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## **CURTIS FULLER NEA JAZZ MASTER (2007)**

**Interviewee:** Curtis Fuller (December 15, 1934 - )  
**Interviewer:** Bill Brower with recording engineer Kenneth Kimery  
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**Curtis Fuller:** We might miss a date or two.

**Brower:** From what we've already shared off the cuff, I should have just pushed the button and sit back.

**Curtis Fuller:** Let me run my mouth. I like to kick things into perspective.

**Brower:** Okay, it is Saturday, the 25<sup>th</sup> of September 2010. My name is William A Brower. I'm sitting with Curtis DuBois Fuller conducting an oral history for the Smithsonian Jazz Oral History Program. I'd just like to go back, just for the sake of chronology, let's start at the beginning. Actually, we were talking about Billie Holliday and what impact she had on you. I'd like you to start with that and maybe go back and give us the contact of why she was so important to you. That will lead us to something about your early life.


**Curtis Fuller:** Okay, I'll try to shape it this way: Yusef Lateef, I was in New York with him doing early sessions with the Detroit group that he had. I was a part of that. I remember we were recording in "The Center" and "Up Jumped Spring." I forget the other two, but we did three in one week. Dizzy Gillespie had arranged that.

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**Brower:** This was Savoy?

**Fuller:** Yeah, Mercury or whatever. I shared the suite with Yusef. He had to go back to Detroit. I had asked for permission, since Miles Davis had asked me. I was going out to the clubs at night playing, and wanting to see in New York, “Trane and Miles and this and that and everything. I went in and “Trane told Miles, “This is the sub, the kid that I was telling you about.” So, that was in the works from there. I went back to the hotel and I told—this all leads to Billie Holliday—I said, “Yusef, I’d like to take leave from the band.” We had been together a long time. I remember recalling this, “I’ve got to do this, I’ve got to drop out of University.” I said, “I’d like to stay and see this through because this is what I ultimately want to do and the chance to do it is open. This is what I want to do.” It so happens that Miles had to wait until the engagements, it was just a couple of weeks off, I didn’t really have the finances to stay in the hotel. I was already staying with Yusef. But, why I was in the hotel, little did I know, two floors below me was Lester Young. He had sent word, since he heard that there was a new flash in the pants, there was a young girl from New York—from Detroit trying to play a thousand notes a solo. He said, “Tell him to come by, I think I’m going to use him. I got another night. I think I’m going to use him at Birdland in two weeks. Have him come by to rehearse. I’ll get the door open over there and we will see how it feels.” So, I went there and Lester wasn’t there. I got the word. Billie wasn’t over there so I went over Lamplight, the bar next door. Billie Holliday was sitting there. I didn’t know, but I knew it was her. You know what I mean? I heard the records. Them guys were sitting there at the bar talking back and forth, “It’s Holliday!” So, I said, “I don’t know if I’m in the right place. Maybe I got the wrong information. Lester Young wanted me to come over here and rehearse with the band. We got an engagement here, you know? I could sure use it. It’s either that...that would help me stay here since Miles is not able to help me come in.” I said, “I’m so surprised. Lester Young wanted me out here.” She said, “Just cause its this way, kid, if he sent for you and asked you to come over he must have wanted you. Put that frustration aside.” She said, “I talked to him earlier. He’ll be here in a minute.” Sure enough, I sat there talking to her, she said, “How long have you been here.” You know, regular stuff. The more I talk to her, you know, I was a little fearful because you know; you don’t know what’s on the other side of the door. You know what you’ve heard.” People said this and that, slam her, say she’s trouble, couldn’t work in Birdland, and couldn’t do this. I’m trying to be careful. You know, I’m a youngster now. I know the history of her that I heard, a lot of negative stuff. Some of it was guarded, even though it’s the great Billie Holliday. I know I’m out of place and I have to watch myself. I had no other angels hanging around me or anything. But she, she was what I would want a mother to be. She had begun nurturing me from the first vido, and I didn’t get it. She knew that. When she compromised the whole


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situation by letting me know that he was there for me, just in bursts. “If that doesn’t work, play this one. No you come down,” and so and so. This little Billie Holliday came down to the club and rehearsed with Lester. She gave you charts, [I] got a title the first day. He called me Ivy Divy, because we were wearing the Bostonian suits at the time. They had ten buttons, which was the style at that time. He said, “Oh, Ivy Divy!” That was my introduction to Lester Young. Then he said something that I had no idea what he was talking about, “Deuce Yusef the ding dong.” You know? I know that “deuce” meant two, but I didn’t catch the phrase. It was jive talk. I’m from white water Detroit; I didn’t know about that. So I knew “Yusef” was a saint. He was a Muslim brother. [There was] a carpet in the rehearsal room, in the dressing room, you know? The band would go to Bell Owl in Detroit at night after the gig. He’d practice outdoors at two or three in the morning. He liked the earth’s sound. Flute, oud, obo, everything. Yusef was very spiritual in many ways, and that rubs off on you. I got all these conflicting things going. I want to do the things he’s told me to do, and guided me. Now, I’m being exposed to another side of everything, another dimension for instance. I had probably only dealt with one or two. I didn’t know that the third was already day. I was there to find out which door to go in. All these things happened simultaneously. Put me on the old road to mystery, you know? I learned later from reading Khalil Gibran, you know? When you take of life, you take what comes what with the light. You don’t know darkness until you’ve seen the day. You don’t know darkness until you’ve seen the day. You don’t know hate until you’ve loved. You don’t know what love is until you’ve hated. One comes with the other. That was my introduction to all of that. Billie sort of guided me to that in verse. “This is what’s going on now, this is what’s going to be happening later. You should be conducting yourself like this so you can get over here.” Number one, I went up there and to prove myself, one thousand notes. No, that’s not the way you want to present yourself. You can do that good, but you don’t want to expose everything you can do. “Can you play a ballad?” “Yes ma’am.” “Do you know the words to the ballad that you’re playing?” “No, ma’am.” “How can you play the ballad if you don’t know the words?” You see, that’s an exposure. Just like now, I got to start looking at this stuff another way, the correct way.

**Brower:** More full.

**Curtis Fuller:** More full, full picture. It’s like a chessboard. You look at the game and see all the rooks and all of the other people. “Explain that to me.” “Now, those pawns are people. They are people who live outside the castle, the y guard the castle. The rooks are over here, and the bishops are over here. Each one of these persons has a function. Each one moves a different way. I learned this. This is not checkers; this is my game. You’re not here to collect pieces, they’re not ornaments. You must have a strategy when you play and everything.” I had never approached nothing like that

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before. It was all; get on the bandstand and, “boom!” Whatever I played, good, bad, or indifferent, you know? Sometimes they’d like it and sometimes they didn’t. But, I didn’t know there was a way to get people, to get their attention. There is like an order or something. We played like, “come here and let me talk to you.” It was all the guys that I learned [from] later had that: Malcolm, King, everybody that I learned later. The people that write, they had a way of getting your attention. Miles Davis, you know? She put me on that road, she taught me how to listen, how to believe my blind eyes. That’s what you thought you saw, but what was really happening was this. I didn’t get that where I came from in Detroit. Isn’t that so?

**Brower:** You also said that you thought there was a certain affinity, which is there because of both of your backgrounds, of being orphans or having that part in your life. That’s what I wanted to, more or less...now, talking about chronology, just go back to the beginning. Your parents were Jamaican.

**Curtis Fuller:** My father was, my mother was from Atlanta, Georgia.

**Brower:** So, give us some family history.


**Curtis Fuller:** As I knew it, most of my information came from my dead sister, who is actually the musician in the family.

**Brower:** And her name was?

**Curtis Fuller:** Mary Elizabeth Fuller. She was the one that got lessons. There was a piano in our home, a big grand that she didn’t want my brother or I to touch. I would wait for Mr. Newton to come by to give her lessons. I would sit close by and I wrote. “Now, the piano is played like this. There’s 1-2-3-4-5 and 1-2-3 fingering. 1-2-3 and 1-2-3-4-5.” That even got me. I’m over there listening and taking it all in. But she, at 11-years old was playing Franz Liszt. She came from the pool of kids, like...what was his name? Roland Hanna, who was in school during her time, he was from Detroit. Little did we know, a couple of miles away, the same thing was happening with Ahmad Jamal. He was a student of Franz Liszt—I mean not a student, per se, but he was playing that sound.

**Brower:** Playing that literature as a child.

**Curtis Fuller:** Yes, playing that as a child. They were all trying to get into these programs, Major Bowls, almost like the American Idol thing. Little did we know that there was a kid upstate named Sugarchild Robinson who played with his elbows! There were several kids in the area and my sister was one of them, like a child

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genius. I followed the same instructions that she got but I didn't get the thing across my knuckles because I wasn't sitting there when the guy was... (Laughs). She'd say, "Who's been on my piano!" It'd be like the three bears, "Somebody's playing my piano." It was me. She had this very protective thing for me. She was like a surrogate mom. My father died when my mother was carrying me.

**Brower:** So, you never knew your father?

**Curtis Fuller:** I never knew him. There's a picture of him in the mosque. I didn't know anything about mosques or anything else at the time. There was a gentleman in the building named Mr. Briggs who told me about my father. "You're just like him."

**Brower:** What mosque?

**Curtis Fuller:** Mosque number one in Detroit, Michigan.

**Brower:** So, who was with Elijah?

**Curtis Fuller:** Mohammed.


**Brower:** Oh.

**Curtis Fuller:** His name was Janais.

**Brower:** That's deep. That's really deep.

**Curtis Fuller:** When I told Billy Higgins that later and they went to the mosque and checked it out. I didn't know anything about that, but when I went in the military I was asked about it. "Now, your father..." I didn't know anything about that. I don't know that he did, when he did it, how he did it, his beliefs. I didn't know the program when they go through the years, and ceremonies, and old men, black men. They had those little meetings and things then, you know? They were sitting around talking. That's where your clans started, that's where everything else started: men sitting around doing what they do. I wasn't privy to that though. I don't even know that my father actually came from Jamaica. It was from my sister that this history was passed on to me. When I was told later, "Were you here illegally?"

**Brower:** If we take all of that into consideration, you could have been a Garveyite. You know, Jamaica...

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**Curtis Fuller:** For what was going on at the time, it could have been.

**Brower:** I mean, not casting aspersions but connecting dots.

**Curtis Fuller:** Connecting dots, like every group had a purge. Look what Hitler did to Germany. Somebody had a name that sounded Yiddish. That's why when they came here they picked names: greenback, you know names of colors.

**Brower:** Did he pass of natural causes?

**Curtis Fuller:** As far as I know, he passed of Tuberculosis. The person, when they're killed...he came to work at the Ford factory. It was a whole thing, that's what made the story believable to me. I would go to Mr. Brigg's house in the building to see a picture of my father, praying everyday. It's only me that I knew of him. But, my mother was there and by that time, you know, but even before she passed I had already formed this thing about self-containment. I kept to myself, always. I've always done that. It's been a detriment but I've always stayed out people's business and stuff like that. If I go this way...it's just self-protection.

**Brower:** So, you grew up in an orphanage?


**Curtis Fuller:** Yes, and I was one of three ethnic kids at this particular orphanage. It was called Children's A Society in Detroit, Michigan. It was about four blocks away from away from the University on Second Avenue. It was ran by the Jesuit Society. That's where I grew up.

**Brower:** So, you were educated in a Jesuit system?

**Curtis Fuller:** Yes, system, but not actually. The schools were...about to go to the public schools, whatever denomination you were.

**Brower:** What public schools did you go to in Detroit?

**Curtis Fuller:** Well, my mother had adopted Catholicism, and also the first black Catholic Church in this country. They had one...in Chicago, they say there was the first one, but this had a small congregation. She was just the opposite of him from what I gathered, you know? She also died of tuberculosis. Therefore, years later, 1994, when I developed this lung cancer and walked away from it, thanks to God, without Chemo or anything. I'm a poster boy for the cancer society. I don't smoke or drink. Now, I did drink, but the message is I was the cardiac king with Wayne Shorter. That led the cancer of course, so be it. I've never one to obsess anything.

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**Brower:** So, you think it just could have been a vulnerability that was in your family?

**Curtis Fuller:** I think it was a thing that was in my genes. Both parents were susceptible to it, too. They said, "Has anybody in your family has tuberculosis?" They thought that's what it was.

**Brower:** In the 90's?

**Curtis Fuller:** In the 90's, which is a long way from now. But, I walked through it. A brilliant heart surgeon, four feet tall, he said, "Curtis, we got it in. The good news is you will play again." He was already a fan; his wife was a fan.

**Brower:** What was his name, the surgeon's name?

**Curtis Fuller:** Uh, what was his name? I started to say O'Hara, that wasn't his name. I'll figure it out.

**Brower:** It'll come back to you. Just to loop back on a couple of things that you brought up, we will jump around but I don't want to lose this thought, who was in the personnel with Yusef? Who was in the personnel in the group with Yusef? What was the personnel in that group?

**Curtis Fuller:** The first one?

**Brower:** Yes.

**Curtis Fuller:** It was Lewis Hayes, myself, a piano player who was...Percy was finally playing, but then he had to leave. If I can think of his name, I can see him. He came to New York and he was the only one that wasn't obsessive or...If you look at the Yusef Lateef's website then he's on there. He's a very well dressed kid. We had a seminary profile.

**Brower:** So you guys went to Detroit just to record and then you decided---

**Curtis Fuller:** We went to New York.

**Brower:** Yes, New York, I'm sorry. You went to New York to record and then you decided, "This is ultimately my objective, y'all can go back to Detroit if you want to. I'm here."

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**Curtis Fuller:** Right. I decided... I went down there with Miles. He said, "J.J. likes you, I want you to stay with my band." He said, "Trane likes you too." He says, "Get with the piano player and learn the music." Then he walked away. But then, a day or two later, he came to the room and he told Yusef. I thought that was awful kind of him because he came to our room, which I shared with Yusef.

**Brower:** You were at the Motel?

**Curtis Fuller:** Yes. I remember his shirt; he was always a sharp dresser. He came to the room and he said, "Yusef, I want that trombone player." Yusef said, "Yeah, but he's has got to give me a two-week notice whatever he does. Give me a chance to hire somebody." The story goes on, it's like a rhondo, it's like...I was talking about Wilbur Harden, who trained one of the trumpet players that John liked. He replaced me with Yusef.


**Brower:** We were talking about schools and you were about to tell us, and I just want you to walk us through elementary schools, and what schools you went to, and, along the way, where you started to form friendships on a musical level that persist through your life.

**Curtis Fuller:** Okay. The first school that I can remember, and the reason I remember it, it was because it was the catalyst for two of the three dramatic things in my life that rocked my world. One being that I missed the school bus and that bus was hit by a train and every kid on the bus was killed. I was late getting there. It was the bus that was going. It was going from Detroit to Hamtramck, I don't know if you know the area. It's a little community. I missed it by a few minutes. So, I always had this feeling that God was looking over me. I've always felt protected. I'll explain to you why. Everything I've been in, I don't know if you saw Wizard Of Oz or not, I'm going to be a child in the sense that I believe in the yellow brick road. But, I believe I walked that road. I'll tell you why. A riot broke out in Detroit when I was at that school. I said there were two or there cataclysmic things that really happened in my life that really...Missing that bus was one, the other things was a riot broke out in Detroit, 1941. I was a kid. Me and my brother, who is deceased, we went to a carnival.

**Brower:** Excuse me, what was your brother's name?

**Curtis Fuller:** Wellington.

**Brower:** Okay.

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**Curtis Fuller:** I named one of my children after him. He tried to play drums, you know? He was in a separate orphanage; they divided us. The three of us, when my mother lay dying in the apartment we had, the oldest person in the house was twelve years old, my sister. She would fix the porridge, the oatmeal, every morning. We got that on welfare. It was a big bag with no name on it. I call that porridge but it was oatmeal, old, lumpy oatmeal. (Laughs) She had it ready every morning, she pressed our clothes, she saw to what we need, and then we went to school. She was there at age twelve. To my dying day, I will always remember and love her for that. So, I lovingly call her Lizzy. I wrote a song for her, one of my first songs, it's "Lizzy's Bounce." That was dedicated to my sister and she was so thrilled. "Lizzy's Bounce? Is that really bouncing her?" (Laughs) I thought that was cute, she was a sweetheart. She was my closest confidant, I could tell her anything. She was like a surrogate mom, you know? She knew I was fragile, very fragile, scared to death of my brother, the whole bit. He was always taunting me. She, on the other hand, was like a little...So that was my way of finding out that there are scales and they do balance your life. The other way I felt when I went into the military, I took my horn with me. It was a school horn; I took it. I stole it and went into the military. And I heard some guys taunting me, "Where are you going J.J.? If only you could take that horn back, we are going to Korea!" (Laughs) Less than three months later, that same horn was playing for them to go get on the troop train to go and get on the boat. They would never forget it, (sings the melody to marching tune). "See ya' later guys!" (Laughs) I looked to practice in the latrine, you know? I was in the room where they had the stalls; that's where I used to practice at two or three o'clock in the morning. The all black Army band was in the next building, which is Cannonball Adderely's group. He was playing bell trombone in the band, which was his instrument at the time, bell trombone and trumpet.

**Brower:** Now, we got to...Well, that was what? 1950-what?

**Curtis Fuller:** 1955, I don't know?

**Brower:** Was it '57 or '55?

**Curtis Fuller:** Well, when I got out it was '55.

**Brower:** You went in '53?

**Curtis Fuller:** '53, right.

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**Brower:** Okay, since we are there, who else was in that band? Junior Mance was in that band.

**Curtis Fuller:** Junior Mance was the company clerk because he was the piano player. He had to play the glockenspiel, or whatever that thing is.

**Brower:** Where were you stationed?

**Curtis Fuller:** Fort Knox, Kentucky.

**Brower:** And what was that band called?

**Curtis Fuller:** It was the 132<sup>nd</sup> Army band I figure. It was the 132<sup>nd</sup> or thirty something. It was the 3<sup>rd</sup> armored division.

**Brower:** They were in the process of de-segregating?

**Curtis Fuller:** It was the last black army band, yeah. Slide Hampton's brother, he was processed through there. They were, you know, I think the full script was 28. Everybody didn't play a horn; they had many administrative people. Cannonball couldn't be head of it because he wasn't the warrant officer. They gave him a staff sergeant thing because they sent him up here to the Naval School of Music. He passed that course. He got to be the band director, but he wasn't in charge. He couldn't be because he was a staff sergeant. You had to be a warrant officer to be in charge and he was not that. Junior Mance got caught by a corporal because he was doing administrative things and that was (inaudible) and I was a new comer. Mel Wanzo and I-- Mel Wanzo was there for me. I don't know if you know who Mel Wanzo is.


