ring or the class sweater or something like that. But that was a minor nuisance, you know, compared to-- I'd still rather have been here than have been in Phoenix at that time.

ISOARDI: Yeah, once you got out of it.

FARMER: You know, meeting these guys and exchanging ideas was just a great thing. Big Jay McNeely was there. "Cecil" we called him.

ISOARDI: Yeah. Do you have any memories of him?

FARMER: Yeah. I think he was in the class in front of us, but-- Was he? Yeah, I think he was in the class in front of us. But I was in the harmony class with him. And my memory is not so clear, but somehow the story is there that he asked the teacher, "Well, how much money do you make?" And the teacher told him. And he said, "Well, I already make more money than you. How do you think you can teach me anything?"

ISOARDI: [laughter] Oh, no, really? Oh, geez! [laughter]

FARMER: But he wasn't in the band. He wasn't in the swing band.

ISOARDI: Why not?

FARMER: I don't know. Maybe he didn't want to be. Maybe he felt he didn't have to be there. Maybe he felt he was too hip for that. [laughter]

ISOARDI: [laughter] Gee, you know, I think I remember him telling-- I think he bounced around from school to school, because he started-- I think it was at Jordan [High School] in Watts.

FARMER: Yeah, Jordan, yeah.

ISOARDI: And then he just bounced around, I guess, looking for different teachers. Well, that's a funny story. [laughter]

FARMER: But he had his little group, and he was working around town. He was getting jobs and things, you know. The scale was sixty dollars a week, you know, for a sideman. Sixty dollars. And that was big money.

ISOARDI: That was in the top bands?

FARMER: Yeah, well, that was the union scale like if you were working at the Downbeat or someplace like that.

ISOARDI: Yeah, that's good money.

FARMER: Yeah. So he was getting that much, because the union was strong then.

ISOARDI: [laughter] I like that story. Oh, geez.

FARMER: Let's see, I'm trying to think if there was anything else.

ISOARDI: Well, we can stop it there.

FARMER: Yeah, that's all I can think about Jeff for the time being.

ISOARDI: Okay. We'll resume tomorrow, then.

TAPE NUMBER: II, SIDE ONE

NOVEMBER 23, 1991

ISOARDI: Okay, Art. I think we stopped yesterday with your year at Jefferson High School.

FARMER: Yeah.

ISOARDI: What comes after Jeff, then?

FARMER: Well, there was a band at the [Club] Alabam. Johnny Otis had a big band that was sort of styled after the Count Basie band: you know, five reeds, four trumpets, four trombones, and four rhythm.

ISOARDI: Were there charts like Basie?

FARMER: Yeah, well, actually Basie sent him some charts that Basie didn't want to play. You know, Basie would buy arrangements and play them, and if he didn't like them for one reason or another, he would put them in the back of the book or send them to Johnny Otis or Billy Eckstine or somebody like that, you know. So they had been working at the Alabam steady for some time. I don't know how long, but when I came to L.A. they were working there. But when they got ready to go on the road, some of the guys didn't want to leave, so they left an opening in the trumpet section. He sounded me and asked me did I want to go, and I said certainly. So that was my first chance to go back east.

ISOARDI: How did he know about you?

FARMER: Well, I'd been playing around with various other bands in the area--like I said, Floyd Ray and Horace Henderson. I don't know who else. It's not a very large community of people, so word gets around. Just like Horace Henderson sounded on me when I was still in school.

ISOARDI: Yeah.

FARMER: I don't remember exactly how it happened, but it seems to me like he just-- I was on the playground, and somebody said, "Can I talk to you for a minute?" you know, and sounded me.

ISOARDI: Well, you must have been damn good by then; the word was getting around.

FARMER: I wasn't very good, but you see, the war was still on really, and a lot of the good guys were still in the army.

ISOARDI: Yeah. But up to this time you hadn't had much formal training on trumpet.

FARMER: I hadn't had any on the trumpet.

ISOARDI: Completely self-taught?

FARMER: Yeah, completely.

ISOARDI: Extraordinary.

FARMER: Yeah, but I paid for it later, you know.

ISOARDI: [laughter] Well, some people would find that hard to believe listening to your albums. [laughter]

FARMER: But anyway, he sounded me, and I said yeah. In

fact, I went in-- I was-- With the confidence of youth because I was still about sixteen or seventeen or something like that, I asked for a certain price, and I got what I asked for. It turned out that I was getting more than some of the other guys were getting, which I paid for later on, too. [laughter] But anyway, that was the beginning. That's how I happened to have left California. And of course, as I told you yesterday, I went to the school and told them that this was my chance to get started and I really needed to take it, and they said that they understood. We had this agreement that they would-- The principal wrote this letter to my mother [Hazel Stewart Farmer] and said he would put the diploma in the safe.

ISOARDI: Oh, yeah, and hold it for you forever.

FARMER: Yeah.

ISOARDI: What was Johnny Otis like as a bandleader?

FARMER: Johnny was a fine guy. I didn't have any problem with Johnny at all. Johnny loved music. He loved to swing. You know, he was really into jazz then. Later on he got into this what we called "barrelhouse." He had a place in Watts called the Barrelhouse, which was really a rock and roll type of thing.

ISOARDI: That was his own place?

FARMER: Yeah. Yeah. At this time he was really into swing. But when the big bands went by the wayside, well,

then he went into rock and roll.

ISOARDI: With still a big band setup but doing rock and roll?

FARMER: No, no, with small groups, like six or seven pieces with whining guitars and screaming tenors. And he had--

ISOARDI: A lot of honking.

FARMER: Yeah, a lot of honking. He had success with that, too. He couldn't make it with the big band thing because the time was just past for big bands. So he changed. And, let's see, I lasted with Johnny for a few months.

ISOARDI: All on the road?

FARMER: Yeah. Well, we went from New York directly to Chicago, and we worked in a club there that was owned by Earl Hines called the El Grotto. We worked there for about three months. Then we went to New York City and worked at the Apollo Theatre. And at the Apollo Theatre he gave me my notice, my two weeks' notice, which he was required to do. You know, like if you want to fire someone, you have to give them two weeks' notice. And the reason why he did that was because he said, "I hope there's no hard feelings, but when I hired you I hired you as a first trumpet player, but you are unable to do the work, so I have to get someone who can." And the people that were coming out of the army were more competent than me. Now, what happened-- This is

when I started paying for my lack of training, because I was playing with bad habits, and it hurt my lips, and I couldn't hardly play the parts anymore. You know, I developed a hole in the lip, and it just wasn't happening. So he was perfectly right to do what he did.

So I decided-- My final week was in Detroit. Then I went back to New York, and I was talking to some other trumpet players--some pros who really knew what was going on. They recommended a teacher that I should go see. And I went to see this teacher, who was very nice. He said, "Well, what are you going to do?" I said, "Well, I don't have any job anymore so I guess I'll go back to Los Angeles or back to Phoenix." And he said, "Well, I think you should stay here and get your playing in order before you start talking about going someplace else. What good is it going to do you to go back to Phoenix or to Los Angeles?" So I could see the point.

So I started working as a janitor in order to pay for my keep and pay for my lessons. I did that for about a year or so, and then I got a job with-- Or about at least two years. My brother [Addison Farmer]--see, I had a twin brother--was playing with Jay McShann's band, and an opening came up in that band, and he got me in that. And that's how I got back to Los Angeles. This must have been around 1948 or something like that when I came back to Los

Angeles.

ISOARDI: How long were you in New York?

FARMER: Oh, I was in New York doing this study period for at least maybe two years. Yeah, from November of '46 until, let's say, around the spring or summer of '48. Yeah.

ISOARDI: And a lot of woodshedding, I guess, working as a janitor and then woodshedding like crazy?

FARMER: Yeah, sure and spending a lot of time listening.

ISOARDI: Oh, geez, back then you must have gone out on Fifty-second Street.

FARMER: Yeah, Fifty-second Street was still happening. And I remember at one time I was working as a janitor at the Radio City Music Hall. And, you know, you could get a janitor job just like that. It only paid twenty-eight dollars a week, you know, and there was a lot of turnover. Your work started around midnight, so if I was working at Radio City-- I remember working at Radio City Music Hall, which was like on Fiftieth Street, a couple of blocks from Fifty-second Street. I got to work late one time too many at the Radio City, so the guy fired me. So I went right across the street to the RCA building and got a job over there the same night. [laughter] Of course, Dizzy [Gillespie] was there with his band, and Charlie Parker and Miles Davis were there also, so there was just

too much to hear, you know. I would get absorbed and be late. It could happen.

ISOARDI: Now, you had a jolt when you came to L.A. from Phoenix and you saw Central [Avenue].

FARMER: Yeah.

ISOARDI: After having spent a few years in New York, that was an amazing scene on Fifty-second Street then.

FARMER: Yeah.

ISOARDI: But how would you compare, say, the Central Avenue scene and the New York scene?

FARMER: Well, the New York scene was more intense because these real, true giants were right there in one little small area. Here there was like-- When I first came to Los Angeles, Howard McGhee was at the Downbeat [Club]. Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker hadn't come out yet. We'd heard about them, but Howard McGhee was the major nationally known jazz star that was living and playing in Los Angeles at that time. So they had the run of the whole town. If you went to New York, well, you had Dizzy here and Charlie Parker here, and Coleman Hawkins across the street, Art Tatum next door. You know, it was much more happening.

ISOARDI: Yeah.

FARMER: And then you could go uptown to Harlem and go to the Apollo Theatre and sit there all day long just like you

could do here. You could pay one admission and sit there all day long and listen to whatever band was there. So there's a lot to absorb. But I met Charlie Parker and Miles Davis when they first came out here.

ISOARDI: Before you'd gone back there?

FARMER: Yeah, yeah.

ISOARDI: How did that happen?

FARMER: Well, there was a tenor player named-- Well, the tenor player with Howard McGhee, Teddy Edwards, I met him, and there was another tenor player named Gene Montgomery who was a close friend of Teddy's, and he used to run the Sunday-- They had Sunday afternoon matinee jam sessions at the Downbeat on Central Avenue, and he was what we would call the session master. The club would hire one man to coordinate the session to see that there weren't too many guys on the stand at one time and keep things moving along. So I met him. He was a few years older than we were. But his house was-- It was off of Central Avenue. It was east of Central Avenue around Wadsworth [Avenue] or something like that, around Vernon Avenue.

ISOARDI: Yeah.