**Brower:** Count Basie.

**Curtis Fuller:** Count Basie, but they wanted to put him out of the band because he was this complexion.

**Brower:** He wasn't black enough.

**Curtis Fuller:** No, he was this complexion. His mother was my complexion, but he was this complexion.

**Brower:** He wasn't dark enough.

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**Curtis Fuller:** Yeah. His name was Mel Wanzo, so that didn't go over well. You saw his father and you had to wonder what his mom had done! (Laughs) They got on the bus and they said, "Get that boy on the bus!" They did that when we were with Basie. It was the same thing they did at Fort Knox, years later! We didn't move much.

**Brower:** But, you were travelling in the South or whatever?

**Curtis Fuller:** We were in the South. Well, the Southwest. I mean, I think that the time was born in Indiana; it wasn't born in...

**Brower:** Mississippi.

**Curtis Fuller:** Mississippi or the hardcore stuff. Those cities, they knew who their...I don't know if you knew Mary Shrug who owned the Cincinnati Reds? At the time she said, "Don't tell me about my neighbors, I'll take good care of them." That's the way they spoke, lovingly, to them. That's lovingly.

**Brower:** My darkies.


**Curtis Fuller:** My darkies, my niggers.

**Brower:** I can whip 'em but you better not.

**Curtis Fuller:** These are my niggers; I take care of these niggers.

**Brower:** Right.

**Curtis Fuller:** That boy over there, I'm giving him a million dollars. Don't tell me about nothing. That's my money. Then they took the team away from her because she was honest. I went to Duke University to pay my attention to teaching for Paul Jefferies. Mrs. Reynolds from the Reynolds Company, they were trying to borrow money from her classical apartment to take us through Monterey. So, Paul Jefferies was trying to borrow money for the trip for his jazz band. He made an improper statement and he said, "Well, you give money to all these other associations." She said, "Look boy, I take good care of these niggers here in South Carolina—North Carolina, Raleigh." That's the way they spoke, I was a little taken a back, but that's the way they spoke. That was it; there was no disrespect. I made a mistake one time. I laughed during somebody's speech. This guy was Vice President and he couldn't spell potato. Huh? I said, "He couldn't spell potato!" And the woman at the table behind me said, "Now, we're not going to have any of that, boy. Mind yourself." (Laughs) People from there are...I remember once, I'm jumping all over the place,

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but I remember Cedar Walton telling me at an airport in Paris. There were four little old ladies there from Texas that were very uncomfortable with us sitting there with them. We were drinking, shouldn't have been, Wayne and I. I said, "Well, this is none of their business." She just said, "Pretty sure you don't talk like that around people like that." (Laughs) You know, "Shit, what has that got to do with..." He said, "Now, those folks have a way of telling people things and we will all be in trouble." So, I toned it down and it turned out to be true. In fact, one of them walked up to me and said, "Take your hat off, boy. You're in the presence of ladies," not knowing me from Adam or Eve, or where I was from, or what country, or anything. She just said, "Take your hat off, boy." A joke came to mind when she said that about the code that they used in the housing unit in those days. It's funny how the story goes; it's like L'Ouverture Toussaint. He was a coach driver! He had no military training. During the uprising, he just took a coat, a jacket, and a hat off a French officer and led the people to insurrection. He drove a coach! It had nothing to do with military training! Napoleon's 50,000 crack troops that he sent there to quell the insurrection had to deal with a guy like that. This is a guy that is nibbling at the Army and destroying the French Cracow. The joke was, and Moody was the one who told me that, can you imagine? This guy is driving the family in the coach, and he gets to the stop sign. In those days, you're not supposed to know anything about reading and the sign says, "STOP." (Laughs) The frustration he must have had, "Do I go through it!?" (Laughs) "Or do I adhere to the stop sign!" He's sweating bullets! (Laughs)

**Brower:** I'm wrong either way!

**Curtis Fuller:** Yep, I'm wrong either way. (Laughs)

**Brower:** Nigger why didn't you stop? Nigger why did you know to stop?


**Curtis Fuller:** You know, "You can't read, or can you? Who's teaching you?" Then that's another story. Whoever taught you is in trouble, too.

**Brower:** He might be sitting right next to the person who's mad at him.

**Curtis Fuller:** That's probably who taught him. It's probably a little girl!

**Brower:** "This is A, this is B."

**Curtis Fuller:** If you think about the history, I love where we are going, and the dream. At some point, this should be a reference to where music is going. So when you're editing, I'll just tell you now, since I'm right here at this point. It's like a little joke I used to laugh about. I'm from the Congo; I can go either way.

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**Brower:** I can go either way.


**Curtis Fuller:** But, where the kids have brought it to, they have taken this from us. Because, to call everything jazz, they leave reference to, "Yeah, you know, I know all that jazz." There are negative connotations all the time about this art form/

**Brower:** "Close enough for jazz."

**Curtis Fuller:** Yeah, "close enough for jazz." That's always bothered me. It goes back to things that I sat in a room and I heard Duke Ellington say. When I heard Dr. Taylor and people I respect, you know? When I talked to Sidney Bechet, about how did you get us all the way here? Sidney said, "Well, I couldn't do anything over there." I befriended Art Tatum. I always liked being around the older musicians because that's where you learn, you know? I see the same thing happen to (inaudible). That's one of the first people who calls me, "Hey pops!" I guess it's my turn. I am pops. I am trying to respect the role I have. It's incumbent upon me now to do what was done for me when I was a youngster. I used to follow Papa Joe and all of those [guys] around. My first trip to the carnival, "Voice Of America," and guess who asked me to go to dinner, to the dance? Papa Joe Jones, Coleman Hawkins, and Roy Eldridge. I'm with that crowd! While I was there, Herbie Mann asked, can he play with us, too? So, they let me play with he and Kenny Dorham, and Zoot Sims. That's it; I had the best of both worlds. I had Papa Joe and Coleman Hawkins. We were playing in soccer stadiums that were packed. Ironically, on this last two weeks, I never had it so good. It follows, I'll show you before I leave, I poster that I got from Milan. It's as big as that wall. It was hanging across the boulevard in Milan. They gave me a copy; they had it on different spots. But, every place I played, so I know I'm at a...going to the rest of the place with my wife. I think that's everything because I've never seen so many people. Even last night, that was a very good crowd. My wife was here, and Cedar was here, and judging by that, I think it was a good crowd. That was the last of that Paris that was...

**Brower:** Sparse.

**Curtis Fuller:** But, Detroit, San Diego, the school, [they were all] packed. All of the sudden, a song I wrote 40 years ago, never named it, but dedicated it to my wife, has been at the top of the charts for the past ten weeks. Then, it fell to four and now it's back to two, "I Will Tell Her." Check it out. I wrote that for the late Catherine Fuller. She's my heart, you know? Irish Catholic lass, I met her in New Jersey. She was doing graduate work. 22 years in, you're dying. Smart as a whip. Talking to her was as easy as talking to you. She was a child at that age. She was raised by her wealthy

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grandparents. She sat and watched, as a young girl, Laurence Welk and all those old programs and whatever they would watch. I would say things that she could relate to. How can this be? She's 22 and I'm 42! But, that's the way we were. I think she's off negotiating with somebody now, planning my arrival. I'm being facetious but you know. That's a girl.

**Brower:** You said there were three things that happened that were associated...well, going back to Detroit, to school now. One was the school bus, the ride. What occasioned the ride? Give us some context for that.

**Curtis Fuller:** We went to see the circus. We sat up in the corner. Actually it was in Grand Circus Park in Detroit, Michigan. It was right downtown, Lynwood Avenue. Every year, J.L Hudson used to have a parade. It was on T.V. around the country with the big floats, and the balloons and the singing kids. We were allowed to go there and stand in line with people and watch it. When we went to the Michigan Theatre we had to sit in the back row, you know? We weren't even allowed in Dearborn even though that's where the Ford Factory was. That's where I set my pins. I had to get out of dodge, rolling in to the tent. The guy would take us and put us at the bus stop. To come back there and find out that 90% of the population of Dearborn was Arabs. It was the largest congregation of Arabs in the country. Every shop in Detroit is owned by Arabs. That makes me wonder. It has nothing to do with ethnicity or anything, you know? You got black Arabs, like half of the earth when you go into Sudan and all that. But, I have to wonder, like in music, why do we bring all this stuff on ourselves and let these people in the country and they complain about it? Do the Mexicans let the things come to their backdoor and work in Mexico? No. Not a chance. All the billionaires in the world, at least 25% of them live in Mexico. I told my people. All the cattle farms and all kinds of shit, you think they have enough with oil, you'd think they'd have enough to sustain themselves. In fact, Barbra Jordan, the late Barbra Jordan, she was a congresswoman under Clinton, wrote a paper on that. She stated that in 20 years these people will run this country. Was anybody listening? They weren't marching with Dr. King, but when Dr. King had done all these things for gays, and rights, and women's rights, the people that marched with King, Catholic priests and all of them. But, there wasn't a Spanish person there, anywhere. But, when these things are given to the community, they're right there. They want some of that.

**Brower:** Well, you had Cesar Chavez.

**Curtis Fuller:** Well, he took California because of the workers. I'm saying they have thought of themselves primarily, not as a collective source, a base, to offset anything that's going on in the country. They have become very flexible. Now, they'll move to

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the Republican party because they'll see a chance with the people who didn't even want them in the first place! But, you'll see them when they're fighting in Arizona and they don't even know what they're fighting about. I don't see the American Indian out there fighting at all. Now, that's a native! As a matter of fact, when I was on my way to Florida, I had a laugh with...What's his name? He called me on the phone to do with? It wasn't you.

**Kennith Kimery:** I called you originally.

**Curtis Fuller:** Originally, you called me. We had a nice laugh about it. He said, "Yes, we are going to get it done Curtis." I said, "I know I sound like a dummy, but I don't know where I'm going, I don't have a clue about nothing. I don't know anything about the trip, where I'm going, no hotels, no nothing. The night before I came here, I didn't know what hotel I was staying in. Which I know, Ron is busy and all that, but that's to be expected. But, getting back to the other, I see the things happening which makes me wonder. That's what I like about what I saw in San Diego. That school I guess is 50% Spanish and it was packed. The young man playing with me, Gilbert, was sort of like Castellan. He's not like Spanish or Mexican; there is a difference. My wife is Spanish and Asian, so, you know, I got all of my information from her. But, any chance to see how they had taken to out there, like in Vancouver. In Vancouver, Canada, which has a large oriental population, as well as American, or Native Canadian Indian. They are really into jazz. I see another world, another market there, Ottawa and those places there, that I don't see here. Last night, the kid that occupied my whole night, was a young Jewish student. He sat there and picked my brain for two sets, and I dare say he'll be back tonight. You know, working the Kennedy Center for the past 13 years now, you get a good view of what's going to happen or what can happen. The irony of that is it's a Betty Carter program called Jazz Ahead, or I suppose it to be. The irony of it is that 99% of the people that come in have never heard of Betty Carter, nor did they research it and find out who she was and what it's all about, or how I got here in the first place because of that woman. I got on some basketball players at Duke University once. I would make them..."do a paper on Billie Holiday, do a paper on so and so. You've got to know about the subject form, this is why you're here. Don't take this class as an elective or something that you just want some credits for so you can just get in and out of this building. I want you to know something about jazz, or pretend!" (Laughs) You know? Don't make a fool out of me' pretend that you know it. Go there and take your yellow pencil and highlight some things. I'll buy that! That means that you've made some effort, you know? But don't come in here as if you don't have a clue, unacceptable.

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**Brower:** So, I'm going to stick to this, you were telling me what occasioned that riot. You were downtown, was there some incident?


**Curtis Fuller:** Yes, it was like, I didn't count them, but it was thousands. It had to be, I hadn't seen that many. It's just like when you're in the monument, when it's full, you can assume that it's at least 10,000 people. That's when the monument is crowded, that's not all the people milling around the side streets and everything. So, when I was running, feeling like my heart was going to pop out of my chest, somebody heard the crowd yelling, "There's two young niggers there!" They were chasing us with chains and bats. You know, the frustration of a child, I mean...she. I went to school with her; we had mixed schools even though they had the theatre thing going. My first thought was just looking at the only girl I had dated in school. I went out with her twice, two or three times. She was from Germany, and I went and took her home once and her father told me, "Don't ever come back." But, that's my only experience that I had outside of my own environment. That experience of running like that, fearful that I didn't know what the outcome would be, that's why I said I've already felt protected by God or some force of God. Do you have to change?

**Brower:** We can keep going.

**Curtis Fuller:** I've always felt that in some way, and I don't know how, that I was covered and I was going to make it. I've been in situations that are unbelievable. I don't drive a car now because I had this new car; I was in New York. I bought an old something with the white colored roof. I was coming from a gig; I was living in Weequahic Park and the cops stopped me on the way from the club. Betty Carter and a bunch of us, the Isley Brothers, we all stayed in the little neighborhood there. In fact, the little rider, Leroy Jones, you saw the trouble he had out there in Irvington. Anyways, the alto saxophonist who played with Dave Brubeck was also there.

**Brower:** Desmond?

**Curtis Fuller:** Paul Desmond. Anyways, I'm going home. A young State Trooper says, "Pull over. Get out of the car." He pulled me out of the car, "Get on the car!" He put his boot on my back. He took out his Magnum. I said, "What's wrong officer?" "Shut up." Then he's just like expletive, n word, n word, n word. He's terrified of a man on the ground. It's raining and I'm cold. He said, "What's in that case?" I said, "My instrument, sir." He didn't ask me. He took it open and looked in it and took it apart. He threw the bell one-way, and threw the horn over the bridge on the New Jersey Turnpike. Mind you, he's still got his foot on my back and he's shaking. He's got the gun, and the club, and everything else, and the force and I'm honoring every

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command. “Yes, sir, but I’m just coming from a job.” And, “Yes, sir. Yes, sir. Yes, sir.” He was only a kid, for me. He was so nervous, that gun could have gone off any minute. He was shaking like a leaf. You’re talking about the force of God, or something lunar or something; I don’t know. Billie Holliday said something once. She said, “You will always make it. You’re going to make it. If you keep doing this thing right,” she said, “you have a certain quality.” She said, “Lester had that when I met him. You have a humility, and you have this so and so.” I had all these attributes that she could see visibly. I just listened; I didn’t know how to answer because I didn’t think that about myself, in fact, just the opposite. I thought only of my inabilities to do things. Sometimes, I’m inadequate because I didn’t do this will, and I can’t do this well. I don’t read good enough, I have to practice this and I have to play this part because I can’t do this well. I was always taught that you practice the things you don’t do well. I always had my own idea of how I stood there. He was so funny.

**Brower:** Are we running?

**Kennith Kimery:** Yep.

**Brower:** Do we have a level?

**Kennith Kimery:** Yes, we have a level.

**Brower:** Okay. One, two, one two. You were talking about Keter?

**Curtis Fuller:** Yeah, Keter Betts, what a guy. We played a lot together down in Italy. He worked with an Italian pianist. He was in Genoa. He stayed there a lot, him and Bobby Durham, the drummer. They were working Ella when I was with Basie. Whenever we’d go out with the Norman Grantz All-Stars or the All-Stars, which was Sinatra, Ella, Joe Pass—this was the show.

**Kennith Kimery:** Oscar Peterson.

**Curtis Fuller:** Right, and Joe Pass with him. That was one show we used to do all the time. Then Tony Bennet and Nina Horn. Then there was Shecky Greene; he was always a comedian. I used to love those shows because the band only had 28 minutes. Vegas time, Sahara. [It was a] good gig. \$500 for the rehearsal; \$768 for the week. It was big time! \$1,200. Then you’re on location; you finally take the stuff out of your bag and let it air out and stuff. [Those were] great days. Incidentally, the third one was same band. I told you, everybody used to laugh at me in the military about. “We’re going to Korea.” I happened to be playing with Yusef Lateef. I went to the military in the Tank Core. They said I had the highest score out of anybody with

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an application and I don't know shit about a tank! (Laughs) You know, the ones you had to fill out? Tank Commander School, which doesn't mean you're going to command the thing, you'd be in the turret rather than loading and doing stuff like that, and putting tracks on the tank. You could be one of the few black guys that got into this, into the tank with the three other men. I was working with Yusef at a show bar and a couple of from that outfit came back from Korea. It was the last battle of interim or some shit. Everybody was slaughtered, and not by the Koreans. They were slaughtered by the B-52s. There wasn't supposed to be a gathering of tanks, which they'd just used for firepower. They couldn't drive through that terrain anyway. They would just line up and use it for firepower. All those guys that I knew and trained with, and there I was at Kline's Show bar, playing a gig with Yusef.

**Brower:** So this is like '55 or '56?

**Curtis Fuller:** Yes. That was the third one, when I felt there was a real connection.

**Brower:** The cocoon that allowed you to navigate this yellow brick road of your life.

**Curtis Fuller:** It doesn't matter what I do. And I've always escaped. Like one night I remember leaving a club in New York. Lee Morgan came back in the band, replacing Freddie Hubbard. We were in L.A. and we played Shelley Manne's club. This guy, Frank Morgan, had just got out of the joint. Lee asked him, "Is there any place we can cop?" I would always go, but I wasn't into what Lee was going to do. I was cognac and sipping daddy! I was a real drinker. The only way I could drink the cognac was I had to put Coca Cola to it. When I went to Europe they used to laugh at me because it cost just as much for the Coca Cola as it did for the cognac. But, I had to break it because it was too strong for me. It wouldn't take much to put me on queer street. I'd look like I was higher than Lee. If you look at the band, you'd think Wayne and I were on something. We were drunk as skunks. (Laughs) Anyways, the cops came. They stopped us and they saw a lady jump out of the car, out of the front seat, that was with Frank. She ran into a dark neighborhood. We were going over to the hip club in the black part of L.A. We were sitting there, two cops pull up, one white and one black. The black cops said, "I know what you guys are up to! You're trying to cop! Well, you're all going in." The white cop, "Look, I gotta go home tonight." (Laughs) It was so funny. He said, "I'm not going to no night court tonight. I promised the wife I'd be home." You know, he was a nice kid. You could see it; I felt the vibe. He said, "What's your roll in this." I said, "I don't know. I was just getting a ride to the hotel." He said, "C'mon now! What hotel were you staying in?" And I named the hotel. It was back by the Capital Building, where we were staying downtown. He said, "You're over here." I said, "We were just going by the hip club. We are going to see Sweets Edison and some of the guys. We are going over to the

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club to hang out.” He looked in my eyes and he said, “Hey man, let’s let these guys go. This is going to be too much. There’s nothing here. We don’t sit here and wait for that girl that jumped out of the car.” Oh man, I went through a panic mode. I was sweating and everything. I said, “That’s the end of my career.” But, Lee, he’s an interesting guy. He’s very interesting. It’s ironic that the life he lead took him right to that spot. You know? I didn’t know he was that close to Judy Garland. She used to come out of the club and take him in the limo to go to the black neighborhoods to cop. Judy Garland! I also thought it was funny that the guys like—because this is not going into print nowhere, please—being with Basie when all the guys would come by to see Basie, I mean, everybody! Every Hollywood star, everything! I’ve seen some characters in that dressing room. I perfectly remember the night that Archie Bunker came back there.