FARMER: But anyway, on the way home from school in the afternoon, well, we just got in the habit of stopping by his house on the way to where we lived at the time, which was Fifty-fifth [Street] and Avalon [Boulevard]. And I met

Charlie Parker over there. He was a very nice, approachable person. You know, to me he was not really a monster at all; he was just a nice guy. I went by there one day, and he told me, he said, "Hey, you know the trumpet player--" No, Charlie Parker didn't tell me this, but Gene told me, "Hey, a trumpet player named Miles Davis came by here today. He was looking for Charlie Parker."

I said, "Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah." Well, we knew Miles because he had made some records with Charlie Parker--"Now's the Time" and "Billie's Bounce" and things like that. And he said, "Yeah, I came out here with Benny Carter's band because I know Charlie Parker came out here, and I'd go anyplace where Charlie Parker was, because you can learn so much." He said, "I would go to Africa. "Well, our image of Africa at that time was people with bones in their nose, you know. Nobody would have thought about going to Africa. He said, "I would go to Africa if Charlie Parker was there because you could learn so much."

And then where I actually met him was at the union, [American Federation of Musicians Local] 767. I guess he went there to file his transfer or something, because you had to file your transfer if you were going to work on what we'd call a location job, like to work in one place for a week or two or something. And Benny Carter was working at

some ballroom somewhere. So Miles was there, and he was talking. The first time I saw him, he was talking to maybe a few guys. They were asking him questions about what's going on back east. There was a trumpet player who came out here with Tiny Bradshaw named Sammy Yates, and Yates knew Miles from back east. And they were asking him about various aspects of this new music, which was still new to a lot of people. That's when I first met Miles.

And like I said, I met Charlie Parker at Gene's house. Charlie Parker was a kind of a nomad. This was after Dizzy left, because Dizzy fired him and gave him his fare home, gave him his ticket. He cashed the ticket in and spent the money, so he was sort of stranded here. And eventually-- Well, my brother and I, we had a sort of a large room on Fifty-fifth Street and Avalon, and eventually Charlie Parker was over there staying with us sometimes. Like we had two twin beds and a couch, so he was sleeping on the couch. He left there and he went someplace else. Eventually he was working with Howard McGhee's band in what we called Little Tokyo. He had just had a nervous breakdown, and somehow the bed caught on fire in the hotel room, and he went down to the lobby with no clothes on. The next thing, he was in Camarillo.

ISOARDI: State hospital.

FARMER: Yeah. But my memories of Charlie Parker were all very positive. I remember we used to-- We would walk the streets on Central Avenue. One night we went up to Lovejoy's. He always had his horn with him. And he went up there. There was one guy playing the piano like what we would call an old-timer, playing music that would fit the silent movies--stride music, or stride piano and stuff. And he just took out his horn and started playing. After that, well, then we were walking back to the house, and I told him, "Hey, you know, you really surprised me playing with somebody like that."

ISOARDI: He just fit into the guy's style?

FARMER: Yeah. I said, "You really surprised me playing with somebody like that," because Charlie Parker was regarded as the god of the future, you know. And he's playing with this guy, what we would call like, you know, just an amateur. And he said, "Well, you know, if you're trying to do something, you take advantage of any occasion. Go ahead, ignore that other stuff. That doesn't mean anything. You have to concentrate on what you're trying to put together yourself." So I always kept that in my mind.

And none of us had any money. My brother was working sometimes because the bass players would get more work than trumpet players, you know, because many little places would have a trio. So sometimes Charlie Parker would say, "Loan

me five dollars" or "Loan me ten dollars. I'll pay you back tomorrow." He always paid him back.

ISOARDI: Really?

FARMER: Always. You know, he developed a reputation of being a sort of a swindler and borrowing money and never paying people and all sorts of negative things like that, but that never happened.

And I remember one night we were walking on-- We would walk on Central Avenue and go to one of those movie theaters, like Florence Mills or something like that, until the last-- Like, it was a double feature. Well, you wait until the last feature had already started and then go to the doorman and say, "Hey, man," you know, "we don't have any money. Why don't you let us in to see the end of the movie?" [laughter]

ISOARDI: Did it work?

FARMER: Yeah. [laughter] Yeah, it worked sometimes. [laughter] So there was the great Charlie Parker, who didn't have enough money to buy a ticket to go in a movie. But he was a human being, you know. He was out here just like everybody else. He was still in his twenties. I guess he was about maybe ten years older than we were then. The musicians, they recognized him for his talent and his ability.

ISOARDI: Before they came out--Dizzy Gillespie and Parker and their group--musicians were aware of bebop on Central?

FARMER: They were certainly aware.

ISOARDI: People were listening to it?

FARMER: Yeah. Yeah. I remember one day-- There was a drive-in there in that area on Central Avenue and they had a jukebox, you know. And one day I was standing there listening to this record, and he walked by and he said, "What are you listening to?" I said, "Oh, this is your record. This is 'Cherokee.'" He said, "'Ko-Ko.'" I said, "No, it's 'Cherokee.'" He said, "'Ko-Ko,'" because he put the name of it on as "Ko-Ko." So he called it "Ko-Ko." [laughter]

ISOARDI: And you were arguing with him. [laughter]

FARMER: Yeah, because I wasn't concerned with this new title. But the real [name] of the piece was "Cherokee," you know, and that was really his number. You know, that was his "crip," we called it, because he could always deal with that very well.

Let's see, what else about him?

ISOARDI: Did you hear them when they first played at Billy Berg's?

FARMER: Yeah, yeah.

ISOARDI: When they first got in town, were you at the first session?

FARMER: Yeah, I was there the first night. And some nights we were able to get in, and some nights somebody on the door would say, "No, you're too young." You know, they had a rope there.

ISOARDI: What was the response? I mean, was the place crowded during that--?

FARMER: It was crowded at the opening, but then it kind of fell off, because the music was too far advanced for the general audience. And Billy Berg's, the club, had two other acts there also--Slim Gaillard and a guy named Harry "The Hipster" Gibson. And they were very, very entertaining. Billy Berg decided to give this new thing a chance, but when he saw the audience reaction, well, then he-- I think that he actually cut the engagement short a couple of weeks. I think he paid them off or else gave them a notice or something. So Dizzy went back east and Charlie Parker stayed out here.

Oh yeah. I remember one time Howard McGhee had this-- He was like a part owner of a place called the Finale Club in the Little Tokyo area. Howard McGhee worked there with his band, and Charlie Parker worked there one time with his own group, which Miles was in. Miles was working with Benny Carter and Charlie Parker. Benny Carter had a job at some dance hall or something. So there was a lady named Althea Gibson, I think. She was working for a weekly black

newspaper called the Los Angeles Sentinel, I think, or something like that. And she came and checked out the group and wrote a review in the paper. Her boyfriend was a swing-type trumpet player named Dootsie Williams, so he told her what to say and she was very negative. She said, "This group has this saxophone player who carries himself with the air of a prophet, but really not that much is happening. And he's got a little wispy black boy playing the trumpet who doesn't quite make it," you know. [laughter] Her boyfriend is telling her all this stuff. "It has a moon-faced bass player with an indefatigable arm," speaking about my brother. She didn't have anything good to say about anybody.

Well, I saw that paper, and I went over there to where "Bird" [Charlie Parker] was staying at Gene's house and woke him up, you know, and said, "Hey man, wake up!" [laughter] I said, "Wake up, man! You have to read what this bitch is saying about you, man!" You know, he's still laying in bed [laughter] Well, we couldn't get him to move unless you--

ISOARDI: He probably didn't care.

FARMER: No, no, it got him. You'd give him a joint. We'd give him a joint to get out of bed, you know. You'd have to baby him. Anyway, he read this. He said, "Well, she's probably all right. Just the wrong people got to her first." And then he got kind of in a self-pitying mood and

he said, "Well, Dizzy left me out here, and I'm catching it." You know, "Dizzy got away, but he left me out here, and I'm catching this from everybody." You know, he felt for-- That really brought him down, you know, because he really thought his music should be-- He didn't see nothing strange about his music. His music was very melodic. And for somebody to say something like that-- You know, he was proud to get good reviews. He liked that. You know, he would send reviews to his mother.

ISOARDI: Really?

FARMER: Yeah. You know, if somebody said something like that, that hurt him. It was sad. So first of all, he tried to take it as "Well, she's probably okay." He didn't say, "Well, she's a dumb bitch," you know, "and she doesn't know what she's talking about." He said, "She's probably okay, but the wrong people got to her first." Then it went deeper to him, and he said he was "catching it," catching hell, in other words. So that's how that turned out.

So let's see. That was my introduction to bebop. So when I went back east with Johnny Otis-- When I left, I think he [Parker] was already in the institution.

ISOARDI: When you left with Johnny Otis?

FARMER: Yeah, or else he went in shortly after that. And the next time I saw him was when he first came back to New

York City, and he hadn't even started at Fifty-second Street. But someone had fixed a job for him, a one-nighter up at a place called Small's Paradise, in Harlem. So I went by to see him. He said, "Hey, Arthur Farmer, we're in New York, man. You can get anything you want in New York!" [laughter] He was so happy to be out of California. [laughter]

ISOARDI: [laughter] I'll bet.

FARMER: So everybody streamed up there, up to Harlem, to hear the first appearance of Charlie Parker after his adventures in California.

ISOARDI: Which I guess everybody knew about.

FARMER: Yeah, yeah, yeah. And I would see Miles, you know. I would run into Miles. He was always very friendly.

ISOARDI: Did you ever run with him at all, Miles Davis?

FARMER: Yeah, yeah. We used to hang. Well, years later, you know, after I met Miles out here, well, then I always considered him to be like a friend, you know, sort of like an older brother type of thing. And I would see him in New York sometimes. Years later he actually fell upon hard times, and he used to borrow my horn, which I would turn into rental, because after I left Lionel Hampton's band in '53 and I was living in New York in '54, I didn't have that much work and he didn't have a horn. And sometimes he

would have a job and he didn't have a horn, so he would come around the hotel I was staying in, and he would say, "Let me use your horn. I'll pay you ten bucks." So I said, "Okay." But I would go along with him, because if I didn't go along with him he would have taken it and pawned it.

ISOARDI: Geez!

FARMER: So we were always friends. But then one time he came by and he said he would like to borrow the horn, and I said, "Well, I can't let you have it tonight because I have a job." He said, "Well, I'm paying you for the horn, man!" [laughter] And I'd say, "I know. I know you're paying me, but I want to play too." And he'd say, "Yeah, but I'm going to pay you." And I said, "Look, man, I'm not in the horn rent business. I want to play!" You see. So there was a moment of silence, and he said, "Man, I didn't know you were like that."

ISOARDI: Oh, geez! [laughter]

FARMER: You know, as if I was really a creep. [laughter]

ISOARDI: Yeah, just because you wanted to play.

FARMER: Yeah. And then later on I was working with [Gerry] Mulligan, and by that time he was really straight. You know, this was like in the late fifties. I was working with Gerry Mulligan, which was a good job. I had made some records. And Mulligan came out here to do a movie called I Want to Live. I can't remember her name,

an actress. Susan Hayward. She won the Oscar for that. Anyway, it was a big movie. So I saw Miles a couple of months later, just ran into him on the street, and he said, "You know, man, I fixed that job for you, because they asked me to do it, and I told them I wanted $10,000. I only did that because I wanted you to have a chance to make some money." [laughter]

ISOARDI: [laughter] Was that true? Do you know?

FARMER: I don't know. You know, he probably asked for $10,000. I wouldn't put it past him. He might have asked for $5,000. I wound up getting $1,500, which was big money at that time.

ISOARDI: Well, maybe by the late fifties he thought he could command $5,000.

FARMER: Yeah. Yeah, sure. He always had the sense of self to ask for a big price. So like I said, I'd run into him from time to time.

ISOARDI: Were all you guys pretty simpatico musically down on Central, I guess when you were--?

FARMER: Yeah, sure.

ISOARDI: Pretty much?

FARMER: Almost 99 percent of the younger guys really loved this new music. The disagreement came with the older guys, some of the older guys, who were more firmly entrenched in the swing era, and they just couldn't see anything else

happening.

ISOARDI: Well, I've talked to people who I guess were from the older generation. They were in high school in the thirties and they went in the service, and so many of them have said they came back in 1945--

FARMER: Yeah, yeah. [laughter]

ISOARDI: And the way they described their reaction when they first heard bebop is just incredible.

FARMER: Yeah, right.

ISOARDI: It just turned 180 degrees. You either throw the instrument away or you start over.

FARMER: Yeah, absolutely. That's what happened. Well, you see, our minds were open because we didn't have this other influence so firmly entrenched in us. And as it is, you know, when you're very young, first you go for the thing that's most popular at that time. It happens now that kids, they come into music and the first [thing] they go into is pop. And then later on they find out that the pop isn't giving them enough of a challenge, enough satisfaction, so they gravitate towards jazz. But for us, well, we went towards bebop.

But I have to say that my first attraction wasn't bebop because bebop didn't exist then to my knowledge. I just loved the big bands. But bebop was an outgrowth of big band, because all those guys had worked with big bands,

and they went into bebop because they were able to play more. It presented more of a challenge to them. If you played in a big band, you didn't get that much chance to really play. You know, you jumped up every now and then and played a short solo. But if you were working with a small group, well, you had much more time to play, and you could play different kinds of tunes that were more challenging. There was more flexibility than in a big band.

But there were sessions, jam sessions, on Central Avenue, I guess which you've heard about.

ISOARDI: Some, yeah. You're talking about after-hour jams?

FARMER: After hours, yeah. Of course, they had the Sunday matinees.

ISOARDI: Like the Downbeat?

FARMER: Yeah, the Downbeat and Last Word [Cafe]. Monday night was the off night, so there was always a session on Monday night in these clubs. Then the after-hour clubs were-- Lovejoy's was an after-hour club. And then there was a place called Jack's Basket Room, which was farther north. Say, that was somewhere around in the twenties or thirties. And that was a big session place. And farther north from that, there was a little place called the Gaiety. I don't know if anyone ever told you about that.

ISOARDI: It's come up a bit. Was that just a regular

club? Oh, that's the one that became the Jungle Room, or vice versa.

FARMER: Yeah, yeah. No, that became the Jungle Room. At that time it was called the Gaiety, when I first came here. There were some sessions there sometimes.

ISOARDI: Where would you hang out? Or would you just go from club to club?

FARMER: We'd go from club to club. And the police started really becoming a problem. I remember, you would walk down the street, and every time they'd see you they would stop you and search you.

ISOARDI: You're kidding.

FARMER: I remember one night me and someone else were walking from the Downbeat area up north to this Jack's Basket Room or the Gaiety or some other place like that, and we got stopped two times. And the third time some cops on foot stopped us, and I said, "Hey, look, you guys are going the same way. Do you mind if we walk with you?" [laughter] We'd been stopped so many times we were getting later and later. [laughter] So they said, "Okay." But we didn't have anything. It would be insane to be carrying some stuff on you on Central Avenue, because you'd get in trouble. You could get put in jail. You didn't have any money for a lawyer. If you had one marijuana cigarette, you could get ninety days.

ISOARDI: No kidding.

FARMER: Yeah. And if you had one mark on your arm, you'd be called like a vagrant addict. I don't know if that still exists or not, but that was automatic: ninety days. So you don't want to throw away ninety days for something stupid.

ISOARDI: Well, you weren't there earlier, but was there like an increase in police harassment after the war or had this been going on?

FARMER: I think it was-- Well, I wasn't aware of it until after the war, because I came here-- When I came here, it was just a few weeks before the atom bomb fell. And as you know, when that fell, the war was over in a week or so. I remember seeing this newspaper with this big headline, you know, about bombing Hiroshima and stuff. I had just been here maybe a few days, actuallly. But then the whole thing started falling apart, and the police were, as I said, very obnoxious around there.

ISOARDI: Really?

FARMER: Yeah.

ISOARDI: I suppose it was mostly white policemen.

FARMER: Mostly, but it wasn't just whites. There were blacks, too. With the place we were staying there on Fifty-fifth and Avalon, we had a room, and down the hall from us was a police officer. He was a young black guy.

He might have been in his late twenties. So he was a bachelor, had a room there. He said, "I would arrest anyone who was breaking the law. I would even arrest my own mother." [laughter]

ISOARDI: [laughter] Hard case.

FARMER: To us, we just laughed at him, because there was a community icebox there where the tenants would put their food. He'd put his food in there--we'd steal it and eat it because, you know, we didn't have that much money sometimes. [laughter] Sometimes we were hungry. We'd just go in there and take whatever. [laughter] I don't know if he knew it or not, but anyway, we didn't take him too seriously. [laughter] One day we're in there, and we heard a gun go off. Pow!

ISOARDI: In his room?

FARMER: Yeah. He was cleaning his gun. [laughter]

ISOARDI: Oh man! [laughter]

FARMER: He was lucky he didn't kill anybody or something.

ISOARDI: Or himself.

FARMER: But there's Charlie Parker in that place, and there he is, too. He didn't know about that. Charlie Parker was supposed to be a drug addict. Well, at that time he didn't have any drugs, you know, and he was in pretty bad shape. I remember one night there was an incident, and he was about to have a nervous breakdown. We

were on the second floor. There was like a French window, a window from the ceiling to the floor, and he opened it up, and he was standing there like he was going to jump out. And before that he'd been taking off, putting on his clothes, and taking them off and putting them on, taking them off. He was just going off, you know. So I took him out of the window and I said, "Let's go for a walk." So he put on his clothes and we went right across the street. It was Avalon Park. We went and walked in the park. And he had a bad cold, you know, really, like his lungs were falling apart. I said, "You ought to do something about this." I said, "What are you going to do about this cold?" He said, "Not a goddamn thing!" And he was just-- I mean, he was really down. We took him back to the room, and he finally went to bed, and that was the end of that. But he was having a hard time.

And then when we went to Lovejoy's or when we went in the movie, he was starting to come apart, because he had nervous ticks. You know, he'd be like [mimics Parker's movements], you know. He'd be playing his horn--

ISOARDI: Snapping his neck?

FARMER: Yeah. You know, his nerves were really shot. I guess it was just what we'd call stress from the withdrawal, because he didn't have any drugs at that time, but he had had drugs before. When he came out here he was

strung out. But then he just ran into hard times. And he wasn't working. No money.

But these jam sessions were a great part of the life, you know, because that's the way you learn. That's one way of learning how to deal with that kind of situation, because in a big band-- A big band was much more disciplined. Everybody had their solo written. If it was the time for the trumpet-- When the trumpet solo comes, well, he can only play the time that he's supposed to play, and then he's got to sit down and someone else takes a solo. But on a jam session, you'd play as long as you wanted to play.

ISOARDI: Do you remember any in particular? Any stand out in your mind?

FARMER: No. I don't remember any that stood out in my mind, really.

ISOARDI: No? I guess they were usually well attended.

FARMER: Yeah, yeah. They were well attended, and they were part of the-- It was still a part of the-- I would say the music was still a part of the ordinary people's community. You know, people would come into the jam session. They liked music. You'd go into a restaurant and you'd have the jukebox there. You know, if you sat in a booth, well, they'd have a little thing there where you'd pick the numbers. There would be bebop tunes on the

jukebox and tunes by swing bands and things. So we still hadn't reached that gap where the general audience sort of lost interest. So it was a different thing, you know, because now the average person doesn't know anything about jazz at all, or they know very little. So, yeah, we hear about it, but they're really not that interested. They go to a place like the Playboy Jazz Festival, Hollywood Bowl for the spectacle. Because the Playboy Jazz Festival will hire whoever is the big star, and that's what really brings the people in.

ISOARDI: A friend of mine went to the-- I don't go to the Playboy Jazz. I just don't like that kind of a throng, and half the time you can't hear the music.

FARMER: Yeah, right.

ISOARDI: And this friend of mine went, and I told him, "Look, it's going to be a circus. Why spend all that money?" So he went there, and he came back and he said, "You're right." You know, he told me during one number that was soft, people started doing the wave. You know that thing they do at football games? [laughter]

FARMER: [laughter] Yeah. That's the way jazz festivals are. I played one in New York at a place called Randall's Island years ago. Every attraction was given a bulletin about what to do and what not to do. It said, "No ballads." [laughter]

ISOARDI: Oh, no! Really? [laughter]

FARMER: "No ballads."

ISOARDI: Oh, man. [laughter]

FARMER: So that's jazz to many people. They might go there, and they figure-- And then this Hollywood Bowl, that holds a few thousand people.

ISOARDI: Yeah.

FARMER: But if there's something really big happening, the Hollywood Bowl can hardly take care of it. They have to go to the [Great Western] Forum theater or something, you know.

ISOARDI: Yeah.

Weren't you saying yesterday, I think just before I left, that a lot of the cops down there were from the South?

FARMER: Yeah. Yeah, sure. Sure. That's still happening. You know, L.A. has this Rodney King [police beating] case. A lot of these guys are either [Ku Klux] Klan or Klan sympathizers or something. They don't have any empathy for minority races at all. And even the blacks in the police force--they know that, and they have trouble inside of the police force. Mayor [Thomas] Bradley used to be a member of the police force himself, and he wouldn't say anything different from that. That's just a fact of life.