**Brower:** (Laughs)

**Curtis Fuller:** I see Archie Bunker on the T.V, “WW II!” He’s talking and shit. His son had just been busted for this thing. (Imitates Bunker) “They had the nerve, Basie, to bust my son! These assholes!” So on, and so on. Then he put this envelope down on the bag. (Laughs) And the funniest thing happened I’ve ever seen in my life. The Count went in on him. He dumped it, and it looked like a little Mount Fuji. Basie didn’t even touch it. He says, (Fuller imitates Basie laughing). The shit left the table.

**Brower:** Turn this off. Turn it off. Turn it off! Turn it off!

**Curtis Fuller:** (Laughing) I’m sorry, but that was so funny.

**Brower:** No, this is so weird!

(Recording Breaks)

**Brower:** We could probably go back now.

**Curtis Fuller:** She was telling me her life, and she had to go through it. She was equating my experience that I yet had to go through, with her experience. She told me a story about her being with Charlie Burnett’s band, being a little black girl, just 16 years old. She was on the bus and the indignity she had to go through! I mean, I don’t want to discuss any of that. I’m saying; it was unbelievable. I was sitting there with tears in my eyes. I heard that she was barren because she was high, and she had to sell her body and all kinds of things. She was made to do things that are unbelievable. The more I talked to her, the more I wanted to, sort of, do anything I could to protect this little old lady. By this time, she was frail. She wasn’t the rosy

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woman I had saw in the pictures and stuff. She was frail and it was just two little white puppies and her. I don't know the species. She would come to see Benny Golson and I. We went to fill in for Monk because he couldn't get a police car at that spot, and we stayed two years at that club as the house band. She was there; she didn't miss. She looked forward to coming out on Friday nights and just sitting. That was my spot when I came up on the bandstand, sitting next to Billie Holliday. I was just so enamored; I was just in love. I don't mean like a boy-girl or something like that, no improprieties, a grown woman and a kid. It was just all...I just wish she was my mother, you know? She was giving me motherly advice and things. She was guiding me. To this day, I'll always be thankful. I hear singers doubt, and I say, "Tony Bennet would loose to it."

(Recording Stops)

**Curtis Fuller:** ...How her diction was, how she added syllables in the song when she sang. "The sunrise in the..." you know? It was correct pronunciation of everything. You knew that the ball was going to fall on the syllable. If it had four syllables in the song, "San-Fran-cis-co." You know, everything was so clear. No offense to Nat, who had a great voice, but he was, (Imitates Nat's voice and mumbles nonsensically.) (Laughs) You'd never know! Half the time, I'd play it 30 and then I'd know. (Imitates Nat) "I want some Frown Frown sauce." What! I'd have to play that again. (Laughs) Again! Slow it down! What did say? It was like a little old lady, "What did you say, sonny?" I can't get it. But, Billy, kind of like Billy Eckstine and those people, they knew how to put it over. Therefore, I liked the thing. She must have had a conversation like that with Miles. You know, he had a way of playing like that, too. I don't know how you feel about a guy like Sonny Stitt, but Sonny Stitt played like that. There was complete pronunciation of everything he did, every statement. You know, like a group of statements make a paragraph? You got subject, predicate, verb, adverb, exclamation—you got everything! (Sings Sonny's melodic line style). Perfect statement. "I went to the store. This is what I did." (Sings ascending melodic phrase) That requires resolution (sings descending melodic phrase). You didn't hear a guy play, you learned.

**Brower:** What did you get from Pres (Lester Young) in that regard, in your time with him?

**Curtis Fuller:** How to be a performer, how to play, what to play, when to play it, when not to play, when not to use unnecessary phrases that are un-anointed, and I'm guilty of it now sometimes. I do it just to fill a void, sometimes. When Monk was telling me, "Space." Sometimes, I feel like Dizzy, like I got to cover everything. (Imitates Dizzy's busy and dense melodic line) I got one I can refer you to, to show

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you my point. Benny Golson used to write 20 page arrangements, you know? It was busy, busy, busy, and busy. But, he was superseded by a guy named Herbie Hancock. We did a date with Stanley Turrentine, with Louis Mitchell. It was a great date. It took Bluenote a long time to release it. I don't know what Bluenote did with it. It was the one where he played that beautiful ballad on "Make Someone Happy." You know? Herbie did all the arrangements for the date. There wasn't a two bar rest in the whole date! I love Herbie, I was into his band once.

**Brower:** When you say superseded, he's even busier than Benny?

**Curtis Fuller:** Yes. I mean, breathing... a lot of writers are like that. Now, my good friend, we worked together at Skidmore, John LaBarbera. Not only is he like a...I've sat next to some good guys in my years: Urbie Green on my left, Billy Bauer when he was playing trombone; he's a great writer and a great player. Dave Becker, great writer. He had already done "Down By The Riverside" and shit. You know? So, you know in another way, you heard Dave had different sections like, (Imitates Dave's ascending and descending melodic line). He's such a guy; he's loud. But, when you hear a guy and, you know, the section is always busy. Sometimes, I think that's how Quincy slipped through the cracks. Less is more; let it breathe. Let people just stand up and just dance for a few minutes. (Laughs) Stand up and just say it. "Wow, that was cool." He would go up and give the spirit. That's what he called it, giving the spirit of life. He would just go up and give the spirit and then sit down for a few minutes. He'd check out the bass, then he'd sit back down and he'd let it rest. I tried to imitate his style when I wrote an arrangement for him. He graced the thing, and he came to the recording, and he came to the rehearsal. Little known fact about this band, out of the whole messenger group, the only one he hung with was me. I was a fool enough to hang with him (LaBarbera), and this school would not go all day long. It was a joy.

**Brower:** So when you did that piece on one of those Riverside Records, "The High Priest," that was for Monk?

**Curtis Fuller:** That was for Monk. That was the way he played. (Imitates Monk's rhythmic phrasing) I did that for Monk. That was his taste, what he was all about. The thing I did for Art Blakey, "Everlasting Light" was captured to highlight his soul. Benny Golson gave me the idea. He said, "I did Blues March. Why don't you write a song for Art?" Everybody writes something and Art ends up creating a solo. Art is a big band drummer. Like Buddy Rich, he doesn't read. But, they know where the hits are; they hear that. It's an important thing. Joe Morello, who I played with, he could read it one time. Grey would read it but he lost a little bit of his sight. If you can't see it, you have to deal with it another way. But, I always try to let a song breathe and

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not have too much. I don't do as much writing. There's no greater writer now than Slide Hampton, you know? Sometimes he doesn't let the music breathe. I know once, I can really say, and he would acknowledge, it was the most overwritten piece of music I've ever heard. Big man, little horn, big horn, and little man—Whatever he did for Dexter. Was it Redtop? The corral right in front of Redtop, it had ornaments of Gil Evans (Laughs), and all of the sudden (sings a overwrought melody). I was like what the fuck? You went all the way to Macy's to come back to Target? You know, but you have to be careful of that, overwriting, overplaying and 30-minute solos. I could actually say that about "Trane sometimes.

**Brower:** Since we are free associating, I read that you, harmonically, and in your approach to soloing, that "Trane was a big influence.

**Curtis Fuller:** Oh yeah, very.

**Brower:** Talk about the music. What is it in the music, then talk about your relationship with "Trane, and maybe the date?

**Curtis Fuller:** "Trane was my male Billie Holliday. He was like a guru to me. He was like my breathing. Only now, in my old frail age, I get it. I really get it. I understand every phrase, and I try to do that now in my solos just to touch on what "Trane was all about. He was a student of Stravinsky, I mean, not going literally to study with the man. But, [he played] sheets of sound. It was almost like bubbling waters sometimes. (Imitates Coltrane's melody) I didn't know. I finally got to the place, with the trombone, because I'm limited just like he was. I can't get the higher notes when I do that...from my thinking. I don't hear...To me, high G's and things like that, I don't hit those notes. Actually, that comes from my association with J.J. J.J. never played anything over a high D until it was about four months until his death. Just to prove everybody he could do it, he would start every song with the highest note he could hit, an F, or a G, or whatever. (Imitates J.J. hitting high note) Now, you could hear it. Steve Turre has picked that up. Every time you see him, it's just "Bam!" It's like the frightening thing, you know? I just wonder, "Why? What did I do with the price of eggs?" You got me, just to get my attention. "Trane wasn't about that. You know, his higher register suffered. He was an alto player to begin with. By grabbing the tenor that changed the complexion of his hearing. Even Miles had to stop and set himself a note. It would come very easily to Dizzy or John Faddis. I mean, John Faddis was a really high note player, or Arturo Sandoval, when you hear them play, they don't have to wait to...(Imitates their playing style). It's more a natural thing, the whole spectrum, if you practice like that, the linear stuff. But, I am playing. The other trombone players hit the notes, a lot of them. But, I used to talk to Billie Holliday about that same thing. She said it like this: "Do you talk in that register?"

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“No ma’am.” “So, you have the male voice, a baritone voice, the tenor voice. That’s where you are.” Dizzy was saying, “In the middle of that horn, you got it.” I sat next to Al Grey would play a note and you’d hear it five blocks away. But, it’s the context. Key is like the context to the characters of what you play, it’s not how you play it. People that are listening to you, you know? If you say a lot of words, they have to mean something. Check the difference out between, I call them my musical bookends, just sit there for a moment and think of Benny Golson and John Coltrane. As boys, they grew up practicing together on a daily basis. They are my musical bookends. What I got from Benny was the writing. What I got from “Trane was playing. The liquidity of his playing, flowing phrases, connecting scales, Art Farmer is in that mix.

**Brower:** That’s interesting because my perception of “Trane and Art Farmer is really different.

**Curtis Fuller:** It’s really different. But, conceptually, the scales that they play harmonically are the same. Art Farmer is a master of scales. But, he has the prettiest lines of any trumpet player that ever lived. To me, honestly, and maybe it’s just me, but I will reference what I’m talking about and you can check it out for yourself, and you may have to listen several times, but, Art Farmer is the only trumpet player that I know, living or dead, that can pick up a piece of music and make it his own. When Art Farmer finished playing “This Is It” you thought that he wrote it. He would hear me practicing on my own and he would say, “Now Curtis, if you play a B9 with a flat five, that’ll get both of those scales and it will be easy to connect those same notes in both scales.” How many guys can tell you that off the top? I do it and I say, “Damn. You don’t have to deal with the two-five-one thing.” You know, when you play a C7, you’re playing two different chords. You can play an F7 and it would be the same notes. F Major 7, it would be the same notes. You have what are called tetrachords, right? The bottom half, F-A-C and then C as the head, you know? Tonality is when you play one and you get two for the price of one; you couple them together.

**Brower:** Did they have similar work habits in terms of figuring that out?

**Curtis Fuller:** Oh yeah. A student, sometimes, Eric can do it. That’s why the Suzuki method was so successful for a while, training the student’s ear. The student can actually train himself to hear. I’ll tell you, I’ll make a student to play a note, then I’ll tell him to sing or hum the third, fifth, and seventh. He knows that if he is going to be a writer or composer, he’s going learn there’s going to be a room sometime where there won’t be no piano. He’ll have to learn. Don Sickler would always tell me, “Damn, you and Thad Jones...” He said—ask him! I had written the whole trumpet

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section thing with just the horn. I'd sing the note to him and tell him the line for the first trumpet, second trumpet. It'd fit in and he'd say, "Damn, you heard that?"

**Brower:** Is it just logic?

**Curtis Fuller:** Well, it's based on my horn. I don't have to—I don't carry a piano around. I do know, some instruments...the French Horn is a fifth in sound. You gotta hear that sound. Alto saxophone, being a sixth—actually, the alto can play—you can read the alto part as if you were playing the trombone! Just make the sharps natural, as long as it's a minor interval. The baritone saxophone is just a big alto! (Laughs) Harry Carney is leading the section from the bottom, playing the same thing!

**Brower:** Well, you were, earlier and it was off camera, you were talking about your time in the Quincy Jones band. Julius Watkins was the lead.


**Curtis Fuller:** Yes; he was the lead and the French Horn. Obviously, listen to the part (imitates Watkins' part), French Horn would be the lead, if you know the lead tones. He may have written...

**Brower:** You characterized that instrument as a cross--

**Curtis Fuller:** As a cross between trumpet and trombone. I mean, the French Horns that you're seeing in the band, you get two for the price of one if you got a French Horn player in there.

**Brower:** So, that's actually a natural thing to do?

**Curtis Fuller:** It's a natural thing to do! I didn't know that until—I'm sorry my hand was busted, but last year I was supposed to play with...I really got upset. I was mad about my hand being messed up. I fell on ice and before my wife died, I couldn't use this left hand. I worked at the Kennedy Center, anyways. But, I was supposed to play with the military band because I integrated the service. In Louisville, Mel Wanzo and I were the first two blacks that integrated into a white orchestra in 1955. But, when I got there, out in Virginia, he said, "Curtis, we can't find any record of you and Mel Wanzo being there." I said, "Well, you shouldn't do it then if there's no record of it." But, mind you, the omission didn't come for Mel Wanzo and I. We were there and we signed our papers. In fact, they even put us in the book, picture wise, with the band. That was not my doing. I wouldn't want to live a lie; I wouldn't want to say that I played with a band I didn't play with. But, my roommate was a principal horn player with the Louisville Symphony; his name Ed Volker. You can check the records out. Mel Wanzo is dead, but there was a black tenor player there, too. He didn't get in the

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band; he ended up being a great piano tuner; his name was James Cheeseman. There were three of us, but he didn't actively perform with the band, we did. But, the fact that it's omitted in the records, that we were in that band, I can't tell you why. So, I don't want to have to do like Obama; I don't want to have to show you my birth certificate every five minutes before you believe me. (Laughs) If he shows that damn thing one more time, I think I'll scream. But, take my word for it; we were in the band.

**Brower:** Ken, do you have a curfew in 30 minutes?

**Kennith Kimery:** 30 minutes, yeah.

**Brower:** Okay, man. High school, where'd you go to High School?


**Curtis Fuller:** I graduated from Inkster High.

**Brower:** Inkster?

**Curtis Fuller:** 17 miles outside of Detroit.

**Brower:** Okay.

**Curtis Fuller:** We were put in homes once we reached a certain age. We could get out of there at 16-years-old. If we had working papers we could leave the orphanage. We had to have a job, and what a lot of kids did that didn't have parents, was go into the military. The danger of—there was a war and a draft. If you had the orphanage assist you in changing your age then...In my case, there was an older brother that died, and there was never a death certificate issued. I used his birthday; his name was James Fuller. He died on a hot stove, a belly of a stove. He got out of the...He was too close to the stove and they found him like that. But, anyways, I'll tell you the name. Her name was Joanne Webber; she helped a lot of kids in the register of the orphanage's offices. As soon as I went from 17 to 19, not 16 to 18—I put it up so they'd think I was really there. They were hiring jobs at a factory called Kaiser and Frasier in Detroit. It was a shipping industry first, but they started making a car. Kaiser and Frasier, I don't know; you're too young to even know that. Later on they made tanks. The Chrysler Corporation bought them. That's where the 51, the T-51 tank comes from. But, anyways, when we got out of the service, we could go back to that job. It was moved to Toledo. I went on because I wanted to go—Cannonball had arranged for me to go to FAMU (Florida A&M University), a black college. They didn't accept me. That's another moment I have to take with my own people before I

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even start with anyone else. The racial lines are so blurred in the black race; it's disgusting. Think about it and say something profound. But, it's true.

**Brower:** I just want to get the chronology straight. You were able to manipulate your records to get a job, knowing that if you went into the Army, you could come back.

**Curtis Fuller:** I didn't know I was going to go into the Army. I was sucked up! "You're 19! How did you miss this! They started drafting at 18! Get in that service"

**Brower:** So you got the job, and then you were sucked into the service.

**Curtis Fuller:** Yes, sucked into the service.

**Brower:** Okay, now tomorrow we are going to have to come and fill in the blanks of how you developed as a musician in Detroit. We haven't talked about that. Just to, sort of, understand this chronology: you get the job, you get into the service, you meet Cannonball in the service, you go through that, then you integrate this band, then you come—when you muster out, Cannonball tries to get you to FAMU. It doesn't work, and you end up at Wayne State.

**Curtis Fuller:** It doesn't work because "Who are your parents?" "My parents are deceased." "How are you going to pay for this education?" "G.I. Bill." "Oh we don't accept G.I. Bill here." If your father, Dr. Brown, was some sort of light-skinned...

**Brower:** So, you're talking about the—When you say the lighter, the brighter, the better. You see, browns stick around, and if your light your alright. If your brown stick around, if you're black, get back.


**Curtis Fuller:** I could put it simple for you; let's start with Harlem. The first black congressman that came into power, you're damn near his complexion. There was Charlie Rangel right behind him. Ernest Morill, the senator from...

**Brower:** Brooks.

**Curtis Fuller:** Brooks, then the other guy from Tennessee.

**Brower:** But, he had kinky hair.

**Curtis Fuller:** Obama! Now, if he had been my complexion, he wouldn't have been even thought about. It's still like the old days. Nina Horn as opposed to... Harry

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Belafonte as opposed to Sidney Poitier. Who is a better actor than Sidney Poitier? And, before him, what was his name that did the whiteface thing? One of the first actors played with Charles Laughton and all those people. I'm having a senior moment right now.

**Brower:** Williams?

**Curtis Fuller:** No, no, no. He was this...Canada Lee!

**Brower:** Oh, okay.

**Curtis Fuller:** These senior moments! They'll come. I got in there somewhere but it's an old computer. That's what happened. All these guys minds, singers, it's all the way they look. It's all in sex! It's no wonder that Laurence Fishburne's daughter-- he's a Shakespearean actor and she wants to be Kim Kardashian. These people with no talent, they're living the life of a booty call. They're actually little whores. You know?