ISOARDI: Did you encounter any kind of Klan-related

activity back then around Central?

FARMER: No. No, I hadn't. I heard nothing about any Klan at all. Nothing like that. My only experience with the police was like I told you. But I heard indirectly-- I remember working at a place some years later-- Say it was somewhere in the fifties on Main [Street] or Broadway, like that. It was a nice club, what we would call black and tan, because black people and white people went there too. I was working with a band that was led by Teddy Edwards. It was maybe about a seven-piece band. It was a successful place, you know. People went in there, and we could have stayed there a long time, but then the manager said we had to go, because the police said that they didn't want this racial mixing there, and if the club didn't change its policy there was going to be trouble.

ISOARDI: Really?

FARMER: Yeah. So they could have certainly made trouble.

ISOARDI: About when was that?

FARMER: This was like in the late forties or the early fifties, say, like '49 or '50, '51, something like that.

ISOARDI: Had you noticed anything like that earlier when you first came out here? Where cops were going in and really trying to break up the integrated atmosphere of the clubs?

FARMER: No, I hadn't actually seen it. I couldn't say

that, because I wasn't aware of it when I first came here, and I was hanging out in the Downbeat and places like that. I heard that the police were around and were thick in the neighborhood because they wanted to abolish people smoking marijuana. And the story was like some of the guys would take a walk on their break and walk around, take a walk off of Central Avenue on a side street, and they might light a joint or something, and the police would jump out of a tree. [laughter]

ISOARDI: Oh, man!

FARMER: I don't know if that was an exaggeration or not.

ISOARDI: Well, from what I've heard of Chief [William H.] Parker, it probably wasn't! [laughter]

FARMER: But at that time those guys thought that marijuana was something that you should be put into the jail for, which is nothing compared to what came later.

ISOARDI: Really?

FARMER: You know, like when you think about these guys--Like these rock and rollers, like the Rolling Stones and things like that, say, "Yes, yes, we smoke pot. So what?" [laughter] It was completely harmless compared to what's going on now: all this crack and all this murder. It's just awful.

ISOARDI: Did you notice hard drugs as much down there?

FARMER: No. They were available, because Charlie Parker

was a junkie, of course. That was the only-- At that time, in the forties, he was the first guy that I heard of that had a narcotics habit.

ISOARDI: Really? So it was mostly grass.

FARMER: Yeah, yeah. But all the younger guys I knew, there was nobody that was into hard drugs in the forties, at least at that period when they first came out here. But it happened later, certainly.

ISOARDI: Did you ever--I guess you did with Floyd Ray and Horace Henderson--play in areas of Southern California away from Central Avenue?

FARMER: Yeah, we played San Diego. I first went to San Diego with Horace Henderson. And my brother and I and another young guy, we walked across the border to Tijuana. Then we looked at the clock, and the time told us it was time to get back. And then we crossed the border again, and we saw there was a difference in the time. We still had another hour to go, so we went back again. The second time we crossed over, the customs people said, "Hey!" [laughter] They gave us a thorough search.

ISOARDI: [laughter] Yeah, I'll bet. I'll bet.

FARMER: I remember that very well, because they made us take off all our clothes and everything. They thought for sure that we had gone back that second time to pick up something, you know, but we didn't have anything. We were

young, but we weren't really that stupid to figure you could go over there and buy something. We figured that the Mexican that sold you might turn you in and get a couple of bucks that way, you know.

ISOARDI: That's right, and maybe get his stuff back. [laughter]

FARMER: Yeah, right. [laughter]

TAPE NUMBER: II, SIDE TWO

NOVEMBER 23, 1991

FARMER: And we played some other places, like of course San Francisco, San Jose, El Centro, and other places in--

ISOARDI: What kind of clubs were you playing?

FARMER: Well, it was not really clubs. Well, in San Diego I played a club with Floyd Ray called the Black and Tan [Club].

ISOARDI: So it was an integrated club in San Diego?

FARMER: Yeah. It was mostly dance halls, because people were still dancing to swing bands at that time. So that was the main thing. Some years later I played some clubs. I played a club with Jay McShann in San Francisco. But with Horace Henderson, Floyd Ray, Benny Carter, and Roy Porter, we only played dance dates. The concert thing hadn't even started then. You know, like now you play concerts in a concert hall.

ISOARDI: Yeah.

FARMER: The Roy Porter band was important to us, to the younger guys. Roy Porter was the drummer who had played with Howard McGhee when I first heard Howard McGhee on Central Avenue at the Downbeat. Then later on Howard McGhee went back east again and Roy Porter organized a big band. And of the big band, the members were younger guys like myself mostly. A lot of us had gone to Jeff. And

this was more a rehearsal band than a real ongoing commercial band. We would get together and rehearse maybe two or three times a week at a place on Vernon Avenue. It was off of Central Avenue near San Pedro [Street], I guess. Every now and then we would get a job, and sometimes we would get paid and sometimes we wouldn't get paid. But Eric Dolphy, who became a very well known jazz figure, was in the band at the same time I was in the band.

ISOARDI: Oh, really?

FARMER: There were other good players, but they didn't get the prominence that Eric and I got. But they were good. So that was like a training ground, also. After leaving high school, well, then that was the next period for me where I really got to learn something.

ISOARDI: What were the charts like? Was it just swing? Or was it--?

FARMER: Well, they were patterned after Dizzy Gillespie's big band.

ISOARDI: It was, aha.

FARMER: Because by then Dizzy Gillespie had come out to California with his big band, and that was the next earthquake. [laughter]

ISOARDI: Yeah. So you guys were pretty progressive.

FARMER: Yeah, sure, sure. Absolutely. Well, some of the kids that had gone to Jeff who learned how to write arrangements at Jeff were writing arrangements for this big

band. And we made some recordings for a company called Savoy Records, which was located back east and was one of the main record companies as far as recording jazz. They used to record Charlie Parker and Miles Davis and people like that.

ISOARDI: And they recorded this band of Roy Porter's?

FARMER: Yeah, yeah.

ISOARDI: With you and Eric Dolphy?

FARMER: Yeah.

ISOARDI: Really?

FARMER: Absolutely. You should talk to--

ISOARDI: Did they release the records?

FARMER: Yeah. They've come out now in an album called something like Black Jazz in California or something like that. You haven't spoken to Roy Porter?

ISOARDI: No.

FARMER: Yeah, well, maybe you could talk to him.

ISOARDI: Yeah, he's on the list.

FARMER: Yeah, yeah.

ISOARDI: No question. His autobiography [There and Back: The Roy Porter Story] just came out.

FARMER: Yeah, yeah. I read it a couple months ago. Yeah. And it's truthful. You know, he has his own opinions about things, but there were no lies in there.

ISOARDI: Yeah.

FARMER: And nothing that to me-- Everything I read in there, that's the way it was.

ISOARDI: What was Eric Dolphy like?

FARMER: Oh, Eric was a prince. You know, he was an angel. He really lived for music. He lived for music and he loved music. Twenty-four hours wasn't long enough for him. During this time I remember that he had a Model-T Ford. [laughter]

ISOARDI: In the late forties? [laughter]

FARMER: [laughter] In the late forties he had a Model-T Ford.

ISOARDI: Oh, boy!

FARMER: The guys, you know, we all had these old cars. They were going along with prayer. We had a mutual aid society. You know, like if one car stopped you would have to call up your buddy and say, "Hey, I'm stuck over here at so and so," and we would all come to each other's aid. Eric was always a very enthusiastic guy, but he was one hundred percent about music. He was a nice, nice, friendly, warm person, but he just loved to play.

ISOARDI: Yeah, I heard some stories about him I guess in New York--the intensity of his concentration, his practicing, was phenomenal.

FARMER: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, he was one hundred percent. Because like during that time I didn't feel it was necessary

to spend all that time playing. I figured it would just come naturally. [laughter] I figured if I spent a couple of hours on it, why, heck, that's great. Somebody like Eric would practice all day long. All day.

ISOARDI: Did you have a chance to talk with him much about musical ideas? Or did you notice in his playing at all any indication of the direction he would go later?

FARMER: Well, at that time, no, no. At that time he was very much involved with Charlie Parker. He was very much under the influence of Charlie Parker, as all the young guys were. Then later on, when he went back east, I think he got involved with Charles Mingus and I think Mingus broadened his boundaries. It wasn't that he didn't stop loving Charlie Parker, but he started being interested in more of a less structured type of music thing. He used to imitate the sounds of birds and things.

ISOARDI: Eric Dolphy? On his horn?

FARMER: On his horn, like on his flute. He'd listen to bird calls and play them, do things like that. But, you see, some guys that got involved with what we called the avant garde, it was like a-- To them it was like a way out, because bebop music was more difficult to master, so they got into that, where they could say, "Well, we are the avant garde. We don't have to pay attention to the rudiments of music." But Eric wasn't like that. No, Eric

was really firmly founded. He had a foundation of the elements of music, the elements of music which would be recognized and respected by anybody, regardless of where you were, regardless of whether it was jazz or whatever it was. He had studied with good teachers and studied at [Los Angeles] City College. So when he went into this less structured thing, well, he had the musical background. He was serious about it. It wasn't just a way out to avoid studying or avoid learning.

ISOARDI: Yeah, yeah. Right.

FARMER: He got hooked up with John Coltrane, and John Coltrane was the same way. It was like his wife said: he was ninety-five percent saxophone. [laughter]

ISOARDI: Yeah, yeah. I heard stories about the two of them having marathon practice sessions that would go around the clock.

FARMER: Yeah, they were really kindred spirits.

ISOARDI: Did you ever bump into Mingus on the avenue at all?

FARMER: Yeah, well, I bumped into Mingus back east, sure. I never played with him in California. Never.

ISOARDI: Oh?

FARMER: I knew him. That was the first bass player that I heard of when I got here. They said, "Yeah, there's a guy

here named Charlie Mingus. He's got a bad temper, too." [laughter] They said, "Last week he took his bass stand and chased the vocalist off the stage with it."

ISOARDI: You're kidding! [laughter]

FARMER: That was the first I heard of him. He must have been nineteen years old or something.

ISOARDI: Why did he chase the vocalist off? Do you know?

FARMER: He didn't like the way she was singing. [laughter] He was a bad boy. [laughter] So nobody messed with Charles Mingus. Everybody was afraid of Mingus. I never played with him out here. But then when I got back to New York, boy, I started playing with-- I developed a reputation of being able to play anything that anybody put in front of me. So there was a certain group of guys back there who were getting-- The music was getting very difficult, and they were stretching out. I mean, they were venturing into areas where it wasn't just ordinary jazz, you know. And I developed a reputation that they could call me and I would really give it an honest effort. That's how I happened to have hooked up with Mingus out there, because that's the way his music was. You just couldn't play it the way you played everything else. You really had to work with it. You had to have the time to give it, which I did, because I wasn't working all the time, anyway. So I met him and played on some jobs with

him.