**Brower:** Beyoncé.


**Curtis Fuller:** Tiger Woods! Here's a guy growing up with all these great golfers, and these whores following these guys on these tours. He ain't the first guy that had a babe, by far. Those same whores move on to another guy. When there's money being made by these athletes, they go to these clubs and all these guys...they migrate to these clubs where these whores hang out. They know the money is there. They know that's a \$1,000 hit, as opposed to the streetwalker. Do you think Mike Tyson would have a better position if Don King had bought him a \$500 whore, instead of having him bring a 19 year old girl to his room and then spend 6 years of his life in the joint because he went to bed with a 18-year-old and he wasn't much older than her! That color line is still here for us. When David and I were with Quincy we had a thing, we called the guy an H.N.I.C. Do you know what that is?

**Brower:** Mhmm.

**Curtis Fuller:** What does it stand for?

**Brower:** Head Nigger In Charge

**Curtis Fuller:** Okay, and it's always the light one! No darkies in there now! Right or wrong?

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**Brower:** Pretty right.

**Curtis Fuller:** We didn't date light skinned girls. They were beyond our color, and ironically--

**Brower:** Well, there would be phrases growing up, like "brighten your corner."

**Curtis Fuller:** Now, a woman of color doesn't even speak to me. Just two nights ago, a lady followed me from Portland, Oregon, to Andy's Club in Chicago. She brought a guy with her, "I had to see you again." I'm dropping...my wife...I'm still in the repair shop.

**Brower:** Yeah, "I ain't feeling that."


**Curtis Fuller:** I'm not into that. Hey, her body's not even cold yet. I just left the gravesite before I left. But I'm saying, they're more attracted to basketball players and stuff like that. You know? They don't go looking for it, but that's who is there! You're not trying to purposely marry out of your race or something like that. Where are you going to live? Are you going to live in a neighborhood isolated out there, where you'd into all the trouble? Michael Vick was having so much trouble. The way that boy grew up, everybody had dogs that fought! That ain't nothing new in the south! Pit Bulls and shit, fighting all the time, money, big money, like Spaniards' chickens and roosters and shit—this is life! I turned on the thing just before I came here today: "Lindsay is out of jail!" Her lawyer says something interesting: "I mean, why are you singling this girl out when Paris Hilton was just put out of Japan because she finally admitted that the cocaine was hers." You know they treat these people different, people with money; they don't get litigated like we do! You know? It's all perverted. The guy with the Pittsburgh Steelers, isn't it funny that the black cop that wants, that took her back to the bathroom...Now, he's a lieutenant on the police force, a black cop in Atlanta. He lost his job. Roethlisberger had a six game suspension, but now they took two off of them.

**Brower:** Yeah, it's four.

**Curtis Fuller:** He ain't doing no time. But, the policeman is gone! It's preferential treatment. What about the guy with the Giants? He had a gun and he shot himself in the foot. He'll never play again! He was a great player.

**Kennith Kimery:** Plaxico Burress.

**Brower:** Yeah.

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**Curtis Fuller:** Plaxico Burrell, if he ever sees his gridiron again, it'll be something to behold. We got a lot of that, you know? There's nothing wrong with Sarah Palin, or something like that, running. How could anyone even consider that when she quit her governorship thing prematurely? She left two years on the books, and you're going to follow her somewhere? Who are we kidding? When I hear Glen Beck or somebody say, "We gotta take America back," America was taken then!


**Brower:** From who, who are we taking it back from?

**Curtis Fuller:** Who got it? Who do we belong to? Who's running the shop here? (Laugh) Obama, he's gotta come through. He's gotta break the mold. I thought a better ticket would have been him and Clinton on it, you know? Too bad, at the time, they needed a Clinton in there, they needed it. There's no way in the world that those Republicans—and I can think of some Republicans, man—all the big slick cats, the one from Nevada who took his wife with a cold heart. The father, his father, is supposed to be paid off so he can stay out of trouble and keep his post. There's so much of that corruption and that stuff. This Friday at noon, he was up and he couldn't even get his own party to vote with him. He did save the automobile industry, whether you like it or not. Ford is independent again! They gave that money back a long time ago. Workers are going back to work; it ain't one-hundred percent. In the Great Depression left, did it leave two years after the bread lines? No. So, to put people back to work, Roosevelt put them in the coal workers. What did they call them?

**Kennith Kimery:** The miners?

**Brower:** WPA, and all that.

**Curtis Fuller:** Yes, the WPA and the workers thing. They'd go and clean up America and everything. It was the same thing that Obama was proposing. This is all where we are coming from. If you really ask the Tea Party or anybody what this means—these people were coming to the White House with Uzis, automatic weapons, standing there for the world to see! They're at these meetings with children and shit around, all accepted. Right now, to this day, if you and I went to the store to buy a stick of dynamite to blow up our backyard...Homes, it would never happen! "I only want one stick, I only want to blow up my backyard because I'm going to be digging for the rest of my life." It ain't never going to happen. One day it will. You never thought you'd see a quarterback, you never thought you'd see a coach. But, it will happen. You'll be planting that shovel in my face before it does. I'll stick a finger up to say "I told you!" But, every country I go to, "How do you like it?" "Fine." "What's

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the best country?" "America." "You like it?" "Of course!" "Aren't you there from..." "Yes, but I love it." It's home to me, it's who I am, it's what I am, it's where I came from. I think the guy said it best, he said, (sings) "I believe in miracles!" Yes I do. You know what I mean? We wouldn't have no Coltrane's or nothing! Could you imagine if 'Trane was still in Hamlet, South Carolina, or Monk was still in Highpoint? Could you imagine where we'd be right now?

**Brower:** No. That's actually my daddy's town.

**Curtis Fuller:** We have a story to tell. This is our story. Nobody's copping the Japanese music, nobody's copping the Chinese music, nobody's playing the Ton Ton's. We did do it in front of Cherokee years ago. (Imitates sounds of the drums). We brought this to the table, it's intertwined with European culture, you know? We didn't have the scales, the chords, or the wherewithal to make this take shape to be enjoyed by all. You're getting with rhythm and a few things, but even that now...As a result of this being an America, we can shape all these sounds and chords and things. It took all of us to do this; I don't care what color you are. That's what jazz is, it's just like a chord, it all depends on what you got in it. It's like Bitches Brew, or Grandma's Stew, it depends on what you put in it. As Victor Lindlahr says, "You are what you eat." You eat shit? That's what you become. That's where I think we are headed. We eat better, we'll play better, we'll think better, we'll sleep better, we'll learn to—The guy says, "Can't we all get along?" Yes we can. When the day comes, we'll have to. We have to! We are at that gig right now. We have to get along, or else it will be like Rome, we'll crumble from within. That was the greatest country at one time. The British Empire, great! They over extended themselves; they were all down in Australia or wherever else. It took four weeks to go to the little island, the Falkland Islands, to fight a handful of people there in Argentina. Give me a break! You don't have to worry about this! There's nothing there but seagulls. C'mon guys! You can do better than that. (Laughs) But, this is where we are. So, why don't we take this and market this great art form that the Creator has given us? We're blessed. We are truly blessed, where we live, the location logistically on the map. Even the Germans tried, they came right up to our shores. People didn't even know it, we sunk more ships right out there. We didn't know what was happening. They're still finding bombs out there in San Diego and out there in places. The Japanese put on balloons and flew there. Every once and a while, a kid will go out to play somewhere and go and detonate one of those son of a bitches. We will survive. We have to. It's our nature that we can survive all those dinosaurs and pig foot, and big foot, and all those people. We'll be all right. The reason I know, you know Grady Tate?

**Brower:** Mhmm.

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**Curtis Fuller:** We went tour with Dr. Billy Taylor. We took a group of musicians with the State Department over to Europe. All the venues didn't have buildings, so we had to play with these tents with the circus. We had our own tent. You know? We got there while they're setting up the tents and all the musicians practiced before the gig. There was these chairmen. It was true, every time I practiced my horns, all the lions, they sounded like the anvil chorus. They were (imitates a lion roaring), the polar bear went in here. Grady said, "Damn, Fuller! Whatever that sound is you got on this trombone, you're upsetting all these animals!" Have you seen the picture, "The Wolf"?

**Brower:** No.

**Curtis Fuller:** You saw "Wolf" I'm sure you did. It was with Jack Nicholson.

**Ken Kimery:** Oh yeah.

**Curtis Fuller:** When he went around the horses and all that he goes, "Oh, shit!" (Laughs) Somebody said---But I gave them a (imitates himself playing) and the animals went wild. Grady had, on the bus, he had, "Yeah, every time Fuller picked up the trombone all the animals went nuts." But, the point being is that music can reach the savage beast and whatever.

**Brower:** Okay, you gotta go.


**Curtis Fuller:** Me too. Is somebody taking me back to the ranch?

**Brower:** I got you.

**Curtis Fuller:** Okay.


(Recording Stops)

**Brower:** Okay this is September 26<sup>th</sup>, 2010. We are at the Bohemian Caverns, the historic Bohemian Caverns. My name is William Brower, along with Kenneth Kimery. I'm conducting an oral history for the Smithsonian's Jazz Oral History Project with Curtis Fuller. There's so many things to cover. I want to talk about your sister. You talked about how you would sit along and follow along with her piano lessons. Let us understand how you got to the trombone, what the specific things were that lead you to the instrument was, what your early exposure to the instrument was, and what in your Detroit phase lead you to that instrument.

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**Curtis Fuller:** That’s an easy one. In the orphanage—the orphanage was a recipient of donations, instruments, used instruments. People would give them to the kids. I think, at that time, there were 230 kids where I was, at the processing place. That’s why the Jesuit had to stand in because we didn’t have the facility. When I say “we” I mean the state, the county, didn’t have the facility to deal with all those children. Some of the kids still had families; they were just dispersing things or going back South or whatever. Anyways, these instruments were donated like reading books and things were. There was a selection of things. There was a class for the students who had musical ability or wanted to play the instrument, there’s the instrument, help yourself. Kids in ours, it was like opening the door to Target with a great big sale on. Kids were grabbing shit! I ended up, being the person I am, I just stood there and waited, like I waited so long to get a chance to play ping-pong or badminton or whatever. I was standoffish and some bigger boys were a little rough on guys like us. Being one of three orphan kids, I didn’t push nobody’s button, (Laughs) the beginning of me knowing my place. I waited and waited, and in doing so, there was this beat up trombone there. I said, “Well, I’ll take that.” There was only one or two left in the corner or something. It was hard. I couldn’t move the slide or anything, so I had to doctor on it and I got it to work. The reason I took that, on the radio I had heard—you know we got some radios. I had heard the bands of Woody Herman, I could sing some of those solos. It was one of the first musical solos I learned and I can still sing it. It was a solo played by Stan Getz on “Early Autumn” (Scats the solo). The ear was there. I could hear it. You know? That’s the gift from the Lord, right there. The omnipotent one, that’s the gift, when you can hear. If you can’t hear, you can’t play. I was told, I was privy in the day schools I went to, my friends Donald Byrd, Clara Rockmore, and guys around Detroit. You know? Primarily, they were all listening to songs on these jukeboxes and things anyway, we were learning by rogue. There were not written catalogues or books of songs like the free book or whatever that stuff is became later after they found out what we were doing and knew what was going on with Charlie Parker and those people. That always hit me, but for some reason I could always distinguish the difference between Illinois Jacquet and Charlie Parker. I didn’t know what, but the appeal to me was more from that. Coleman Hawkins and the people like that, I knew there was a difference. He didn’t have the smoothness and the other stuff. For trombone, of course, (Scats a melody) but I—there was one guy, even over Tommy Dorsey that I fell in love with. I gotta tell you the story while I’m thinking about it because I’ll forget all about it. I found out his name, I listened to the radio long and hard, and the finally announced the guy that was playing “Somewhere Over The Rainbow” His name was Skip Layton, he played with the Stan Kenton Orchestra. Now, years later, many years later, I have a big job. I’m playing with the Count Basie Orchestra, which I don’t solo in. Al Grey is the première soloist in the band. I get to solo one night and every once

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in a while Basie is checking me out. “Roadrunner, take Al Grey’s solo on hit 12.” “I got a solo tonight!” I play. After the gig, somebody came up to me. We were in Troy, New York. There’s this trombone player and his wife. He must be 90 years old, he’s an old man, he’s here and he says he loves your playing and he loves what you’re doing and he wants to know if he can take you to dinner. Sonny was telling me, “If you go somewhere, Curtis, we are all going to go and get sandwiches for the bus, so you gotta get back here because we’re pulling the bus. Go with the little man if you want to.” I told him—I met him and I was, “Hi, how are you and all that.” This little oldwife clutched to his arm, he took me to one of those old streetcars converted to a restaurant type places. About two blocks from the place, we walked slowly in the rain. He said, “You never heard of me, but I used to play with the Stan Kenton Orchestra. I saw you sitting there and playing your parts and things and I heard your tone, I could hear you from the audience, your tone.” He said, “I love your tone, you remind me of myself.” I said, “You play with Stan Kenton, what do you play?” He said, “Oh I only had one solo and that was ‘Somewhere Over The Rainbow.’” I said, “You wouldn’t be Skip Layton, would you?” This man’s eyes lit up like a Christmas tree to think that a little darkie somewhere 50 years ago would even know his name. He was so astonished! I just put that little inflection in there about the darkie, that didn’t matter to him, man. He was just so proud.

**Brower:** But, that does speak to something, you know? If you put yourself in that time, there was two Americas. There was race records and all of those things that existed. So, you say that and I know that you don’t want people to view that as a gratuitous comment but it is salient.


**Curtis Fuller:** It is part of it.

**Brower:** It’s part of the reality of it. That you could connect across that is important.

**Curtis Fuller:** His wife looked at him so adoringly, and lovingly that this kid knew who her husband was and she knew that meant a lot to him. She said, “Honey!” or something like that to him. She was so enamored. They’re on a fixed income and you could see that. Those burgers probably took a lot of the family budget between the two of them. That made it even more-- I’m assessing all this as I’m remembering it.

**Brower:** There’s another point, this man, in a way, is like musical royalty.

**Curtis Fuller:** Yeah, and to me, he could have been King Farouk from what I heard on the radio. He played—the reason for that, we all know what Tommy Dorsey was. This man, my ear told me, was playing an octave higher than Tommy Dorsey. I mean, Tommy Dorsey was up there on the high E flat, shaking the slide. This guy was

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(imitates the high note Skip hit.), I said, "Oh my god, what is that note? Did he leave the staff or something?" It was so pretty and soft, you know you can't blast that. You have to watch it very carefully and very easily. You slip in to the notes and it's almost unnoticeable, the note is so pure and clear when you ease into it. You can't get the dexterity in the instrument by playing like you're in a marching band (imitates the marching band sound). I hate that sound, therefore I turned to the French Horn for that sound. But, he had that resonance. It was so pretty. I said, "I was stocking a store in Clover's Supermarket and I would stock one shelf and everybody else would to 100!" I was listening to that radio, that jazz show. I was hearing the grandeur and all that. He says, "Yeah, I was in the band with Kal Winding and all that." But, I called his name out because I learned his name and I remembered it. To this day, I can still call this name out. Even Urbie Green hadn't heard of him. "Do you know Skip Layton?" "No, I don't recall." You know? It meant a lot to me. I had concerned my self with him.

**Brower:** Where did the baritone horn come in your development?


**Curtis Fuller:** Well, I tried it out. The kid that had the baritone horn in school didn't like it and wouldn't practice it. When we went there to get the issue of our respected instruments, that baritone would always be there. A couple of days, I borrowed it and I liked it. I learned that the sound of it was almost the same as a trombone but I was the valve. I've always been good at the positions and things like that. The reason for that, when I was younger we had this part in one of the national...what was that? It was a Phillip Souza kind of thing. (Scats the fast, frenetic melody) I could play as good as the trumpet player and the teacher was impressed.

**Brower:** On which instrument? The baritone?

**Curtis Fuller:** No, on the slide trombone. I could do it. I first got it on the baritone, then I translated that to the slide.

**Brower:** So the baritone was something you were doing simultaneously.

**Curtis Fuller:** Yes, it was simultaneous. It was the same type of horn but another sound. What I like about that horn is that it's a fixed instrument. The trombone is an open type instrument. You've got to look up the vertical and horizontal. Fixed instruments, the notes are here, you push the valve and that's that. That's what I tell students. It's the most important thing you got. It's the same thing that Suzuki tells his violin players, it's the same way you learn to do anything. It's the same way you learn your mother and father's languages from the crib, this right here. We all start learning our native language phonetically, what we think we hear. Any place where

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academia is not on the same level, like in the South at the time, not that they didn't have great schools, but we've always had problems processing southern dialogue. You know? Remember that the people who we phonetically learn the language from didn't speak the Queen's English to begin with. (Laughs) They were saying "dis" and "dat" and "tat." They still do in the South, even white people! I'm sure that you've got some relatives some place that you have to listen hard to figure it out. They would say, not "between", "twixt." I needed to figure out what is "twixt" (laughs). We are not supposed to be able to read books and I'm talking about 135 years ago when it changed and I'm over half of that myself. That ain't a hell of a long time ago. There's a joke we had the other day about a post driver not being able to respond about something he saw. Musically it's the same, you translate. I wrote the letters over the note and the music teacher came back—they had these things, a baton or something, that they directed the band with. He hit me across the knuckles, "WHAP!" He threw the book across the room and said, "Play this or you'll never learn how to read. You're handicapping yourself when you do that! You have to remember these notes. You'll never increase your word skills, none of that." I concur.

**Brower:** Who was that person?

**Curtis Fuller:** I don't remember his name. It was earlier. I know it was Dwyer Grade School in Detroit, Michigan. It was Kaniff and Cardoni, they'd sit there right on the corner where that bus went there and all those kids got killed that day. They were going to Hamtramck and I missed the bus by inches. That was the school. For all practical purposes, as far as I knew, Detroit was an integrated city. But I mean, when we went to the theatre I knew that blacks had to sit in the back of the theatre.

**Brower:** Well, it was a mixed reality. There was not a de jour segregation, but there was certainty de facto segregation in certain areas.

**Curtis Fuller:** They still exist now but in another way.

**Brower:** Like, can the public accommodations or school systems might be integrated, but in social situations there was segregation. There was strong competition in the working class with jobs.

**Curtis Fuller:** America has made more progress with that to prove its point, to prove Lincoln's point.

**Brower:** There were several threads in what you just said that I want to...You mention, and this is probably an aside, Roadrunner. Was that a nickname?

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**Curtis Fuller:** Yes.