I remember one night he came into a place where I was playing. He had this fearsome reputation. And he was sitting in this club, and he hollered up to the stage, "Hey, Art Farmer, play a C scale!" And I'd say, "Oh, man." I didn't want to get any stuff. And I hollered back down, "I really don't know how you want it played." I got out of it some way. And then I found out later that he had told some people there with him, he said, "This guy here, he can play a C scale and make it into music," you know. But at that time I was very, very apprehensive about it. And I played with him on other jobs. But the main thing, my main musical experience with him-- There was a school in Massachusetts called Brandeis University that had a music festival one year. They commissioned three jazz writers and three contemporary classical writers to write music for this festival. And they had a small band to play it. I was one of the members of this band, maybe about ten pieces or something. And Mingus wrote a piece for this event called "Revelations." And it was a great piece.

ISOARDI: Subsequently recorded, I think.

FARMER: Yeah, it was recorded. One of the classical composers was a guy named Milton Babbitt, who was really highly ranked in contemporary classical music, which is a far cry from Mozart and Beethoven, for sure.

ISOARDI: A far cry.

FARMER: Yeah. [laughter]

ISOARDI: It's usually for academics, I think.

FARMER: [laughter] Right, yeah.

ISOARDI: [laughter] It's so removed.

FARMER: Absolutely. But that's the kind of stuff we played. And you really had to be able to go for now and forget about everything that you ever knew. You had to look at that music, and this guy had this vision. It's like playing with blinders: you know, like you see a horse, and it's got these blinders on so he doesn't see what's going on on the side? You had to have blinders on your ears, because if you listened to the guy sitting next to you, you'd get completely confused. You had to play and concentrate on exactly what's on the paper. And it seemed like one thing didn't have nothing to do with the other. And I remember he said, "I'm counting on you guys to put the soul in it."

ISOARDI: Oh, geez! [laughter]

FARMER: He was a nice guy, you know. He was a nice guy.

ISOARDI: Well, he was being honest.

FARMER: Yeah.

ISOARDI: Much of modern classical doesn't have any.

FARMER: And there was a guy named Harold Shapero and some other guy there. But anyway, Mingus wrote a piece and--

Let's see, the conductor was a very highly respected guy named Gunther Schuller, who was doing a series of concerts based upon a long, extended work Mingus wrote that they just found a few years ago.

ISOARDI: "Epitaph."

FARMER: Yeah. So that was my main experience with Mingus. But I'd appeared on some records with him. I remember one record was a Quincy Jones record called This Is How I Feel about Jazz, and Mingus was the bass player on that. And we were on some other things with some other people. We did a TV show, the Steve Allen Show, one night, things like that.

ISOARDI: When you finally got back to Central, I guess that must have been the late forties then?

FARMER: Yeah.

ISOARDI: Were you here for long before you were off on the road again?

FARMER: Well, I got back around sometime in '48, and I stayed in Los Angeles until '52, when I left with Lionel Hampton.

ISOARDI: For a while, then.

FARMER: Yeah. So during that time, that's when Central went into history.

ISOARDI: Yeah.

FARMER: I remember the Alabam was still going, and I heard

Josephine Baker there one time.

ISOARDI: Really?

FARMER: "Sweets" [Harry] Edison was the musical director.

ISOARDI: At the Club Alabam?

FARMER: Of her show.

ISOARDI: Oh, of her show.

FARMER: Yeah, he was touring with her. That was probably one of the last big events at the Club Alabam--that I was aware of, anyway. And things were just thinning out generally.

ISOARDI: What was that doing to you? Where were you playing then?

FARMER: Well, I was working with Gerald Wilson or Benny Carter or whoever had a job. Dexter [Gordon] or Wardell [Gray] or Sonny [Criss], Frank Morgan--people like that. You see, the downfall of Central Avenue was more than anything else economics. When the war ended, people didn't have money to be going out into clubs, you know. There was a period in the forties when this war was going, everybody had a job. And this was before the days of television. So when they got off from work, they wanted to go up and have some entertainment. But in the forties when television came into being, and people didn't have the money that they had during the war, they would go home and watch TV. So these clubs would become-- The attendance became sparse and

they eventually had to close. And also there was a migration from the east side to the west side. See, we would call Central Avenue the east side. The people who had work and had some kind of equity and property in that part of Los Angeles, they made a step up the ladder and moved to the west of Los Angeles, say, around Western Avenue or Normandie [Avenue], places in that part of town. And what was left on the east side were people who didn't have the money to move.

ISOARDI: So the area was changing quite a bit.

FARMER: Yeah, it was changing.

ISOARDI: It was no longer, I guess, the commercial business center then in the black community either.

FARMER: Yeah, right. That's right.

ISOARDI: Other places to go to shop and--

FARMER: Yeah. Because, see, the people who were able to, they were buying houses in what had until then been exclusively white neighborhoods. And there were a few key cases that opened the thing up. There was something out here called a restrictive--

ISOARDI: Covenant.

FARMER: --covenant, yeah, and that sort of was eventually beaten up, so people were able to buy in other neighborhoods. And they got out of that neighborhood there. Then there were some clubs opening up over there on

the west side, like there was a place called the Oasis on Western Avenue and some other smaller clubs.

ISOARDI: But still not the same as Central?

FARMER: Oh, no. It was nothing like Central Avenue, because Central Avenue was more compact, you know, in this little area between Vernon [Avenue] and Washington [Boulevard]. That's where everything was going on. The real center was located around where the Alabam and the Dunbar Hotel and the Downbeat were. Yeah, that was the real center. But then after that, as Los Angeles is, you have one place here and another place thirty miles over there, so there's nothing like Central Avenue.

ISOARDI: Did you do any studio work at all? Because then it was starting to open up a little, wasn't it?

FARMER: Yeah, it was starting to open up, but it was far out of my range. You know, the only guys that were doing studio work were like Lee Young, who was a drummer--the brother of Lester Young--and Buddy Collette was in there. But they were the main ones. And some others got some work. But the only time I went in the studio was like I went in the studio with Jay McShann's band playing some backup music for a singer. And I went in the studio with Roy Porter, as I said before. This was like in the late forties. Gerald Wilson got a job on [KTTV] Channel 11. There was a series that lasted for thirteen weeks, I think

it was, and the band was fronted by a guy who had a radio show--named Joe Adams--at that time. He was like the band-leader. He wanted to be a singer, you know, where he was part of-- Without him in the front we wouldn't have been there, anyway.

ISOARDI: So it was thirteen weeks on TV?

FARMER: Yeah. And they would bring in stars. Like one week I remember they had Stan Kenton, and one week they had Nat King Cole--you know, that kind of thing. But it was strictly a local show, so you probably couldn't see any of that anyplace now.

ISOARDI: Right, right. Well, before I bring up a couple of other things and get too far from Central, I wanted to ask you, do you remember what some of those clubs looked like?

FARMER: Yeah, well, they were not large. The Downbeat and the Last Word were the main small clubs there. They were not large. They might hold maybe a hundred people at the most, at the most. I would say the Last Word might have held a hundred; the Downbeat might have held around seventy or eighty, something like that.

ISOARDI: Gee, there doesn't seem to be much room for an audience once you put in musicians for a jam session.

FARMER: No. Well, see, that's why they'd have the session masters, so there wouldn't be too many guys trying to cram

themselves up on the stage at one time, you know. No, these were small places. And the stage might hold six, seven at the most.

ISOARDI: Including the rhythm section?

FARMER: Yeah, yeah. And they had a bar. There was no dancing in these little places.

ISOARDI: Just tables?

FARMER: Yeah, just tables. So they would call them a lounge, the Downbeat lounge.

ISOARDI: Were most of the clubs like that, kind of on that order? I guess except maybe for the Alabam and the Plantation [Club], which I guess were a lot bigger.

FARMER: Yeah, right.

ISOARDI: But most were clubs like that.

FARMER: Yeah. I guess this place out here, Billy Berg's, might have held around 150, something like that. But there wasn't anyplace any larger than that as far as I recall. And the clubs, they started at nine o'clock, and they went until one. But then after they finally realized that the war was over, well, then they allowed the clubs to stay open until two o'clock.

ISOARDI: For economic reasons?

FARMER: Yeah, well, they had the clubs closing at one o'clock for some reason to do with the war or something. I don't know what it was all about. And there was a 10

percent entertainment tax that the U.S. government had on clubs, and they lifted that finally. They hoped that that would keep these things alive, but it really didn't help that much, though.

ISOARDI: They would have to pay a 10 percent tax on their gross to the government?

FARMER: Yeah, entertainment tax to pay for the war, because, you know, it took a lot of money out of the United States in one way.

ISOARDI: Yeah, yeah.

FARMER: But see, the population of Los Angeles generally was-- There was a gigantic increase in population, as you probably know from the history. When this war came, all the people from the South came in, and they brought their racial prejudices with them. And that's why we've had the problems here. You know, these people come from Texas and Oklahoma and Alabama and wherever. And as customs were at home, well, that's the way they wanted to keep them here. And this mixing thing, this thing about white women and black men, was really a hard issue.

ISOARDI: I guess I've read stories about-- I think Howard McGhee's wife was white.

FARMER: Yeah.

ISOARDI: And they just had a real rough--

FARMER: They were hounded. That would be the word,

hounded, you know.

ISOARDI: By the police?

FARMER: Yeah, by the police. And then there was a lot of prostitution going on. There were some cases where black men were pimps and the white women were prostitutes, and the police, they would rather kill somebody than to see that happen. And every time they saw an interracial couple, that's what they thought was going on, which was not the case.

ISOARDI: They assumed it was prostitution?

FARMER: Yeah, sure. Yeah, you know, because these white women, they would have a period in their life of what we would call sowing wild oats. They would come out and do what they wanted to do, and when they had enough of it, they'd go back on the other side and get married and raise a family, you know. [laughter] But it was just something that-- It was a phase that they went through. But the police, as far as they were concerned, the only thing they saw anytime they saw any interracial thing going on was crime. This was a crime. If it wasn't a crime on the books, it was still a crime as far as they were concerned. So their main worry was this interracial mixing, because it was a crime leading to prostitution and narcotics. You know, they weren't worried that much about robbery, because that was-- Like everybody worries about

getting mugged or something like that, but that wasn't the problem then, because people were working. The economic picture was better then than it is now. The people had a chance to get a job, but now it's--

ISOARDI: It's not even possible.