**Brower:** Who gave you that name?

**Curtis Fuller:** Count Basie.

**Brower:** And just...

**Curtis Fuller:** The why?

**Brower:** Yeah.

**Curtis Fuller:** When that bus parked and we finished that gig, I was boogity, boogity, boogity, trying to find a club, trying to find one of those Western Hotels where they had those guys sitting there with the piano and the electric drum with the Bossa Nova or whatever. "Curtis Fuller, can I play a couple songs?" "Oh, you're Curtis Fuller! Get in there." Even then--

**Brower:** Was that because of being the sections and the frustration of only playing parts.


**Curtis Fuller:** Yes, and only playing parts. I couldn't wait to get out of there and wait to it was over. I was tired of Al Grey coming back to sections and, "Follow that!" "Give me a chance and I might. I don't have any solos." (Laughs)

**Brower:** During the time you were in the Basie band, what was the population, who were the principals—what was the principal, musical, driving force at that point?

**Curtis Fuller:** In the band?

**Brower:** Yeah.

**Curtis Fuller:** La Joe, and I asked when I went in there because I felt it was more or less irresponsible. In the hotels, I heard guys practicing their solos. They played the solo every night, but practicing them. I'd hear Sonny, (Scats the solo) he'd get on the thing and play the drums turned around. Basie called me one night and said, "I hear talk you want to leave. You're doing a great job for me kid, I like you." He said, "But you have to understand something, a lot of these people have families and they've been there a long time. I know they're taking my money." He named a few, "Take Charlie Fowlkes, he ain't going nowhere, he ain't going to never play nothing. Lockjaw, he's steady. I've always had trouble with having him play because, when

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Frank Foster writes the arrangements, he stands up and takes a solo like that's his given right to play a solo. So, I've always had trouble looking over the band to see Frank Foster sulking because he wasn't playing. Now I've got you in there and you're doing the same thing." He said, "J.J. didn't play in the band, Diggy Wells played. Thad Jones didn't play." He named the trumpet players, "Sonny Liston" and so on and so on. "All you are high powered soloists but I use soloist to sell the band. This band, this style, it's not about the individual player. It's like a racetrack, certain horses run better on different tracks. It's like tennis; certain players play better on clay than others do on grass." They way he explained it to you; he sat me down like his son. He said, "I know you know more about trombone than that other guy like over there, but he sells. He's got the gift of mugging the audience, and raping them. That's not you. You're up there trying to play be bop against it. Thad Jones would do that and that doesn't fit this." He said, "When the time comes and you feel like you want to play." He said, "I've enjoyed that you come right in." He said, "Unlike these other guys, I can tell that you're not even looking at the book anymore. I can see you're playing and you're looking straight ahead. You learn the music, if you don't know then you can play it." If the page turns or blows off, you're lost!

**Brower:** Who were the principal writers at that point?

**Curtis Fuller:** The writers were Sammy Nestico, and the one before him... he wasn't writing that much when I get in the band. His stuff was already in the book.

**Brower:** So it was like the second testament band?

**Curtis Fuller:** Yes, but he wanted some white writers because he wanted the band to be accepted with the white audience.

**Brower:** Neal Hefti?

**Curtis Fuller:** Neal Hefti, exactly. He sang a couple things to me to let me know where Reed was coming from. I wrote something for the band and Freddie Green looked at this and said he won't play this. So you've got all those flat sevenths and raised ninths and Basie is simple, C7, G7. He didn't want to put that up there. He didn't like that.

**Brower:** So he had a very strong concept of what he wanted musically because it was a successful formula and he knew what he was catering to and where he was taking the audience, he wanted to take the band too.

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**Curtis Fuller:** Well, Basie...mine you know—they're still playing Basie right now and they don't know it. How many big bands know how to end a song? They're using Count Basie endings on everything. (Scats the Count Basie turn around ending with stops) Everybody uses that. For that, I said, "How did you get to that?" He said, "I played organ in silent movies. I had 26 minutes and I knew how many minutes were in the song. They had piano roll but that didn't work too keen so I learned how to follow the script and apply music accordingly." It's an interesting story, so when Count went in and approached me about the two trombones, I said, "I feel like playing now." We would go to Europe and people would clap and say "Curtis Fuller! Curtis Fuller!" That was embarrassing for him, he said, "We got something in this book to heat them for ya?" Solo on that. Okay, "Ladies and gentlemen, Curtis Fuller!"

**Brower:** That's what Basie would do?


**Curtis Fuller:** Yeah. He had to be almost goated into it. We went up there. They know the difference between (Scats frenetic Al Grey solo) Al Grey. After a while you sit there and – oh jeez. The ladies leave like, "Ahhh!"

**Brower:** Do you think that was typical, I'm thinking of Lionel Hampton. I would go to Blues Alley and I'd see Lionel Hampton and I'd look at his audience. It was predictable: what would happen, who would do it. Meaning, women with their husbands, how they would react, they could create this night after night, after night.

**Curtis Fuller:** I was so pleased, this last little two weeks in Italy. In Italy, I was just so pleased and I was also in Paris this time. I saw students, young students, just like in the club last night. [There were] at least 10 trombonists, and singers from the school here and young kids. I was really impressed with the students. I think the Kennedy Center going over and including Howard and redoing the Duke Ellington school is a good thing. We've got these kids they're bringin' in here from China and North Korea, South Korea and all down under and spending all these bucks. You've got kids right here that need to be...you know? These kids come here and they haven't heard Benny Carter before but this is how they got into the school, you know?

**Brower:** I just want to go back, so the group that you had with Kai Winding, let's talk about that. It seems like that what you were really saying is that's where you went when you decided, "I've had enough of this and I need to do the next thing." So take us into the relationship with Kai Winding and the group and all of that.

**Curtis Fuller:** Yeah, my thing was stymie. I ran into that on several occasions. I ran into that with Benny Golson, that same thing where your wings are clipped and you

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don't have the freedom to explore your talent because it's all about him. He doesn't have the character to deal with that like that. When he speaks about "Trane there's nothing, but he'll say some demeaning things that kind of get me, you know? He had no clue when he was tattered and he was all like, "Who are you?" "Trane wasn't about wearing the lapel and all that stuff, maybe you were. "Trane had thousands of people in the street when he passed away, you won't have that Benny. You're not that kind of person, it's all about you. I remember, he had to ask me about Ellington, "How does this go?" You mean you're one of the worlds chief composers arranging these things, I bet you Dave Baker knows! Slide knows! You're always too self-contained. You didn't listen to Ellington coming up? You didn't think he was worthy of none of that stuff?

**Brower:** You're talking about "Caravan"


**Curtis Fuller:** Yeah, well not only "Caravan," That line that Freddie Hubbard wrote that we played with the Messengers. He scuffled so much with it in Japan with it, I felt sorry for him. The Japanese were all in the room and they were rehearsing. I said, "Gee, Wayne Shorter played that 40 years ago and you're scuffling with it?" Then we go to Austria, and it's the Ellington Festival thing and, "Do you know anything by Duke Ellington?" "Of course!" What do you want to play? "Sophisticated Lady" so I can show off and try to do a little Laurence Brown in there. I was into Ellington, so were all the young guys. How do you miss it? "Trane even recorded with Ellington, just the two of them Where were you? You're sitting up in that tower someplace. Man, John Lewis was like that with the Modern Jazz Quartet. He had Milt Jackson, the world's premier vibraphonist, and he didn't even play "Bags' Groove" I have to play "Bags' Groove." They were together 45 years! Do you know how long my association was with Benny Golson, where he used to go up to the mic and say "Curtis is like a credit card, I don't leave home with out him." C'mon, skip this, let's get real here. You know, Benny's like a brother to me. I love him to death but even siblings have their things.

**Brower:** Now, once again, threads on the Winding, on that groove, do you want to speak on that?

**Curtis Fuller:** Yeah, Winding...

**Brower:** That's interesting because he's another trombone player that you admired from a far.

**Curtis Fuller:** Yes, the first thing that I heard from him was "The Boy Next Door." I thought that was the greatest, well done piece of music that I had heard from a

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trombonist. He had that airy sound (scats his melody). Not only that, he left word in Niece, that if I had time he'd like to have lunch with me to discuss forming the group. Now, mind you, when I was younger and came to New York, I came in the club to see them at Birdland. JJ said, on the microphone, "My little protégé from Detroit is here, who Miles Davis brought in on my request. I'd like to have him come up and play on the trombone right here." I don't know if Kai knew about me or whatever, but that set the stage. I knew, from Jay, that he was thinking about walking anyways. He was trying to set the stage for me somewhere along the line since I played so much like him. He knew it. He wasn't that keen about me playing. I could tell that didn't set well with him. He always told me, "Play your own things, that's mine." He played it before I did, that kind of thing. Kai was a listener. He heard what the wanted to hear from me. Once again, just like Coltrane, Kai decided to approach me. He knew more about Urbie Green and all those guys. But there is a difference between Kai and all those guys. Kai was like J.J. Kai would follow the chord progressions. He didn't have the tricks of the trade. He didn't have all the higher register and all like that. He knew...(Scats Kai's melodic style) He knew what that was and he knew it like a trumpet player. He could sit at this table where we are talking and score orchestra. Urbie Green can't do that but Jay and Kai could. He couldn't put something down that's meaningful. "Send in the clowns! Where are they? They're here." It was that type of thing and I could tell that. This is when I told you that I saw J.J. Willow and all that. I was a kid at that time, I'm an old fart now, but I was a kid then and something told me that the one up there on that stage that knew music was J.J. It was the look, the demeanor, the body language that told me. Even to the point where I could tell the way that he looked at the Eleanor when he sat on stage. It wasn't disgust, he's glad to be there and have a job and get paid, but it was like "What are you doing now?" And he gave him that same look. Did you ever see that old album cover of Jazz at Massey Hall? Did you ever see that look Charlie Parker has when Dizzy is clowning on the stage? It's in his eyes. He gives Dizzy a look. Parker didn't need all that to do this: (Scats Parker's melody) It wasn't about that with Parker. He may have been high, he made have been laid back, but he was playing that saxophone.


**Brower:** Going back to your development, Claude Black.

**Curtis Fuller:** Claude Black

**Brower:** Let's talk about him because in this business of learning the trombone and the baritone horn and all of that, somewhere he's in the mix.

**Curtis Fuller:** He's in the mix very much.

**Brower:** Tell us about Claude.

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**Curtis Fuller:** When I met Claude black, he came to our high school to play. And the band that he was in when he came to our high school to play, they had the top band in the eastside or whatever, in Detroit. It was Robert Barnes, Donald Byrd, Roland Hana, Claude Black on French Horn and trombone.

**Brower:** See, I know him as a piano player.

**Curtis Fuller:** Yeah, I know. But he lost a lung like I did and he went to piano. You know Horace Silver as a piano player. He was a saxophone player. He came up with Paul Gonsalves. They were both on the same level. Kenny Dorham played saxophone. In those days, if you didn't play multi instruments, you didn't work. To get into one of those bands, the old diamonds, you had to be a multiple instrument player. There's one other thing before I skip over Kai completely, before I get over that. To me, he's one of the most, and will always be one of the most dynamic and interesting persons I've met in this business. He was the best teacher that I had. He taught by design. I'm not talking about volumes of books, I'm not talking about all that. He taught by design. I later discovered, he didn't boast about it or nothing, I learned about it later from Vinny, Paul and the other guys get to it, just what Kai Winding had done. He's responsible for all of the black writers, even Jimmy Lyons who played piano and stuff, to get in to the writing. He was the producer for Merv Griffin productions. Also, he decided who played in the Playboy Club's lounges and things around the world. He fought pretty hard for the black players. I thought it was maybe because of his upbringing in Aarhus, Denmark. That's where we went to record the first record, we went to his hometown. He grew up with Hans who owned the Tivoli gardens and it was his idea to that atonement, right in the center of the town, to toast Odin, the god of Norse people, you know? You see in the center of town, those two horns that wrap and conjoin. You see that they took our picture at the foot, the base of that giant thing. He had an imagination, quite a guy. When we started in Chicago, he was based in Chicago at Playboy Club. When I came to town that afternoon to rehearse, and my hotel room, which was one a suite, one of the nicest rooms I've ever had, he had three Whitehouse and Hardy suits. I don't even know how the man got my size. They were on the bed with the matching...

**Brower:** The pocket squares and the whole nine.

**Curtis Fuller:** The whole nine, socks, he even had a cologne line for me. But, there's something he would not do. In travelling around the world, he would never sit with me. He liked his privacy that much. At first I was offended, but then I realized he likes to work his puzzles, he doesn't want to be feathered or bothered. He sits in first class and he wouldn't even come back to the back of the plane to say, "How are you


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doing, buddy?" But, on that bandstand it was camaraderie to the end, to the nth degree. He wouldn't say much. If he thought that we needed to play that song again that we recorded, if he heard something he didn't like, we'd do it again. Once again, training by design and by the way he carried himself. He'd take me to art shows in Europe or things, always cultivating me. I knew what he was doing, after a while. He'd say "What are you doing today?" "Oh, I'm just going to probably lay in and watch T.V." He'd say, "Oh, you don't want to lay in there. You don't understand the T.V. anyway. Come hang out with Eleanor, me and the girls. He'd go somewhere down the line, "Curtis, there's a lot of the property down where I live. I wish you'd consider Nalga, Spain. There lots of places you can get dirt-cheap. I know the people, you can get there, we can build school." He was always including me in something. As he laid dying, I stayed in New York. Chuck Mangione and I were the two in the room. He said, "What's that little girls name?" My daughter was just being born. I said, "Mary Elizabeth." He said, Eleanor is going to give you a check. We are going to sell Wingspan and your receipts from that will cover college education. That's Kai Winding to me. When I hear all young punks out here not even mentioning his name and I know that he got J.J. or something when he was barefoot in the park. He got Quincy...the pawnbroker and all that stuff, Oliver Nelson. Kai Winding did that; I know this. On Kai's behalf, I'm not going to let him be in a lay away program and not speak on that. I would be guilty and I carry that. If I hadn't acknowledged his love and his greatness, not only to me but to others who may let it go unfettered or unchecked. He was quite a guy. I really, really dug that guy. He was kinder to me than J.J. but I loved J.J. I really cared about Kai, he was a real guy to me in my book. He's part of who I am now. Now, we can move on.

**Brower:** Claude Black.

**Curtis Fuller:** Hearing him on the plane with that band. He heard me playing in the music room when he came in there to check the guys out. He said, "Could you handle it if I call you up to play tonight?" I said, "I'll try it." Of course, the school kids where I went said, "Oh god, no, not that guy. Get him out of here, we played for the band." You know, that's where I got this movement from (scats a melody). He was almost like Tommy Turk. He was a very good player; he was way ahead of his time. He was playing more musically than Donald Byrd on trumpet. He was the piano player, but Roland Hanna, mister piano, was there. He didn't even sit at the piano in-between sets. He'd take me aside and he'd say "do you know this song?" He was a little kid himself. I was enamored with him. He was another guy I liked. Frank Rosolino, but equally Fred Murgy, my classmate, I thought he was a tremendous trombonist. He played as well as Frank Rosolino. They can have every trophy out there they want for Frank Rosolino...

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**Brower:** Now we are talking Detroit trombone players.

**Curtis Fuller:** Yes, Detroit trombone player.

**Brower:** I read somewhere that there weren't many.

**Curtis Fuller:** No, there was McKinney left his trombone because he couldn't keep up.

**Brower:** Bernard McKinney?

**Curtis Fuller:** Yeah, Bernard McKinney, he's from the McKinney family. All his family played classical music with him. He had a pretty sound on the euphonium. He didn't have the same sound on the trombone.

**Brower:** Now, did Claude actually teach you?

**Curtis Fuller:** Yes he did. He nurtured me. He really nurtured me. He taught me how to play this song and he'd play it with me. That's teaching you. You know, just like the medical profession, when they have the table down there in the operation and they have all the medical students sitting around checking the thing out. It was that type of thing.


**Brower:** Now, another thing you've mentioned in passing, and I've heard as a Detroit player that people have a lot of respect for is Claire Roquemore.

**Curtis Fuller:** Beautiful player. Yeah, he would give Donald Byrd, Miles Davis and all the rest of them a run for their money. He was the trumpet player that never got any significance. He never reaped any benefits from it.

**Brower:** Was that because of the personal lifestyle issues?

**Curtis Fuller:** Well, he met his true mate, a girl. He was a handsome kid from a mixed family. Like I said, he was a tan complexion. He didn't really, like Kenny Burrell and all, he didn't really get down. You notice that Kenny didn't get into the Grant Green thing. He was always with the vibe. But, Kenny would go to bat with me and put me in every musical situation he could before he left. He left to go on with Oscar Peterson.

**Brower:** Let's talk about you're in high school, when do you start to hit the scene and what was your peer group when you did that in Detroit?

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**Curtis Fuller:** Well, it really wasn't my peer group, I was way over my head. I was sitting in with Frank Foster who would be sitting in with Wardell Grey and Stony Nightingale and all those names that you probably would never hear in your life.

**Brower:** Well let's put those names on the record. It's important.


**Curtis Fuller:** There was another guy, when Miles Davis moved to Detroit not only because of the little girl he fell in love with, Jane Peterson, but there was this trumpet player there. He was Milt Jackson's best friend, his name was Willy Wells. That was the trumpet player of the century, for me, before Kenny Dorham. I mean, the slickness of Kenny Dorham and the technique of Freddie Hubbard. The drawback was that he played an old German rotary valve trumpet. What was it called? It's in the trumpet family, that's not what it's called. You see it in Italy, it's sort of like flugelhorn, and it had a flugel sound. He was all over that prettiness and staggering the notes, that was him. Miles took that phrase in so many directions, as Miles took some of his style from Ahmad Jamal, who is a piano player.

**Brower:** So, the Bluebird in is a place that is often...but it seems like there was an Eastside and a Westside thing happening in Detroit, and how did you fit into all of that?

**Curtis Fuller:** Yes, there was. I was with the Westside guys. I was with Tommy Flanagan, Kenny Burrell, Pepper Adams, and before me the group was Frank Rosolino's group. He left to go with Stan Kenton. Kenny Burrell grabbed me and put me in that because I was a Westside guy. Those guys were down there in the valley. They were way downtown and in primarily black schools, high schools and stuff. They were eastside kids, like the movies.

**Brower:** What was the club scene on the eastside like?

**Curtis Fuller:** That's where all the clubs were, dancing girls and pep bands and all that stuff. On the Westside, it was barely...For instance, we had on club called the Showbar which was a really a rock and roll kind of thing. But Kenny Burrell did something very interesting He formed the jazz society, the World Stage Jazz Society and we had judge write in thing. College kids on that level...cause Kenny was graduating...they came all the way from Wayne State and then he started a movement in Detroit that was unprecedented. It went all the way to New York. From that, New York got the jazz mobile. It was kind of like the Billy Taylor concept of taking the music. What Quincy was doing in Europe with the band, we had no work per se, but those casinos where everybody would come out, it was good for the

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community. It was a folk art. That concept, like if Mariah can't get to the mountain, bring the mountain to the people. He was into the sound and he very much learned the level, and Barry is still skilled at what he does.

**Brower:** You mean Barry Harris?

**Curtis Fuller:** Yes. He knows his chords and things. Kenny Burrell put his academic study to work. He wanted musicians to reach that level of proficiency. He demanded that from us. Therefore, preparing us for the big bands and things that we would encounter coming to New York. Of course, the club gigs were fading away fast. If you came there to work at Mittens, you were SOL, shit out of luck. (Laughs) If you came there to get into the musical community, if you came to play with Benny Goodman... I played there when... You said something about "Sing, Sing, Sing" I got that gig with Kai Winding. We played the last concert with Gene Krupa. But George Wein hired us, we were the band he put around Gene Krupa.

**Brower:** How central was Barry? You're talking about the work—Usually when people describe the scene, Barry was sort of the guru.


**Curtis Fuller:** Yeah, he was. I mean, he revamped Yusef Lateef. He would start by saying, "You're playing all wrong. Come by my house and I'll show you how to play."

**Brower:** So, he had an informal academy in a sense.

**Curtis Fuller:** Oh yeah. He would tell you, and he would make sure that you know your 2-5-1 progressions and you played your dominant 7<sup>th</sup> scales, and major 7<sup>th</sup> scales, augmented scales, diminished scales. It wasn't so thought about what you were playing or how you were playing but Barry taught you how to connect them.

**Brower:** So what would your day be like? In that period, take us through what your daily activity would be in that formative period. How did you start the day, what were the interactions during the day, did that lead to a gig at night, did that lead to a jam session? Give us a sense of the daily thing.

**Curtis Fuller:** Barry would give you a theory, and not only theory, he had classes at his home. He did two or three of us at a time. When I went there it was Lonnie Hillyer and McPherson. I was in that group. One of his put together things...and he insisted, not only that, he had a follow up program where he would come to a club to hear you to see if you were applying what you were taught. Now, he's coming from the Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie school of be bop. He would fix on Bud Powell. His whole life was Bobby Powell. Tommy Flanagan was fixed on appearance.

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The difference is, Tommy could last with Sara Vaughn. But, I dare say, Barry, you know, he could play the music Cannonball was playing but he didn't want to. He was in Cannon's band. He dreaded every moment of it. He was there, but almost by rule. That wasn't his thing, it wasn't his cup of tea.

**Brower:** Did Detroit understand itself? How self-conscious was this? Because there's this tremendous amount of musicians that were speaking of him. Its almost like you could have a great day in Detroit picture and there would just be an tremendous amount of players that would be a part of this. From the Donald Byrd's, the Yusuf's, the Hillier's, the, you know, where does Paul Chambers fit in to this? It just goes on and on and on. How conscious were people of the strength of that community?

**Curtis Fuller:** It was very, very strong. It was very...even over Kenny Burrell, he wanted the guys to have a sense of purpose. He would ease and strategize. Like Dave Baker, he put a working workshop band together. We would go in there and imitated all of Dizzy's stuff and Duke Ellington. This is what we did on Saturday afternoons


**Brower:** How was this received in the community?

**Curtis Fuller:** No gigs came from it but we did have a few ballrooms and stuff like that. Then, another guy came to town with the Basie influence thing. He had played with Basie and his brother was Ernie Wilkins. He played trombone with the band at one time. They had a little money so they could spend the time and stuff there. He went on and kept a band in Detroit, that's where us and all of the young guys...we had a thirst for it so every Monday and Thursday we would practice with that band. Saturday afternoon was Barry Harris and "Things To Come" and all the Dizzy Gillespie stuff. In the interim, I would spend day after day, after day with Pepper Adams. Pepper Adams became my musical guru.

**Brower:** Okay, we'll stop there.

(Recording Stops)

**Brower:** Okay, we when we left off you were mentioning...and let's just talk about Pepper and the Jones boys. I shouldn't say the Jones boys, Elvin, Thad, where all that fits. They fit prominently in my life because they were the significant leaders in the jazz field because each had been out with somebody of note.

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**Curtis Fuller:** Pepper was the most proficient player, I mean technically, than anybody in that spectrum. He really knew music. Yusef was a student. Yusef had this thing for sound and feeling. He had this thing that he played, you know? He had the “Mournful Prayer” and all of this stuff. A lot of it was about the show. We had a great big Chinese gong on stage that was about the size of that wall. It was played with this big mallet. It would vibrate and get everybody’s attention in the neighborhood. It was like Tarzan is coming or some shit. It was interesting. Hugh Lawson, the name I couldn’t think of the other day, he was the piano player with Tommy Flanagan. I couldn’t think of his name but it was Hugh Lawson. I wrote a song for him because he was my age and stuff, he was a young guy, but he didn’t have the grasp like Flanagan or nothing. He had the swagger, a little hip thing going, you know, that we all loved. He’d do that thing (Scats his melody) he’d do that kind of thing. There are several dialects of the musical language of jazz. Jazz is a language, you know? It’s a played language, a studied language. It’s in the history books. Steve Allen talked about that time and time again. You know, you weren’t hip unless you were “What’s happening?” He went further than that, “What’s shaking? What’s shaking with the leaves on the trees, and they wouldn’t be shaking if it wasn’t for the breeze.” You know, I had a long thing. (Laughs) Every day was another handshake or another high five or something. We hit another vibe. Yusef took it a step further. You’d say, “Brother Yusef, what’s happening?” He’d say “Basa Bussa.” Basa Bussa? (Laughs) That kind of thing. I couldn’t begin to tell you what that was about. It was almost like you go into a prison or something, they have their own language and they devise this language so no one knows what they’re talking about. They can talk around the guards, and they could be planning an uprising and no one would know what was happening because they just talked it over and nobody knew the language. That would be our thing musically. Of course, the girls and all the guys that had to be with musicians. “Those guys are hip, they got their own shit.” (Laughs) Little do they know...It was our own thing but you had to be on the inside to even come close to figuring out what that stuff was. There was something to be said for that and the community. It wasn’t gangs and fights and robbings and killings and shootings and all of that. We just had a way of life, you know? You had to dance a certain way. If you danced with a girl and you’re a Westside, you had to have your thumb when you held her hand, you had to not just move your feet but slowly drag them around. That said, if you went to the dance and there was a Westside guy, and Eastside guy, or a Southside guy. Of course, that played into it and the girls knew it because they were in on it. The girls in those days were singing Charlie Parker solos when you’d be dancing with them. You know, beautiful. It was not cult like, but it was similar.

**Brower:** Well, it was a culture, a shared culture.

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**Curtis Fuller:** It was culture! But, it wasn't acted like a cult or something underground. It was on the surface.

**Brower:** You talked to us about Pepper a bit, talk to us about the Jones boys and just by now, Hank is gone.


**Curtis Fuller:** Hank had been gone. They factored in, too. The reason I had to speak of Pepper is because Pepper was Thad Jones biggest fan. To give you some idea of what we were playing in high school. When everybody was all, (scats basic melody on downbeats of a simple progression) Here's what we were playing (scats syncopated, complicated melodic pattern). You know? So, when Joe Henderson came to town, he got into that mode. Thad had some songs like (sings Thad's serene melody). Then, Jerry Mulligan would come to town, him and Chet Baker. They'd come by the Showbar. Pepper would literally swallow him. He could play a four phrase, complete paragraph, like sentences. A group a sentences make a paragraph, but he would play about four paragraphs in one phrase! Chet was like "Jeez! Can somebody unwind this doll here?" But, that's way he was. Chet Baker was uneasy because the people that were there, you know...Chet was very, very...All the New Yorkers, Sonny Rollins and all, they'd come there and get stomped. Charlie was one of us at one time, not so much now. He got bombed holding the fort. For the most part, I'm sure where Dave came from---

**Brower:** Indianapolis

**Curtis Fuller:** Yeah, Indianapolis had that same kind of vibe going. Wherever there are pockets of culture.

**Brower:** Now, in this Detroit community, you talk about a Rosolino and you talk about a Pepper Adams. I think that it's pretty consistent that there would be a few whites that would be in the black world. But, was there a separate sort of white jazz community in Detroit?

**Curtis Fuller:** Well, they had their own communities that they could play in and we weren't privy to that. New York has that now. Who work the eastside at the Carlisle and all that. Charlie? What's his name? Bobby Short? There's an element of guys that play all those clubs that are known. They never have full black bands or mixed bands over on the eastside of New York, even now. As a matter of fact, they adhere to a law that is pre-war, where they still have to use cocktail drums. It was always said that the drumbeat stimulated the women and made them (imitates a woman swooning and fainting). It was one of those kind of things, you know? (Laughs) So,

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we have to protect Kai Winding and folks. “Oh god, don’t let her go down there.”  
(Laughs)

**Brower:** They get that jungle thing going.

**Curtis Fuller:** Yeah, the jungle boogie. Yeah, we’ll have a whole lot of little jungle bunnies running around. We can’t have that, shit. (Laughs) “Keep them out of here! Keep them over in Birdland!” (Laughs) It still exists now, right now. If you cross the like in New York, you don’t have to go far, even now. Detroit is like a ghost town, it is not anywhere near where it used to be. That element has been factored out. The law is the gun. There are no more spears or machetes, this is the real deal now.

**Brower:** You know, you mention the McKinley family; I’ve had encounters with Harold McKinley. He’s impressed me as being somewhat of a Barry Harris type figure. Tell us about...I think that’s a story, the McKinney family that people don’t quite—It’s sort of like when people think about New Orleans they say, “Oh, the Marsalis family!” But, there are a bunch of families. Give us some of that texture of the families.

**Curtis Fuller:** There were other families, the Grey family. Ken Grey, he was playing “Firedance” and all that stuff. Classical—Detroit had an abundance of young blacks. There were no Spanish there, and not in the town I grew up in. It was either white or black when I came up. Now, it’s a little bit of everything. In fact, the most populous in Detroit is the Arabs. So, it was very different. This last time I was just there, everybody came up to shake my hand. It was just like last night, you were—the Indian lady sitting in front of you. She said, “I’ve never heard anything like this in my life before.” I thought it was unique that she came to Washington. I saw her sitting there and she was just blown away. I’ve been to Calcutta and a few places, I think Billy Taylor has a couple times, and a few people. Several guys, one guy, when I went to the restroom, he said, “You don’t look anything like the pictures, or your album covers.” I said, “Well, it’s no wonder! The album covers you got were in the 50’s! I’m 100 now!” (Laughs) Well, just checking it out last night, in that one little setting, the two settings in the club, it was tremendous. I like the pool of people. Well, Detroit had that same type of thing going then. It was a show town, like Sonny Wilson’s lounge and all that and certain guys played. Bud Powell was just Motown, so it had that element.

**Brower:** At that point in time in the 50’s, the distinctions between jazz and pop, R&B or a little more dance oriented, or the things happening in the theatres.

**Curtis Fuller:** The lines were still blurred.

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**Brower:** Was that a part of your working environment?

**Curtis Fuller:** Oh yeah, I played with Little John.

**Brower:** Little Willy John, you mean?

**Curtis Fuller:** No, this was Big John. Little Willy John, I knew him, too. He actually grew up in an orphanage too. Would you believe that he grew up in a Jewish orphanage? He spoke Yiddish.

**Brower:** Did you know Mable too?

**Curtis Fuller:** Huh?

**Brower:** Mable John?

**Curtis Fuller:** No. I knew Johnny Wilson, he's a neighborhood guy. All the kids in the neighborhood and stuff like that, there's a thin line. Did you know that Stevie Wonder played alto like Ray Charles first. His first recording was be bop. Then, in the studio he had this little song they were trying to get in and follow with Ray Charles thing and who he was playing...actual jazz compositions. He recorded one of the songs that the alto player, we called him Rabbit. What's his real name? He was with Duke Ellington.

**Brower:** Johnny.

**Curtis Fuller:** Johnny Hodges. "Trane and Benny Golson played in that band. He had a song called "Castle Rock" (Sings the melody) Those guys were in that. Golson and Ease also played with the guy from Europe...Philly Joe Jones called him Coleman Hickins (Laughs)

**Brower:** You're talking about...

**Curtis Fuller:** He was so ugly, they couldn't take him on the road. He had a group called the Bearcats.

**Brower:** Yeah, I know that name. Why is it escaping me?

**Curtis Fuller:** He was working in the Commissary there, over in Howard University. So Grady Tate and all of us was there. I was working, I was in town with the Jazztet.

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**Brower:** He was a singer, too.

**Curtis Fuller:** Oh yes, (Sings “oh I love you, yes I do. I love your kisses, too.) Anyway, he was wearing this whitecap in the commissary over at Howard—Bull Moose Jackson. I said, “Did you ever sing anything like that?” He said, “You know me?” I said, “You wouldn’t be Bull Moose Jackson would you?” He said, “Look here! This boy knows me!” He said, “Well, are you playing with Sonny?” I said, “I’m playing with Benny Golson.” He said, “Benny Golson! He was in my band!” He said, “Where are you playing?” I said, “Well I’m down here with the guitar player at the club here.”

**Brower:** Bill Harris, at the pig foot?

**Curtis Fuller:** No, the white guy with the club.

**Brower:** No, Charlie Bird.

**Curtis Fuller:** Yeah, the other guitar player. So, anyways, this particular night, Tony Bennet comes in with Carter and they come to see the group wherever we play. Tony Bennet would always hire, even in Vegas, he would always hire Harold Land, or guys he grew up with in the orchestra. He loves Harold Land and Clifford Brown. So this guy...(Laughs) we are over at Charlie Birds and he comes with an entourage. He brought everybody in Washington to the club. I said, “Benny, might have a guest tonight. I saw Bull Moose.” He said, “You’re kidding!” I said, “Yeah, he’s working at Howard University.” When we started I went with one of those slow numbers and the guy says, “Benny Golson! Is that you!?” And he’s coming up to the stage, walked up on the stage and said, “Alright! Right here!” (Laughs) Oh! I was dying! You couldn’t get him off. He went and sang ten melodies back to back. It was astounding! That was a great night (Laughs).

**Brower:** We’re back to Benny Golson—and I want to come back to Wayne State and Joe Henderson, but, since we are on Benny Golson, talk about your Washington connection. You played in this club, you’re here this weekend. But, you were here when the Bohemian Caverns actually became the legendary place it was in the 60’s.

**Curtis Fuller:** Yeah, I was here before that. I did a recording with Lee Morgan and Lou Donaldson. It was called “Sputnik” that tells you how long ago it was. It had this great big missile on the cover (Laughs). We came in somewhere over there, northwest of the projects or something. There was a club out there. That’s where I met the trombone player that taught school out here. The big tall guy...

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**Brower:** Calvin Jones?

**Curtis Fuller:** Yeah, Calvin Jones, that's where I met him. Then I came to a club called 2011 that was in the basement of the Dunbar hotel, with James Moody. I met this girl, and I lived here on Caroline Street between T and U.

**Brower:** Yeah, I got to find that street, that's one I don't know about. I have to research that one.

**Curtis Fuller:** Yeah. The Caverns club, the only reason I was here was after Blakey. We were here several times.

**Brower:** At the Caverns?

**Curtis Fuller:** Yeah, but Tony Taylor's sister and I took up and...who owned the club, one of the owners or whatever. And he didn't want his sisters to be involved with jazz musician. I was over there, sitting on the porch after they closed the club and he said, "what are you doing here!" and all this other stuff. That meant that I wasn't going to be playing there much longer. I left to go to Detroit and she followed me so that really did it. I was a booger in his eyesight.

**Brower:** Didn't you and Benny both end up...


**Curtis Fuller:** Marrying girls. We married the first two blacks accepted to the American Ballet.

**Brower:** Did you meet them here?

**Curtis Fuller:** Yes, they went to the Jones Dance Company here, I don't know the first name, the Pamela Jones Company or something. She taught all the little girls around here in the neighborhood. She taught jazz dance and ballet dance. So my wife, the first wife, went with Katherine Dunham, the late Katherine Dunham and her dance troupe. They went all over the place to Brazil and everything. Actually, I first dated Benny Golson's wife whose mother was the bar maid across the street from the Howard Theatre. That was

**Brower:** That was Cecilia's

**Curtis Fuller:** Cecilia's Club, the little bitty woman that was her mother. They were both 19 years old and there we were so we moved to New York and we all lived together. We had a long history.

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**Brower:** So, how much time did you stay in D.C.?

**Curtis Fuller:** A year or something, maybe. We were in and out

**Brower:** You were at the 7<sup>th</sup> and T world at that point. Were you playing in the clubs?

**Curtis Fuller:** No, I just came home, too.

**Brower:** Off the road.

**Curtis Fuller:** Yeah, off the road just to be with my girl.

**Brower:** Did you have any experiences at the Howard Theatre performing?

**Curtis Fuller:** Yeah, plenty. I played with a lot of different people at the Howard Theatre. I played here once with Olatunji and I played here once with Jimmy Smith. Outside of Art Blakey if that's what you mean. On several different things, I came here with Dizzy's band. I don't know if we came here with Quincy but I know that we went to Baltimore at that club there, at the Regal Theatre there.

**Brower:** The Royal?


**Curtis Fuller:** Yeah, the Royal. I said Regal...Yeah. We did that. So, I was around here and they knew and they would always pit me with Calvin Jones. There was another guy from Baltimore, Repart Stone.

**Brower:** Rep Stone? Repart Stone?

**Curtis Fuller:** Yeah so we were all—See, I was stationed to the Army Chemical Center last in Edgewood Maryland and I would come in there and do my little thing and go back out to Edgewood and I would play with guys around there. Pete Peterson and Wendell, Bill Swindell and a little piano player that was married to the little piano player. What's his name?

**Brower:** Not Maria?

**Curtis Fuller:** no. No, but I knew quite a few musicians run here. But, between here and Baltimore, I knew a lot of players. Sully Blaire was around here then. She was from Baltimore. Gary Bartz father have club. I played there a lot there in Baltimore.

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A lot of the culture used to come in there and stuff, you know? I was around there for a while, two or three years, you know? So I knew the musicians, you know?

**Brower:** How would you evaluate the Washington scene?

**Curtis Fuller:** Oh, it was thriving at that time. It was a lot of people, a lot of places to play here. It goes far in Maryland as Abbey DeGraves have club there. Then he started having jazz concerts, 3-day concerts and stuff around the Chesapeake area. There were a lot of little things happening and I was in on that. The guy you mentioned yesterday-- oh you didn't mention him. What was his name? White Binsky? In Baltimore, they had the Jazz Society.