FARMER: It's not impossible to get a job, but it's different, you know.

ISOARDI: Yeah.

FARMER: And more people had what we call the work ethic. You know, people would rather get a job that they were overqualified for than not to work at all. You know, things have changed now. There's a lot of people that have second-generation families that never have had a job. That wasn't the case then. Things have really changed. The members of the black community felt more then that it was a disgrace not to have a job. That was just something-- And to stand around like you'll see people standing around now, "Have you got any change?"--you didn't see anybody like that. You didn't see anyone like that. This just came here in the past ten years or so. So there's a whole different outlook on it now. But the social thing then was everybody had a job, everybody was working, and if they were working they figured that they should be able to enjoy the fruits of their labor, and that would include entertainment, you know, going out. There were no TVs. TV

came into being, say, like around '47 or something like that. But until then, the clubs were thriving.

So, you know, like Johnny Otis's band would go into the Alabam and stay there for months. [laughter] At Joe Morris's Cotton Club [the Plantation Club], well, Count Basie would come out and Billy Eckstine would come out. These were big stars, you know. And they were supported by the community. Some white people would come in, but the white people were not enough to keep this going. They were really the fringe. It was the black audiences that supported these places. You know, you might have maybe two or three white people in the place, but everybody else would be black. And they were there because they were able to afford it. So now if you go into it-- Well, you can go into these discos; you have black people in there. They're working. But you go in the jazz club, you hardly see any black people at all. You see maybe 10 percent who are black; the rest of them are white. They say, "Yeah, I like jazz, but I can't afford it. The cover charge is too high," you know, all that kind of stuff. But jazz has always been sort of treated in a strange way by the middle-class blacks, as I told you. You know, I think I mentioned that the--

ISOARDI: In what way?

FARMER: Well, when I was still in Phoenix, the principal

at my high school one day said, "Don't be a barnstormer like Louis Armstrong." My family is mainly back east--like I have a lot of relatives in Chicago and Detroit, and they're all very middle-class people. Like I said, it was a custom that there was a piano in the house. Well, these people studied music, you know. They learned to play. One cousin of my mother [Hazel Stewart Farmer] was like in charge of the music department in the city of Chicago at one time in the grammar school system. But their attitude was always, "Well, study music but play for your own personal pleasure. Don't make a career out of it, because it's a stupid thing to do." You know, "Do something else. Be a doctor."

ISOARDI: Because they perceived you wouldn't make money at it?

FARMER: Yeah.

ISOARDI: You couldn't make a livelihood?

FARMER: Yeah, right. "Be a doctor or be a lawyer or a minister or a schoolteacher." And that's what they are. I have a cousin in Chicago who is a surgeon. When I have to have an operation, that's where I go. [laughter] He can sit down and play Chopin and Mozart and anything like that. He doesn't play any jazz.

ISOARDI: None at all?

FARMER: No. And I have one in Detroit. She's the most

energetic woman that I ever saw in my life. She has a pathology lab that employs about eighty people. And she teaches at a university there. She works for Wayne County. She also sits down and plays classical piano. There's one guy, the only one other than me and my brother that became a professional, a man in Chicago who used to play trombone with Earl Hines's band. And he did that until he got through college, and then he became a teacher. He just retired a couple of years ago. No, longer than a couple of years ago--he's eighty-five now and he still gets an occasional job playing the trombone. And when I go to Chicago he always comes by. But he was playing with Earl Hines's band like in the thirties or the late twenties or whatever.

ISOARDI: Did they at least listen to your albums?

FARMER: Yeah, sure. [laughter] But the attitude was that jazz was something that-- It's like the attitude that middle-class people had about entertainment, about show business. You know, like actors and-- These people are supposed to be immoral.

ISOARDI: Right.

FARMER: You know, that kind of thing. Like if you were an actor, then you were just a step above being a whore. [laughter] So there's just the idea about the thing.

ISOARDI: Let me ask you about the union. You mentioned it

a couple of times; we haven't really talked about it yet.

FARMER: Yeah.

ISOARDI: I guess you joined [American Federation of Musicians Local] 767?

FARMER: Yeah. Well, see, I joined the union in Phoenix first, and I even had a problem getting in the union in Phoenix because of race. The local number was 586 or something like that. And when me and my brother and other guys had this little band and we were getting jobs, well, we decided we wanted to be in the union. You know, we figured that's part of being a professional musician. So we went there and told them we wanted to be in the union, and they said no. There were no blacks in the union.

ISOARDI: So it was a completely white union.

FARMER: Yeah, in Phoenix. So we wrote to the headquarters.

ISOARDI: In New York or--?

FARMER: In Chicago. That's where "Caesar" [James C.] Petrillo's office was.

ISOARDI: "Caesar" Petrillo? [laughter]

FARMER: Yeah. We wrote there and told them that they wouldn't let us join the union, and they straightened it out. They said they have to let us join the union. So we joined the union there in Phoenix, because the federation told the local that they had to let us in if we were

qualified. So we got in. Then, when we came over here, well, then we-- In order to work with these bands, you had to be a member of the union, so we transferred to Local 767.

ISOARDI: Were you surprised that there were two unions?

FARMER: No. [laughter] No. In our life, there was always two, black and white, you know. We had gone to a completely segregated school system there.

ISOARDI: But there must have been other black musicians in Phoenix. They were simply nonunion?

FARMER: There were no local black musicians in Phoenix when we started playing. There were guys who came there to play in a lounge or something, but they came from back east or something, or from here.

ISOARDI: Really?

FARMER: But there were no local black musicians making a living as professional musicians.

ISOARDI: So the question of a separate union didn't even arise.

FARMER: Didn't exist, no. Didn't exist. So we came over here, and we joined the union here. The first time I heard Gerald Wilson was at-- See, they had this house there. It was the second floor, and the rooms up there were used for rehearsal rooms.

ISOARDI: And the union offices were downstairs?

FARMER: Yeah, they were downstairs. And the union

executives were very nice people, as far as I remember. There was a guy named Paul Howard--he used to play saxophone many years ago, like in the twenties or something--a guy named Elmer Fain, and another one named Baron Moorehead. And there was a lady named Florence Cadrez. When the unions were amalgamated, well, then these people went to 47 and they kept their jobs there. But at first they were kind of apprehensive because they thought they were not going to be able to keep their jobs. But the whole union thing, the whole amalgamation thing was-- A lot of credit should go to certain people that were really involved with it. Benny Carter was very involved with it, for one thing. Buddy Collette, because he was working with a guy named Jerry Fielding, and Jerry Fielding was a studio band. And Buddy was on that band and they were involved with it very much. There was an organization called the humanists which played a big part in this. It wasn't the communists but it was called the humanists and I've heard this name in other places.

ISOARDI: Oh, that was the orchestra that they put together? Was that the one?

FARMER: I don't know.

ISOARDI: Because Buddy told me that they had an orchestra. They decided to create an integrated orchestra [Community Symphony Orchestra] to play Humanist Hall.

FARMER: Okay.

ISOARDI: And this way they thought they could get the black and white musicians together, because they figured if they called meetings nobody would come.

FARMER: Oh, yeah. Yeah, yeah. Okay, because you know what happened--by that time things had moved kind of west, and there was a place at Jefferson [Boulevard] and Normandie which was like a dance hall, and they had these rehearsals there. And white guys from the Hollywood area would come there and we would play classical music, like try to play symphonies and things like that with a conductor. And I never had had any experience like that. That was a--

ISOARDI: Oh, so you were playing in the orchestra.

FARMER: Yeah, yeah, I was playing there. Yeah. And that was the first time I ever played with a conductor without somebody in the front saying, "One, two, one-two-three-four." Instead of that, you have the guy out there with a stick saying [gestures], and you had to play. [laughter] So that was my introduction to that. These guys would come out of their part of town and come down there and give us a new perspective on music. They opened up new avenues to us. And they also said, "If anybody wants to study, well then, we have teachers." They assigned me to a teacher for which I didn't have to pay one nickel.

ISOARDI: Who did? I mean, was this--?

FARMER: This orchestra, this whole thing.

ISOARDI: The orchestra as a group?

FARMER: Yeah.

ISOARDI: Oh, really?

FARMER: Yeah. And they assigned my brother to a teacher. And you could study, I mean, get some-- This was my first real teacher in the West.

ISOARDI: You're kidding.

FARMER: I could get some classical training. Otherwise we were scuffling trying to keep from starving, you know. We couldn't have any money. At least we didn't think we had any money to be paying for lessons and things. So it was really a completely beneficial thing. And I never heard anything about-- Well, what they would call it now, they would say, "Well, certainly this was a left-wing organization," you know, but I never heard anything about that.

ISOARDI: As Buddy told the story, it was a way of getting musicians from the two locals together to begin building the base for merging the two unions.

FARMER: Yeah, yeah. Well, that's the way it started.

ISOARDI: Did you play with them the whole life of the orchestra? Was it a couple of years?

FARMER: No, no. I remember going over there for a few rehearsals, but I was in and out, you know, working with

bands, going here and there and whatever. So it wasn't a thing where you-- I wasn't there for years or anything like that.

ISOARDI: Right. During the time of the amalgamation, were you involved in that at all?

FARMER: No. When I left here with-- I left here finally in the fall of 1952 with Lionel Hampton, and the amalgamation hadn't really happened then. It was moving in that direction, but certain people were putting obstacles up on both sides. But it really hadn't happened.

ISOARDI: You were supporting it?

FARMER: Certainly I was supporting it. Everybody from a certain age group was certainly-- They didn't see any reason not to support it. Because it was a matter of territory, also. You see, Local 47 had the larger part of Los Angeles. It was like-- I don't know if it was written or-- It was kind of official. There were certain territories that were allotted to each local. And we figured if we were all in the same local, then we would be able to play anyplace in town. And this whole studio thing, like the movie studios--that was the Local 47 territory. In order to work in the studio, you were supposed to be a member of Local 47. But if you were black, then you had to be in Local 767. So you had guys like Lee Young. There was a guy named Barney--I remember

reading in Down Beat--Barney Bigard who used to play clarinet with Duke Ellington. He was from New Orleans, where he was what we called Creole. You know, he was a very light-skinned guy. So in Down Beat magazine I remember the big headline, "Barney Bigard says he is not a Negro, he says he's a Creole." [laughter]

ISOARDI: Was he trying to get into 47?