**Brower:** Left Bank?

**Curtis Fuller:** Left Bank. I used to play there a lot with Jimmy Heath, a lot. You know, Hank Moley and whatever. So, I've been in this area, people know me. But, what I didn't know at the time, my mother's baby sister lived at the end of the block of Caroline where Caroline ended, and I didn't know it. She used to work at the Treasury Department. She worked in bills or something, and I didn't know that. She had met my wife's mother who worked there too. They had their own little community around there.

**Brower:** Can we stop for a second? I need to pay a water bill.

(Recording Stops)

**Brower:** Let's flip back to Detroit. You mentioned Joe Henderson. So, just talk about your time at Wayne State and what was going on during that period.

**Curtis Fuller:** Well, I tried to get in where Fred was. Fred was over at U of D out on Myers in Detroit.

**Brower:** Fred...

**Curtis Fuller:** Fred Mergy, this guy that played like Rosolino or better. They were Catholic over there at the University of Detroit. They didn't have any black kids over there. They finally got one, and they made a basketball star one everybody was pressed to have a black athlete. I forget his name, but he married Yvonne.

**Brower:** Was he like seven feet tall?

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**Curtis Fuller:** Yeah, Yvonne. He married the same girl that was married to...

**Brower:** You're not talking about Spencer Haywood?

**Curtis Fuller:** I think I am. Yeah, that was his name. Haywood, he was married to Yvonne first.

**Brower:** Yeah, but he came out early.

**Curtis Fuller:** So, he was allowed to go over there but I got off the bus once and they told me, "Get on the bus and go back where you came from." So, I had to take my lessons from Elmer James at the music hall in downtown Detroit. I wasn't allowed in one part of downtown Detroit. I wasn't allowed to go out there. In fact, when I went to Pepper Adams house, a couple times I had to go into the trunk of the car during the day. I couldn't be seen riding in town with him. When I went into the service my two best friends, one of them's father's name is Gerald Utz. Utz, his father owned the potato chip thing there. And we were boys when I got in the first lack position in the Army band, and the mixer. They would come home during the weekend, his brother—not his brother, his best friend was an Italian kid who introduced me to pepperoni. She was in the box of pepperoni sticks and I would get two or three of them and that turned me on. That would last me a month and then it was gone. Cannon would be eating all my food. "Are you going to eat this potatoes? Are you going to check them out?" He followed me on the line on my shift. But, Pepper, his mother was a teacher. He was very proper at the time. His first name was Park Adams. His best bud was not me, it was Elvin Jones.

**Brower:** So did the pepperoni come from... Did the Park to the Pepper... To the pepperoni...is that...

**Curtis Fuller:** Well that area of town, from Myers road on, we blacks weren't privy to that area. Well, we really weren't privy to Dearborn because Ford has had a factory there. A lot of people from Detroit could work in there but you had to get out of dodge by sundown. For some reason, the Arabs moved in and took it all over. We went to Dearborn, and there is a movie that we wanted to see and they didn't have it at the Michigan Theater. If you missed it at the Michigan, you could see that the Dearborn theater. But, you had to sit in the back row in most places.

**Brower:** But you had to figure out when you're going to leave.

**Curtis Fuller:** Oh yeah, see the movie get out of dodge. Girls always took an attitude because they felt that you were supposed to speak up. They did not want to be

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insulted. "Why didn't you say something?" (Laughs) "What!" (Laughs) Yeah, man it was always challenging. But anyway, Pepper was... This one song we played, (scats the melody) you know, that kind of stuff. In fact, Joe hadn't started writing. He started to write near the middle of his career, you know? In fact, I remember being in his room. I remember Joe struggling to play the blues. He always played out of time I remember, I'm used to playing with Sonny Red and Yusef and Bird. We played that you know, right on the beat. He didn't. Joe would always be a playing (scats a frenetic solo) all that odd time, you know? I "Ode for Joe" with him and stuff and that was turning.

**Brower:** You knew his brother too?

**Curtis Fuller:** Yeah, spaced. He was really out there. Joe and I remained friends for a long time. As a matter of fact, I started a band because the record company said I should have one. I recorded an album years ago and I got one down. I don't know if you know. It was number two on the charts; it was number one for ten weeks. I wrote that for my dead wife. I did with all the teachers out and Denver. But anyway, some good guys in that band. But, in those days this band that I first took out-- do you know who was in it? This will knock you down. The drummer was Lenny White Jr. The bass player was Stanley Clarke and George Cables was the piano player.

**Brower:** That's when you were putting the bebop language into more of an electric sensitivity.

**Curtis Fuller:** Then, I started using electric. I found this young white kid, I called "mountain man." Boy, he could play! He would devise his own thing. It was a hell of a solo, man. It was brilliant! He was a brilliant Tennessee kid.

**Brower:** What was his name?

**Curtis Fuller:** Sid we would call him. I just called him "mountain man." I would get on the microphone and say, "Mountain man back there, he's going to break it up in a minute!" He was start off with something (laughs). The drum company gave Lenny White this electric drum. I hated that son of a bitch. He would take this stick and say "BOOM!" And it would sound 100 times (imitates a large electronic roll). (Laughs)

**Brower:** Well, basically he's triggering...

**Curtis Fuller:** It wasn't like paradiddles or working some sound, all you had to do was take the stick and (imitates roll). Does Art Blakey need to come in and smack

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you? Anyway, then with Stanley and them went to Hollywood. They were selling jazz thing it was a bad name, you know?

**Brower:** Well, within that, what was the conversation internally, with a George and with a Stanley and with a Lenny?

**Curtis Fuller:** They were young kids; they were young guys. As a matter of fact, I got half airfares because Stanley was from Philadelphia and he was playing with the Gene Normandy Youth Orchestra classically.

**Brower:** How did you find him?

**Curtis Fuller:** Well, he had done a gig with Horace Silver who I saw in the club. I fell in love with him. He was commuting from... Then, when Art Farmer left Horace Silver's, Horace used to me because I knew his music, me and Clifford Jordan. Clifford Jordan and I were the front line.

**Brower:** So, that's how you met him. How did you meet Lenny White?

**Curtis Fuller:** One of the drummers—it wasn't Louis Hayes, I think it was the one that had all the trouble.

**Brower:** Roy Brooks?

**Curtis Fuller:** Yeah.

**Brower:** That's another Detroit force.

**Curtis Fuller:** He followed Louis. He was really out there. You know what he could do? He could play-- he had this big saw, and he took a mallet from a vibraphone and he could play sort of like (imitates long sounding metallic notes). Oh man...

**Brower:** Roy had a fantastic imagination.

**Curtis Fuller:** Oh man, they all did!

**Brower:** I used to work Montreux Detroit, And one year he did this thing called "Giant Steps" and he incorporated a guy dribbling a basketball, he incorporated a martial arts, he had cats playing Afro Brazilian, he had every... It was almost like M'Boom.

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**Curtis Fuller:** M'Boom, he started that. Max took that from him. M'Boom, that was Roy!

**Brower:** It was crazy what he did. It was almost like--

**Curtis Fuller:** Freddie Bridgette. You call him something else, what do you call him?

**Brower:** What did he play?

**Curtis Fuller:** Drums. He was never a real bona fide drummer you know? I mean, for me, it's kind of limited in the drum department. There are only a few that I really...

**Brower:** More of a percussionist?

**Curtis Fuller:** Yeah, a percussionist. You know like Billy used to play with the... The New York... Do you remember Hubert Laws and all those guys?

**Brower:** Yes.

**Curtis Fuller:** He played with Horace for a while, and he had 51 pieces, and Art Blakey used to come in and say--

**Brower:** Do you mean Cobham?

**Curtis Fuller:** Billy Cobham. Art Blakey said, "51 pieces are you kidding!? You can't hit that little joint, you have to get up off the stool and walk around in front of it to hit it!" He said, "why don't you learn how to play the three drums that are there?" Hana was wanting to talk, he was always going up to the microphone saying, "in this particular arrangement I play the polyphonic..." Boy it was funny!

**Brower:** One Time I saw Brooks and he had these toy drummers, he had all these toys drummers. In some kind of way he could... He had this laser thing that he could trigger them with. You know when the Chinese had like the -- he had like an army of toy drummers in some kind of a way he was triggering the shit. He was out there.

**Curtis Fuller:** He was out there! You know where he is now, or where he was?

**Brower:** Insane Asylum.

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**Curtis Fuller:** Yeah, he and Wilbur Harden. Now, Wilbur, “Trane loved him, but I couldn’t stand to watch him. He’s a guy that you, literally, could hear him think. He would stand on the bandstand and be moving about “click, click, click, click” He would say, (scats very sparse, calculated melody).

**Brower:** So, he’s editing--

**Curtis Fuller:** He’s editing as he’s trying to play. I mean, do you know what that is to watch? Win, and Cedar I couldn’t stand to watch. Cedar had a way like Elvin. Cedar’s time movement with his foot, I couldn’t look at it

**Brower:** Because he would throw you off?

**Curtis Fuller:** He would throw me off because his foot would move out of rhythm, with no distinct pattern or nothing. Sometimes, I would stand there and look like, “What the hell! How did you come up with that one?”

**Brower:** But, Wilbur Harden, on top of his playing was his significance in writing

**Curtis Fuller:** Who’s that?

**Brower:** Wilbur Harden.

**Curtis Fuller:** Yeah, some writing but not a whole lot. Then, there was another guy that was just like him. “Trane didn’t like him too much. He ended up with Mingus. Clarence something...

**Brower:** Shaw.

**Curtis Fuller:** Yeah, you know all these guys. Yeah, he was just late Wilbur. I never could get the gist of his... It was always something that was... He kept anticipating that he was going to play something but it would always be the complete opposite of what you thought he would do. The line would be so discombobulated. You would be like, “Where did that come from?” That’s the way he heard it so you can question the guy. I used to stand next to him and say, “Nobody’s home.”

**Brower:** We don’t need to spend a lot of time on this but, Detroit, Toledo, how much Ohio did you get into?

**Curtis Fuller:** Quite a bit. Remember, I had been with Mel Wanzo so and we did a lot of practicing together.

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**Brower:** He's out of Daton?

**Curtis Fuller:** No, he's out of Warren Ohio. Then, there was a guy in Cleveland, a big boy, Joe Green, or something.

**Brower:** You talking about the tenor player?

**Curtis Fuller:** Yeah.

**Brower:** He's like a legend.

**Curtis Fuller:** Yeah.

**Brower:** We came up on—maybe it wasn't this one—I want to say Carter? No...Joe. Because, I know Joe Lovano's father, he talks about him. He was the cat.

**Curtis Fuller:** He was the cat. He was a big guy. He looked like George Colon. I can't think of his name. Then there was another guy they called Popeye. He had another name. He did some dates around with some good people. He was still lingering with the other stuff.

**Brower:** Was there a relationship between Detroit and Buffalo or Detroit and Chicago on a sort of... Cities on the Great Lakes?

**Curtis Fuller:** I don't know but I know John Hendricks's brother went out to Buffalo to start a group like his brother. When I went up there, with all the guys there, they were singing similar songs. Pabon, that girl named Pabon?

**Brower:** Yolanda Pabon?

**Curtis Fuller:** She was actually singing with the brother in Buffalo and then she joined the group.

**Brower:** Why can't I remember this tenor player's name? That's can on me the rest of this tape.

**Curtis Fuller:** I know it's Joe but it wasn't Green.

**Brower:** I think it's Carter.

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**Curtis Fuller:** It could have been Carter. He was from Cleveland. There was an alto player that was better than him but he refused to leave. He had a big family. Like, Grant Green didn't want to come to New York, he was milkman. The real start in Kenny Burrell's family was Bill Burrell.

**Brower:** What did he play?

**Curtis Fuller:** Guitar. And he ended up lucrative jobs do those things on the bass, and he was a guitar player, a handsome guy.

**Brower:** Speaking of Washington, was Buck Hill a factor when you were out here?

**Curtis Fuller:** Buck Hill? Yeah, of course. Yes he was. Yes, we played a lot of geeks together. Just a couple of years ago, the same year I did that Benny Golson birthday thing at the Kennedy Center, I went to... it was Louis Hayes, Larry Willis and myself and Buck Hill. We played his 85th birthday or something in Maryland. They had to scramble to get me out to the airport. The Kennedy Center changed the tickets I can get a later flight

**Brower:** You know, when you hear with Golson, was Buck somebody you had to go through? At some point, Adams was here, you know, Stitt was here, it was different people...


**Curtis Fuller:** Well, Sonny married a girl from here, Barbara. He is from Detroit. He wasn't born in Detroit, he was actually born, like Paul Chambers, in Pittsburgh. I think Sonny Stitt was too.

**Brower:** Next to it or something, someplace near Detroit.

**Curtis Fuller:** Yeah, I knew it but... Pontiac. The Jones boys were from Flint or someplace. Flint, Michigan -- all wear those car companies were where, you know... There was so much talent there, there were so many musicians there, white and black. Half of the guys from... The drummer, the real hip drummer from Woody Herman's band? He was a big-time drummer, Kenny Burrell used to play with him a lot. Frank Rosolino used to use him a lot.

**Brower:** Bo Deck?

**Curtis Fuller:** No. If you call out the name I might remember. But, he was the best. He was the hippest of all the white drummers. He was really -- he played for Clinton and all those guys, Stan Kenton and all those guys. He was the drummer. I

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never will forget those dark rams under his eyes. He had old eyes. Like Chet Baker, he looked older than his years, you know? But, I mean, he could really lay it down. I mean, he had a good groove. I will tell you who copied that style, more or less. He was more of a soloist. Have you ever heard of the guy that played with Ahmad Jamal called Frank Gant.

**Brower:** Yes.

**Curtis Fuller:** He's a carbon copy of the guy that I'm thinking about. Kind of a Joe Morello of sort of guy. He could swing. Really, all the black players loved him. Everybody used him. He was one of the main guys. There was a tenor player -- I can't think of his name. He played the tenor and flute. He kept everybody on their toes. He was very good. I last saw him out at -- where was he? I think he was in Germany somewhere. The alto player... That lives in Germany... There are so many guys, there are good players everywhere. His name will come to me.

**Brower:** Let's go to... I want to go to the Savoy recordings you did and then how that relates to Jazztet and how that relates to The Messengers. The signature sound that we get... I mean, you know that... You know The Messengers, but it really changed when that third horn was added to the front line. That sound was being developed before that. So, walk us through that.

**Curtis Fuller:** When people ask me about, "Where did you develop that sound?" I know I have a tone I know I have a sound. But, you know who helped me develop that sound? I have to say that, not only out of respect... The A&R man, Rudy Van Gelder had a lot to do with that, and all the recordings they came out of Bluenote and Savoy and Prestige: The early Miles, J.J... He heard the natural sound for your horn. I tried to go in there with my little magpie hat. You know, the little beret with the Swiss cheese. He said "Get that out of here, Curtis. I have your sound; I know who you are. You don't need any of that with me. I got you covered." I saw the manipulation going on with the bass... certain guys are compromised. You put a rug under the base and in between the bridge, under the bridge for clarity. That's either enhancing or doing something. Maybe that's what we had to do because we were recording in his living room. It was about the size of that wall from here to there. That would be the controller... That's what we were dealing with. He really had an ear for that. I have yet -- I'll tell you one, outside of Rudy Van Gelder, I met one guy -- to really. One in Munster, Holland... And just like Rudy he was an optometrist by trade. He did a lot of work for the label Down. But, the other thing is the work for the guy in Milan, the black saint. He could get the sound you want. He was the one that did me with the Italian All-Stars. The sound he got from Sonny Russo and myself... He captured everything crystal clear. And I like that I mean, when you get to a club...

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Oh Lord help you if the microphone is not in the monitor or I can't hear myself, or I get too close. But when a guy can hear himself he can play more natural, you know? You don't have to depend on, you know, fighting everything. Because if you listened to those old clarification things... "Clarity" with the Jazztet, and all those old ensembles, it's crystal clear. It wasn't done with a whole lot of fanfare and stuff. It's amazing, that's why I had to use the hat because I go to somewhere and it was just god-awful. I always took pride in my sound, you know? And, to get the sound I wanted I play the male voice. I am the male voice. I hear the male voice. I can't do the... What is his name with the Motown? (sings a soprano line) I can't falsetto and all that shit.

**Brower:** Smokey?

**Curtis Fuller:** Smokey, I don't have that ability. You know? I don't hear that register like that, I don't hear it above the natural range of my instrument. I mean I just popped a high C or D just for the hell of popping it, it's not part of the line I hear. And Dizzy clarified it for me, he said, "That's your spot." When Bird speaks, I listen. (Laughs) Now, who is this?

**Brower:** That's like a re-issue.

**Curtis Fuller:** I'm trying to see who it is. Oh, yeah, this is the one with Thad Jones.

**Brower:** I mean, half of that... The double set is a re-issue of "The Imagination." The other part is your first recording with them.


**Curtis Fuller:** See, I'd like to spend a little time doing this again. That's Sonny Redd. Did you know, out of all the indifferences we had with Benny and myself, you know how many times he did the two horned things with Art Farmer in his career?

**Brower:** You told me they never did it

**Curtis Fuller:** I know, I was going to see if you knew of one.

**Brower:** I don't.

**Curtis Fuller:** Whenever Art Farmer used another guy, he used Clifford Jordan. Benny, every time he recorded used me on 11 different discs. Still, there is that on easy thing, that underlying thing that I don't understand so I leave it alone. I never understood that. But, it's coming, it's coming. Anyway, I have enjoyed the fact that I got a chance to play with not everybody but just about every mainstream porn

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player going back to Lester Young. I can live with that as part of my history, you know? I enjoyed those things that I played with Benny. I saw that he wrote once that Curtis just likes to play fast things. But, if you listen to those recordings with him everything he played his fast (scats fast melody). You're going, "Oh, Benny! That's your song I happen to be playing that with you." I don't find it appropriate to open the bandstand in a jazz room. It just bothers me to begin the set with (scats slow melody). It's a beautiful song, but it's not an opener. All the bands I've been in with the Quincy, Basie, you name it, when you open the set "BAM!" You've got to make a statement. You don't come out with that. Benny would come out with (Scats a fast melody) then all of the sudden (scats same melody but slower). I said, "Benny, you're killing me." Joe Farnsworth left because of that. He was a young kid he said, "Curtis, I need you here to get some groove going. Benny is getting slower and slower!" But, he is a great writer. He taught me everything I know about writing. I know the movements and I know all of that stuff. I know all that stuff I didn't get in school like plagal cadences, and you know... The way the third and the seventh move when you're resolving chords and things and the leading tones and shit. He taught me things there were applicable to what he was showing me to write, the things I learned. It was like the application of things coming together that you have learned academically, you know? He is a very academic person so, yeah it was right, it was right. Barry Harris teaches that (scats a scale ascending and descending) you know, when you go down to a third that third becomes the seventh and then you lead into the next one. This makes it almost like you're playing a fourth interval. It's like all the connections and everything, it all makes so much sense. The air can just like sponge it right up. I call that the absorb activity Greek movement. Your mind is like a sponge it can just quickly related that, you know? Have you ever watched ants work?