FARMER: Yeah, yeah. [laughter] He was trying to get into 47, you know. Because, you know, like with Floyd Ray's band there were black people and white people--black, white, Mexican, whatever. The white people could come and work on Central Avenue, but the blacks had trouble coming to work in Hollywood. They could work in some places, but there would have to be some kind of special dispensation or something I think, you know, to work like at Billy Berg's or a place like the Swing Club or whatever the club's name was in this area.

ISOARDI: I know some white big bands, for instance, played down on Central Avenue in the clubs. But do you remember any sort of young white musicians, young kids, who would hang out on Central or anything like that or participate in jam sessions?

FARMER: Well, there was a trumpet player named Kenny Bright, and he used to be much involved with the black groups, because we worked together with Dexter Gordon's

band and he was on the scene a lot. Kenny Bright. And then there was a trombone player named Jimmy Knepper who lives back east now, and he was around.

ISOARDI: I didn't know he was out here. I guess he must have hooked up with Mingus probably when he was out here.

FARMER: Maybe so, maybe so. I think Jimmy's from out here.

ISOARDI: Oh, really?

FARMER: I think so. But he was one of the first white guys that I met. There was a piano player who became pretty well known named Joe Albany that was playing the piano with Floyd Ray at the time I was playing with him. In the Johnny Otis band there was an alto saxophone player named René Block, who was the lead alto player. I think he was a Mexican kid. And with Floyd Ray's band there was a Mexican trumpet player named Ruben McFall, and there was a trombone player named, I think, Chico Alvarez or Chico something or other, who eventually got his own radio show--a disc jockey.

TAPE NUMBER: III, SIDE ONE

NOVEMBER 23, 1991

FARMER: I remember, getting back to Central Avenue, one time-- About jam sessions, one night I was in the Downbeat [Club], and Big Jay McNeely, Cecil McNeely, was working across the street at the Last Word [Cafe]. And part of his thing was going out in the street with his horn.

ISOARDI: So he wasn't playing bebop anymore.

FARMER: [laughter] No, no. He had made the big jump. He came out in the street with his horn and came all the way across Central Avenue and walked into the Downbeat with his horn, you know, playing it, honking--

ISOARDI: While you guys were playing?

FARMER: No. Well, it was on the break, on the intermission. He walked in there with his horn [mimics McNeely's playing] honking, you know, whooping and hollering. [laughter] And the little owner, a little guy, he must have been about seventy years old. I think he was an immigrant, European Jewish guy, you know, with a heavy accent. A little small, bald-headed guy. He said, "Get the horn! Get the horn! Someone get the horn! Get the horn!" [laughter] It was like the Wild West, you know. [laughter] Like, "You've got to shoot this guy down!" [laughter]

ISOARDI: Oh, that's great!

FARMER: [laughter] That was the funniest thing. [laughter] Because the Downbeat was the bebop club that night, and this guy--he was like the enemy! [laughter]

ISOARDI: Oh, boy. Well, it sounds like Jay certainly wasn't bashful.

FARMER: Oh no, he wasn't at all. Not at all. [laughter] I remember working with Dexter [Gordon] and Wardell [Gray]--Well, Jay, part of his act was complete, total abandon, you know. It was like somebody who had become completely possessed by the music. He throws off his coat and throws that down, then he jumps on his back, and he's playing the horn, he puts his legs up in the air, you know, and he's playing all the time. So there was a place called the Olympia Theatre where he would play on Saturday night, a midnight show. I'm working with Dexter Gordon and Wardell Gray--they had a band--and these are highly respected jazz stars, you know, and I was working with that band. So we got a job there one Saturday night, and we figured, "Well, gee, this is a step up." [laughter] And so Dexter, he decides that he's going to pull a Big Jay. So he's up there, and he's playing his thing, and all of a sudden he starts to come out of his coat, and Wardell had to help him out with the coat. So Wardell takes the coat and very civilly takes it and folds it and puts it on his arm. And there's Dexter, and he's honking a la Big Jay, and he finally gets down on his knees a la Big

Jay.

ISOARDI: Oh, no, really?

FARMER: And then the people in the audience, these kids, these teenagers, are looking up there like, "Gee, when is he going to do something?"

ISOARDI: Oh, really?

FARMER: [laughter] He stayed down there so long like that. He stayed down there on his knees like he's praying, like he didn't know what to do then. So he finally got up off his knees and the show went on. But later on-- See, I played with Dexter a lot in Europe, so I would sort of rub it in. [laughter]

ISOARDI: You reminded him regularly about this? [laughter] It was probably the only time he'd ever done something like that.

FARMER: Yeah, yeah, yeah. He did it kind of tongue-in-cheek, too, with Wardell holding his coat and all that. I remember one time Dexter said, "You know, like, you have the nerve to give me a hard time about that, but listen to some of those funny records you make for CTI [Records]," you know. [laughter] Because I made a couple of crossover records for CTI.

ISOARDI: Right, right.

FARMER: He said, "I don't see how you've got the nerve to say anything to me." [laughter] But that Big Jay, he was

something else.

ISOARDI: You know, I saw him just--gee, I don't know--six months ago or something like that. It was down at the Long Beach Jazz Festival, jazz and blues. Jay gets up and he starts wailing away, and you know, with those portable mikes now, you can go anywhere. [laughter]

FARMER: Yeah, yeah, right, right. [laughter]

ISOARDI: And he takes off. I don't know how old he is now, but he takes off, and he's just going through the audience, and he finds this rather large older woman, and he sits down on her lap.

FARMER: Yeah. [laughter]

ISOARDI: And he's just blowing away.

FARMER: And he whips the people into a frenzy.

ISOARDI: Oh, geez.

FARMER: He always got them. He always got them wild.

ISOARDI: Nobody can believe it.

FARMER: Yeah, he always got them crazy.

ISOARDI: But he's still doing it.

FARMER: Yeah, yeah, he's still doing it. Still doing it. Yeah, Big Jay. Well, see, he and Sonny Criss had this group together--Sonny Criss the alto player--called the-- I don't remember the name of it. Something about bebop.

ISOARDI: It was a bebop band?

FARMER: Yeah. Quintet.

ISOARDI: Really?

FARMER: When we were in high school. And he was getting gigs then. But then his brother came back from the army and told him that he was going in the wrong direction. So that's when he--

ISOARDI: By playing bebop?

FARMER: Yeah. He said he wouldn't be able to make a quarter playing that. He was always kind of a-- He never had any real balance. You know, it was either one thing completely-- Because when he was playing bebop, everything was-- It was extreme. You know, it was either everything had to be the hippest or the most corny with him. We called him "Bebop" because everything he played sounded like bebop, like he didn't give a damn about any other aspect of music other than that, you know.

ISOARDI: Oh.

FARMER: So he changed. He made a radical change.

ISOARDI: One hundred and eighty degrees, then.

FARMER: Yeah, right. Yeah. But Sonny was strictly a jazz player.

ISOARDI: Fine player.

FARMER: Yeah. But the trouble with Sonny is that he never really studied. You know, he took some lessons from Buddy Collette, I remember that, but he never really learned how to read that well. You know, he never learned how to read good

enough to play with the big bands and things like that.

ISOARDI: That makes it tougher.

FARMER: Yeah, he figured that he shouldn't have to do that. He said, "I shouldn't have to do that. I'm a jazz player." So that just closed down a lot of possibilities, because if you play jazz, well, a lot of your income is going to be from making records. And you go into a studio, you have to be able to play whatever is thrown in front of you. You can't take time because time is money. If they call you one time and if you hold up the thing, they're not going to call you anymore regardless of how great a solo you play. So that was one of the things that really was a great handicap to him. It didn't have to be that way, but he just felt that he should be able to-- And then another thing: Most saxophone players double. They play flute or clarinet or something. He said, "Well, I'm an alto saxophone player." Well, you know, that's it.

ISOARDI: That's all he ever played, then, yeah.

FARMER: "Why should I have to play flute? I'm a saxophone player." So he didn't get as far as he should have.

ISOARDI: Recently I saw you play with Frank Morgan, and you guys have cut an album.

FARMER: Yeah.

ISOARDI: I guess Central Avenue Revisited is the album, in fact.

FARMER: Yeah, right.

ISOARDI: So you must have met first on Central, then.

FARMER: Yeah, around then. When I first met Frank was in the late forties, and I guess Central Avenue was on its way down, but there were still some things happening then. Frank was about sixteen years old. Frank went to Jeff [Jefferson High School] also, as you know. He was about sixteen years old at the time, and his father was a professional musician also, who now lives in Hawaii. So we were quite close. But then, when I left here in '52 with Lionel Hampton, after then, well, then he started getting involved with narcotics and really got too deep into it, you know, and spent a lot of time in the prison. So when we made this album, Central Avenue, that was the first time that I'd seen Frank since 1952.

ISOARDI: No kidding. That's the first time you guys have gotten together?

FARMER: Yeah. Because every time I came out here he was in prison.

ISOARDI: Geez. Well, it must be nice to see him with the way things are going now.

FARMER: Yeah, yeah, it is nice. But, you know, the tragedy is that a lot of guys didn't survive this narcotics thing. Too many. You know, between narcotics and the prejudice thing and I don't know what-- The prejudice thing might have led to the narcotics in some cases, you know, just feeling like the

avenues are blocked anyway, so we might as well get high, you know, that kind of thing.

ISOARDI: You know, there was a film I saw on Louis Armstrong, a documentary, and somebody--it may have been Dexter Gordon when they interviewed him--was saying that Armstrong smoked pot every day of his life, and he said it was the only time he could escape from the prejudice.

FARMER: Yeah, it might be. But anyway, the pot didn't kill you, but there's other things. Guys spent years and years in the prison, and then they're just out of the music thing completely. Or else they take an overdose and they're dead, you know. So a lot of guys didn't survive. Of the students who went to Jeff in [Samuel] Browne's band, when they left there a lot of them got hooked on narcotics, and they just fell by the wayside. Talented people.

ISOARDI: Yeah, so much wasted talent.

FARMER: Yeah. Frank, although he spent years in prison, he's finally out now and able to-- He's still playing. He's still playing.

But the narcotics killed white people, too, some white talented people. Like, for instance, there was a saxophone player named Art Pepper. I used to make some gigs with Art Pepper sometimes. We'd work like in the Latin bands around Los Angeles sometimes. We'd wind up in the same band playing montunos and things.

ISOARDI: I know he wrote some things like "Mambo de la Pinta."

FARMER: Yeah. [laughter]

ISOARDI: Things like that that were Spanish.

FARMER: Yeah, well, he got hung up in narcotics, you know.

ISOARDI: Yeah, sad. I read his autobiography [Straight Life: The Story of Art Pepper].

FARMER: Oh, yeah.

ISOARDI: Sad reading.

FARMER: Yeah. Yeah, it was sad because he said, "I'm a junkie, and I'll be a junkie till I die." You know, that's it. That's the reality.

ISOARDI: Yeah, whether it's smack or methadone.

FARMER: Yeah, yeah.

ISOARDI: Bill Green told me that he played with him at one of his last gigs. I think it was out at UCLA, in fact. And he said he saw him backstage, and at one point he rolled up his pants or something, and he said his legs were so discolored and he looked so terrible. When he got out on stage, though, and he had the mouthpiece in his mouth, he was transformed. But other than that, for a man who wasn't even sixty yet--he was in his fifties--he looked so bad.

FARMER: And Chet Baker is another one, too. I met Chet and guys like that in coming into this part of town to participate in jam sessions, you know.

ISOARDI: So you'd met Chet much earlier on?

FARMER: Yeah. I met Chet in the forties, too, in the late forties.

ISOARDI: Did you know Art Pepper when you were on Central?

FARMER: Yeah. In the late forties or early fifties, before I left here, that's when I met Art Pepper. Art Pepper used to hang on Central Avenue years earlier. But then when he worked with Stan Kenton and Woody Herman and people like that, well, he wasn't hanging on Central Avenue then. I met him after he left those bands, at a period when he was living here and working casual jobs. That's when I met him, on some one-nighter playing with a Latin band. That's when I actually met him.

But these guys, they got hung up on drugs. It was a scourge. And it was a thing that didn't have that much to do with-- It had to do with luck in a certain sense, you know, because it's like if you do the wrong thing too many times, you'll just get hooked. And some people were able to break the habit, and a lot of them couldn't. They'd get hooked and they'd get arrested by the police. You go to jail, you come out, you have a record, and if the police want a promotion, then they arrest other people. They know who to come to. Like if they want to put another star behind their name, they look down the list and say, "Oh, here's so-and-so. He's been arrested before. Well, we'll go see what he's doing." And

sometimes they might even manufacture some evidence, because you already have the record. So if you go before the judge and you've already been arrested for narcotics and the police say, "Well, we found such and such a thing in his pocket," the judge is going to believe the police before he believes the criminal who has this record of being a narcotics offender or whatever. So guys started going in and out of jails. And the next thing they know, it's all over, because the music is highly competitive, and you have to be able to do what you're supposed to do. It's hard enough then, you know. But if you lose a year here and a year there, it's just impossible.

So Frank--I give him credit for at least being able to survive somehow, because he was a rare one from California.

ISOARDI: To come back like he has after thirty years is remarkable.

FARMER: Yeah. Absolutely.

ISOARDI: Well, we're hoping to interview him. I did a sort of pre-interview meeting with him about a year ago out here, and he told me that there were something like three studios negotiating for his life story or something. So good things are coming in bunches.

FARMER: Yeah, they are. They are. Yeah, yeah.

ISOARDI: At last.

FARMER: Yeah, but he's got scars. He's not without scars from all the stuff he's been through. It's changed him.

Because he's not the sixteen-year-old kid that I used to know. You know, after you spend some years in San Quentin [prison], you develop something else.

ISOARDI: You get a lot taken away, I suppose, that you never get back.

FARMER: Yeah. He's hardened. He has hardened a lot, which I guess you'd have to do in order to survive. But he still plays very well, though. He plays very well.

ISOARDI: Yeah. There's a lot in his music, a lot of feeling in his music.

FARMER: Yeah.

ISOARDI: I know a lot of people who study saxophone and are students. I mean, they would much rather hear a Frank Morgan than any Marsalis record just because of the feeling in it and what the music says. It doesn't sound like it's just come out of a music school. There's something more in there than just the technique.

FARMER: Yeah, yeah.

ISOARDI: So I think he's got a lot to give that way.

FARMER: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah, well his experience has given him more of a certain kind of resonance, a certain seasoning, flavor, to his music, which is-- I wouldn't recommend that to anyone. [laughter]

ISOARDI: Those are heavy dues for a little seasoning. [laughter]

FARMER: Yeah.

ISOARDI: Well, there are two big questions that I always ask at the end, and you touched on one already, and that was why Central Avenue declined. But the other big one is, looking back, what was the importance of Central Avenue both for you as well as for American music and jazz? What would you say Central Avenue gave?

FARMER: Well, to me personally, Central Avenue was the neighborhood place where I could go and hear people play and meet people. If they were playing in Hollywood at Billy Berg's or at the Orpheum Theatre-- I wouldn't think about going backstage to meet somebody at the Orpheum Theatre. I went to hear Count Basie there, and I heard Duke Ellington at the Million Dollar Theatre. I wouldn't think about going backstage and introducing myself and saying, "Hi, I'm trying to learn how to play," or something like that. But on Central Avenue these people were more accessible. So they were part of the neighborhood. And I got to meet people there and got to hear them play, and I could go there any night and stand around and listen and see what was going on.

As far as importance in jazz overall, I would say it would be this possibility that for me existed--for other people as well--and that was the importance that I could see. Other than that, I know that Dexter Gordon used to work on Central Avenue, and other people, they got experience

there, too. There was one place I didn't mention called the Elks-- We just called it the Elks.

ISOARDI: The Elks hall?

FARMER: Yeah, Elks hall. And big bands used to play there sometimes. It was a matter of getting experience, too. Learning, listening, playing, experiencing-- Yeah, learning and listening and playing. And you could get that on Central Avenue more than you could get it anyplace else in this area or in this part of the world. Central Avenue was the main thing for Los Angeles. After you left Los Angeles, you had a long way to go to go to Chicago or New York City. By the time you got there, you were really supposed to be ready. But here you could start off. At least that's the way it was to me; it was a way to start out.

I think Central Avenue was important also to groups that were really not regarded as jazz groups--say, like Roy Milton, blues groups, things like that--because they had a lot of work. I wouldn't want to give the impression that Central Avenue was just a jazz place, because it really wasn't. You had Roy Milton and Pee Wee Crayton and T-Bone Walker and Ivory Joe Hunter, Big Joe Turner. You know, bands like that were playing in these lounges, also. And they were much more successful than the jazz was, without a doubt. [laughter] This was their happy hunting ground. [laughter] But you see, groups like that had jazz players playing with them. Jazz

players would take a job with them if they had no other resort. But they didn't use too many trumpets. They used mostly tenor saxophone and guitar and piano and drums, bass. But that was certainly a big part of the street. But that's about all that I can think of.

ISOARDI: Well, do you have any final thoughts or anything else you want to say or bring up that maybe we haven't touched upon?

FARMER: No. My final thoughts would be more like this Ernie Andrews thing [Ernie Andrews: Blues for Central Avenue]. It was kind of sad, because when you go there now, I feel like I'm stepping into a graveyard. It's very emotional to see something that played such a large part in your life, and now there's nothing left there. Nothing would give you the impression that this place had ever been anything other than what it is right now. And you have to stop and ask yourself, well, is it all an illusion? Is it all an illusion? And that's the big question. You know, I'm sixty-three years old, and when I first went there I was, say, sixteen or something like that, and what happened then at that age has influenced me until now. But if I look at that street now, what could have influenced me? What was there? There's nothing there that would influence anybody now. Nothing at all. Not one brick. I mean, there's no sign of anything ever happening of any value or importance to anyone in the world.

ISOARDI: It's a tragedy. It's a loss for the community for

the next generation who doesn't know what--

FARMER: It is. It's a loss, because the kids come up and they don't have any idea. All they know is crack and shoot somebody, you know, that kind of stuff. Basketball. Basketball is okay, but there's more to life than basketball. You know, everybody can't be six, seven feet tall and make a million dollars playing basketball.

So the kids come up, and their role models are so limited that they don't see any alternative to what's before them. And what's before them is almost totally negative, almost totally negative, in the black community. That's the pity. That's really the pity. And not enough is done to make the people aware of what could be, of what was and what could be, you know. If you don't live in the United States, you live someplace else, you come back here from time to time, you see the way people live, and people feel this is the only way it can be. But it doesn't have to be this way. But they don't get any input on any other possibility, or very little. They're much more aware of the negative things, you know, of the dope dealers and the robbers and all these kinds of negative things. Because at this period--well, we didn't worry about crime. We didn't worry about people breaking in your house or stealing your car. I'm not saying that crime didn't exist, but it certainly was no comparison to now. There have always been gangs in L.A. Before I even came over

here I heard about gangs, you know, like the Sleepy Lagoon case, that type of thing. In fact, I was going to come over here a year earlier, but this whole thing came up.

ISOARDI: Oh, the Zoot Suit Riots?

FARMER: Yeah, the Zoot Suit Riots came up, and my mother said, "No, not now, not now." [laughter] So that has always been a part of the scene here.

Watts was a real middle-class place. You know, everybody in Watts had a job. When I worked with Horace Henderson, he was living in Watts. He had a very nice little bungalow, and I went out there and talked to him. We didn't rehearse there, but I talked to him about rehearsal and jobs and things like that. Sonny Criss was living in Watts. A lot of guys lived there. But it was regarded as-- Nobody said [adopting horrified tone], "Watts-- Man!" It was just another neighborhood.

But things come and go. There's ups and downs in societies as there are in people. About the only thing you can be sure of in life--well, life is change. Whatever exists today, you can be sure it's not going to be existing forever this way. You know, things change, and we can't anticipate what's going to bring it on. Sometimes it takes a movement, but a movement is usually led by one person or a few people, and we don't know what's going to happen or who's going to do it. But we can be sure it's not going to stay the way it

is. And you can't live in the past, of course. You can't take things back to where they were. Things move forward for better or worse. And it's worse now, but it won't stay this way. Whatever is going to happen in the future, I don't know.

People bug me a lot. If they don't know anything about jazz, they usually wind up asking me, "Well, where do you think jazz is going anyway?" [laughter] They don't even know anything about where it is or where it was, but they worry about where it's going. And I know everything is going somewhere, because that's life. It's change. Without change, there's no life. There has to be change. So we go ahead and do what comes to our minds and do it the best we can, just like you do, you know, musically or anything else.

And one day the things that happened here will be looked on with more interest than there is now. But the people who did it will be long gone. But that's the way the world goes. So you just have to live with it, accept it, and do the best you can do. That's all. Some people make a contribution, like [Samuel] Browne made a great contribution. He is a good example for others to live by, to try to do something to pass on some knowledge to people who didn't come in contact with it. And that's about the best thing that we can do.

ISOARDI: Art, thank you very much.

FARMER: Well, thank you.

INDEX