**Brower:** Yes.

**Curtis Fuller:** It's interesting you have all these little and colonies. I can understand the great Nero's of Rome and all of them... Just studying them. They're on the move they have their workdays. Everything has a purpose. They know had a kid a leaf out of a tree and across a lake. Everything! Footholds in things, they know how to do that. Will I want to try the same principle with the horn. I've always thought the essence of your playing is what you play, not how much you play but what you play. As Billie Holiday reiterated, "You know, you're talking to people. If you edited what you play you're talking"

**Brower:** Except, you don't want to watch people do it, ala Harden.

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**Curtis Fuller:** Not moving bells with nothing coming out; no, that's disturbing. It's like an actor, a person that stutters. Moody was like that, he graduated from a school. Not altruism, you know they have that thing that you can't do? Not only did he speak with a lisp but also he had that... Let's just say a speech impediment. I don't know what it was but, capital Moody overcame that whatever it was. Now I skipped some things, did you want to come back to that?

**Brower:** Well, actually, we are going to change. But, I wanted to walk through the sextet to the Jazztet to The Messengers.

**Curtis Fuller:** Okay, we will start with the first sextet I worked with which was Kenny Dorham and Hank Mobley.

**Brower:** Don't start it yet!

**Curtis Fuller:** Oh, that's right they have coffee here! It's probably gone now. Well, whatever. This is a different kind.

**Brower:** 3:25 is the train.

**Ken Kimery:** How are you holding up? That's the other thing too.

**Brower:** Your energy?

**Curtis Fuller:** Oh I'm good. What's the time now? Is it 1?

**Brower:** We are at 1. At 2:15--

**Curtis Fuller:** You said you got me at 5.

**Brower:** The 3:25 is what I got you on, which gets you in at 9:20, because you still have the other leg to do. There is a 5 something, but it will get you there at 1 something in the morning, which I don't think you want to do.

**Curtis Fuller:** No. Are you guys going to help me?

**Brower:** I got you. We're going to do all that.

**Curtis Fuller:** Okay.

(Recording Stops)

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**Brower:** So we were talking about the development of your first sextet. The reason I want to get to this, is I think it just defines, or covers a very important. From your earliest recordings into the Jazztet, into The Messengers, which really changed your character. I want to follow through all of that and the musical thinking behind it, the actors, the people who were involved in it, different record companies – – there is so much! You talked about that's how you got to Van Gelder. You were talking about the sound. Let's go back to the first sextet. You were about to tell us about that.

**Curtis Fuller:** The first call to arms with the Jazztet... Well, I actually tried in school first with Joe Henderson and Albert Aarons, a trumpet player in Ohio who actually ended up one of the most pronounced players in the jazz scene in the West Coast. I couldn't get Quincy Jones to hire him but Albert was the most brilliant player.

**Brower:** Al Aarons?

**Curtis Fuller:** Yeah.

**Brower:** Wow.

**Curtis Fuller:** Yeah, he was one of our roommates, Joe Henderson and I.

**Brower:** Didn't End up with Duke or something?

**Curtis Fuller:** Yeah. Great player and he was from Ohio. You wanted to know about the connection... Anyways, we started playing and he would arrange little things with Clifford Brown (scats melody) "Ronnie Speaks" and all that. He was playing that stuff at the and all over that chump player. He and Joe and I had a unique thing in Detroit and Barry sort of resent that because he wanted me because Kiani didn't play the parts quite like that. He had a sluggish way of playing it; he was playing the part, but he was always behind the beat. That's when I was first called to the sixth Sound and, just having that other voice it's like the mini-band, the mini orchestra. The section is represented; you've got the benefit of the saxophone, this brass, the tenor. It's a very good focal point to start if you're going to write, before approaching big orchestrations, you know? The character of a big band, which I love, there are no big bands. Most of them I stuck in a conundrum. Anyways, I get into New York, I get in touch with, offhand not in a regular basis, the guys that I hung out with Kenny Dorham and Hank Mobley. I met Hank when he was with Dizzy Gillespie. He was the only horn, just him and Dizzy. I saw them when they were in Louisville. Then I saw him once with Sahib Shihab, but I liked Hank better. He had. It was hard to match but, I found out later he had one long like I ended up with. He was very soft. He was

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a very good player. His lines were impeccable, you know? His playing lines... He wrote some beautiful sextet arrangements, you know? If you go back and listen to "Lotus Flower" those pretty things that Kenny Dorham wrote, have you ever heard it? He did it with JJ and Cecil. It goes like this (sings the head of the song). That's pretty music. See, I'm a romanticist. I like pretty melodies and stuff like that. Kenny Dorham gave this kind of thoughts to me. But, Golson's repertoire has been repeated so much to me. Kenny Dorham's hasn't. I wasn't exposed that much, that was just one of the many albums he did on Prestige. And we started playing some gigs for the Union Iran New York on Saturday afternoon and things and to get a chance to play those things with Katie. They were \$50 gigs but I just wanted to get with that music with Hank. He had a good rhythm section and that was my first... That's when I fell in love with that three horn, I really did and I started to do that on some of the albums. Were playing that, and I hear the sound and from then on I sort of graduated to this state. I know Prestige and those companies had these budget limits and stuff like that. Whenever you asked for three horns it was "Oh, c'mon! Do you need it?" (Laughs) We're trying to make music here, the song right here requires it. "Well, who can we get?" They wanted the cheapest guy. Then, they started naming people. "We got this kid over here in Jersey named Rudolph..." "Oh no, no, no. I know the guy want to use" and, we started doing that. I couldn't wait for the chance. I remember, Thad wasn't doing anything at the time. He left Basie before he started with the other orchestra. I had done a date with him with Hubert Laws and the New York Jazz Sextet. It was Tom McIntosh and those guys. So they changed and got me in there. Ron Carter, and all those guys... They were really tight, they still are. That's my man, a Detroit. So, anyways we started going to their rehearsal and right on the money Thad came in and replaced Johnny Coles. It was such a beautiful sound. It was great to hear Thad in that context. For so many years it was just Quincy, with Billy Mitchell or Wardell Grey. Thad is a very good part player, you know, a singing part player. It's sort of like a cross between Art Farmer...you know...that style. He plays anything in the book. One of my Savoy albums, I used Thad with Benny Golson. Lee was available and all that, but I wanted Thad on this particular recording. On this one, we did a couple of things that I repeated with Lee. We call that the Curtis Fuller Jazztet I tried to make... That name was used long before. So we actually had a meeting of what we were going to call the Jazztet. After Benny and I got this gig – –Actually, Joe Tremini called me to replace Thelonious Monk at The Five Spot. Monk didn't have a police car and he couldn't obtain one for at least six months or a year or something... a police escort. So, he got me and he said, "Can you play up in time? We were going to try and get one... who would you use?" Well, I was living with Benny. He had just left Art Blakey with Lee. I said, "hey man, do you want to do The Five Spot with me?" He said, "Sure! It will be a good chance for us to put a group together, Curtis." We had talked about it one living together, you know stuff like that. So, we went down there and put a dynamite

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group together and we brought in McCoy Tyner, who Benny knew from Philadelphia. It worked like a glove.

**Brower:** How did Art come together?

**Curtis Fuller:** Art came in as the other group. They always hire two groups at The Five Spot. First, it was Randy Weston and his quartet. So, Art came in with Jerry Mulligan. The first (inaudible), Benny said, "Curtis, going to try and put a group together. You write good for sextet. Why don't we get this group? I talked to Donald Byrd about it and he wants to do it." Donald really didn't want to do it. I knew Donald he was going for a bigger shot with The Blackbirds. But, he was bending his first choice. It got to be and we had our first meeting. In this first meeting, Steve Allen was going to back this group because Bennie showed him the repertoire. "Killer Joe" was in that, you know? It was dynamite music. Steve Allen, who was at the tonight show, was a pianist himself. So Meadows, Jayne Meadows, they put us in their company. I know that because that's where we got our checks from, Meadow Lane. We were to do nothing but rehearse at the house on the east side of Manhattan. We go there every day and rehearse for 6 to 7 hours everyday. We brought McCoy Tyner into New York and got him an apartment, we put a grand in there for him. We got our uniforms and everything and we were going to open, right here at The Caverns (laughs), which we did. The group was awfully successful, right here in Washington. "Killer Joe," was quite successful and we went from there. What was supposed to have been... That what we talked about like, "let's do the modern jazz quartet."


**Brower:** So it was originally a cooperative group?

**Curtis Fuller:** That's what we thought. Then everywhere we go we would have a different name: the Art Farmer sextet, the Danny Golson sextet...

**Brower:** So, what happened there was there were two groups there. You were rehearsing, you get the gig at The Five Spot, originally as a quintet, and because Mulligan is there and here hearing Art and you can't get on by default effect or with Art. So the relationship was really you end up any and then Art gets added

**Curtis Fuller:** Yes, but art took a step further. I would call my house and I was meeting him down... With Dave Baker on Saturday mornings for the Lydian concept. There were classes that all jazz artists were taking if you wanted to get ahead, you know?

**Brower:** Go ahead.

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**Kennith Kimery:** Well, George Russell...but (inaudible) was involved in that, too.

**Curtis Fuller:** Yeah.

**Kennith Kimery:** Lennox school?

**Curtis Fuller:** Yeah. A bunch of us were taking it. Jimmy Cleveland turned me onto it he said, "Curtis, you have to come down to the school." All the trombone players were going down there, so I found it. A good friend that I had at that time, Billy Barr, who was a tremendous trombone player and writer, we were trying to put together a trombone section. The thought was, every singer, everybody, whatever came through, Union wise or whatever needed a trombone, and we would be the section. Then, Doc Severinsen came in and needed an orchestral thing, rather than just sections. We would meet at Frank Rehak's studio across from Birdland, and we were developing this brass section. Later, it turned into be Gil Evans' Orchestra. That's how that got started, in a way but, this Lydian concept that was kind of the order of the day. It was something that bothered me. You know, a guy walks up to me and says, "C sus 9" on the bandstand and you weren't playing attention (laughs). You didn't have a clue, and you are out there playing left field. There's something about that with the trumpet players... I forget his name. He would only write stems, no lines. You would have to infer the rhythmically... What the [laughs] it was really supposed to be the nucleus of an avant-garde movement. We were going to eliminate structural elements altogether so each item would be all-creative.


**Brower:** But, you're so grounded in the literature and in the various languages that you are supposed to be able to mentally do this. If your orientation is about the ear, than that's another piece.

**Curtis Fuller:** That's another part about that. From that I graduated to... What's his name? It was jazz and poetry. He would come through with a tuxedo and sneakers. Playing (scats abrasive solo) I'll be playing so nicely, and JJ and all the trumpet players would come and say, "See what he does with this!" After I heard Dave Baker and adapted to him...

**Brower:** So, this was after Dave had that accident and he wasn't...

**Curtis Fuller:** It was before the accident.

**Brower:** Okay, So he was still playing bone. So, he and George Russell were kind of taking this theoretical thing.

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**Curtis Fuller:** Oh, they were taking that. They took it. They did it. It made sense because they were coming from style. If you go back and listen to “Down by the Riverside” and stuff like that, there is a lot of style there. You can still hear some Fletcher Henderson, even though it was avant garde. You could still hear that. Eldon also followed suit. Like everybody else like me, I thought it was, you know...

**Brower:** So, we are in 1959-1960?

**Curtis Fuller:** As things came from Oliver Nelson, we were moving, we were flowing we were creating things. If you’re an artist, you don’t want to be left out.

**Brower:** Now, at this same time, you’re still hitting at The Five Spot.

**Curtis Fuller:** Yet, the days were quite full. Whatever you could slam into your schedule daily. You did many things musically. Paul Chambers, early morning, like you would be up at 10 AM, Paul Chambers would be coming to my apartment. “I got a date here is the music can we work on it over here?” “Well, yeah.” “I already called Clifford Jordan, he’ll be over in a minute.” So, we had a gathering of musicians like that. I would still find time, most of my days were spent with John Coltrane. We were into... It should show through our music, the amount of effort that we were putting in. We were on top of ours... but we hadn’t grown to where we are. Like, where we became eventually. By the time I was introduced to The Messengers after the Jazztet, I was right on the threshold of coming out, on coming out of the closet. That band was made for me.

**Brower:** Before we get there, and talking about your time at The Five Spot, I mean, there is a whole collection of all these things that that group did. The Mosaic Set that documents this whole period...But, I’m getting from this. That now you’re getting this theoretical training, or dealing with Benny and all that he is giving to you, but you’re really not getting an outlet for your work at that point.

**Curtis Fuller:** Yeah.

**Brower:** So let’s talk about the issue around that Jazztet, it’s cooperative nature, and how that evolved. And then, how that was affecting what your ambitions were.

**Curtis Fuller:** You have to understand, now Art Farmer had the same problems I had. On his own, he would work with Jim Hall a lot, just he and Jim Hall. He and Jim Hall had a duo thing going on you know? It was brilliant, you know? They worked nice together. I would like to do that and it was like more financially suitable

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because, you know... At that time, he had moved to Austria and he could take a few bucks home. The Jazztet, you know, every time the band moved Benny had us on tour with his daughter and his wife and everybody else. That took a lot away from what the band made. Art would speak me about that


**Brower:** But, as a vehicle for your music, it really wasn't there?

**Curtis Fuller:** It really wasn't there. The brilliant music of Benny Golson, it was successful. We supported him right down to the letter. But, it was all about Benny Golson. We played one of Art Farmer's songs called "Mox Nix." Out of all the playing, 11 albums I did with Golson, "Gone With Golson", "Arabian" all this stuff, he didn't play one song. People would ask for it and he'd say, "How does that go?" Well, he said the same thing about Ellington. He didn't look into Ellington either. So I can't feel but so bad...

**Brower:** So, those things that you had already done... Does "Arabia" was already out on Savoy, none of that worked itself into the repertoire. You're developing yourself as a writer due to your relationship but, not having the vehicle

**Curtis Fuller:** Not having the vehicle to do it with and, by Art Blakey it just so happens that I went from Mr. Music to the music master, which is Art Blakey. He may not have had academic training like Golson but he had the didactic knowledge by leading. Not by structural leading like, "this note is B here, or C, or D, this F goes here. Curtis, I don't like that over there." No, the new the dynamics he wanted, the new one he wanted us to reach the crescendo, when we work to decrescendo, he knew how he wanted us to tip through this, change the rhythm here, be at the top." Mind you, he was a school, a trained school. He had already trained Clifford Brown and Lou Donaldson. That's where this lick came from (scats fast paced melody) Art Blakey don't fool with that. And, the same with the Buddy Rich he wouldn't know a note if it knocked him down. But, still you could hear that he knew what he wanted. Actually, a jammer had to play the part for Buddy Rich so he can hear what it was supposed to sound like, Joe LaBarbera. He traveled with the band to rehearse the band somebody could hear it. Art didn't have that luxury. But he knew what he wanted. In fact, he would come to you, "How does this sound here? What do you want me to do?" I had the damndest time because I was going to South America with the Voice of America stuff, and I heard this bossanova. When I came back, before I did this "Pensitiva," "Art," I said, "This beat goes (scats bassa pattern)" I showed him that and he still played in his own way, he still kept time. (Laughs) but he gave it another flavor.

**Brower:** How did you actually get in the band?

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**Curtis Fuller:** Lee Morgan and Bobby Timmons pulled me in. “Man, we got a guy you need to hear, Boo.” That’s how anybody get in there, you know? I had a young alto player and I told him, “You gotta hear him, Art. Bobby Watson, take him to the club.” Bobby got the job. David Snitten was playing with him and I said, “no, you need somebody that can write and play. This kid has got it. He’ll give you some songs and take you in another direction.” And he did. It was still welcome, when Wayne got there; Wayne wanted me. It was a unanimous decision that they would add another horn. Mind you, they would raise his salary, just like the basketball player with the Chicago team.

**Brower:** Rather than them getting more money, they added you?

**Curtis Fuller:** It was like Scottie Pippen with the Chicago team. “I don’t take less money because I want to win. I want to win it.” We went from this, and I liked— They said, “No moaning Art. No ‘this here, over there, over yonder.’ We want to create our own book.” “Go to it gentlemen.”

**Brower:** That was Art.

**Curtis Fuller:** That was Art. He afforded us a formula to come in with our own music, and our style and we change things.

**Brower:** That was equally true with Freddie, with Wayne, with you, and with Cedar?


**Curtis Fuller:** All writers and that changed completely. We were all different types of writers but, primarily all the same. We were each the same in a contextual realm.

**Brower:** Well, the first band, when you first got there, was like Bobby and Lee. And, Wayne was in the band. At that point, was the decision made to change a repertoire, or did it happen when the Cedar got in and when Freddie got in?

**Curtis Fuller:** Well, I came in and I did “Alamode” and it became a hit back in South America. Because, we are going modal now. That was the beginning of going into modal stuff.

**Brower:** Thus, “Alamode”

**Curtis Fuller:** Yeah, so, we went that way. It got more, more, and more influenced. It began to change with Wayne and I when we did “Schizophrenia.” Wayne was getting

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ready to go into another direction, boogity, boogity and beat music. Wayne was getting ready.

**Brower:** It's still hard bop.

**Curtis Fuller:** We took it all the way to, "Crisis" and all that stuff.

**Brower:** That's one of my all time favorites, just on a personal level.

**Curtis Fuller:** Well, "Crisis" was a result the movement country. The country was going there, you know? Turmoil every other week, one of our leaders being slaughtered. Guys throwing paint on the wall, and scholars looking at it and saying, "Wow, it is magnificent. Check this out! We are talking about Rembrandt!" Forget about that. Who wants that? Paint dripping on the wall, wow! Then, Ornette Coleman picks up a violin in a week and the Leonard Bernstein says, "genius!" That blew my mind! Leonard Bernstein saw it on 10th Ave. he just slaughtered 10th Ave.! Wait a minute Leonard, you endorse this and we're all dead! Shit! C'mon man. In a week! What about Hyphus and all them motherfuckers who have been playing for 40 years! (Laughs) Are you kidding? You just eradicated all those guys that's been playing for over 40 years. You eliminated a whole string of string players man! Man, all these white guys aren't playing shit but Ornette has got it? I went to see it and Ornette was like (Screams loudly) and I said, "Oh Lord." But, that's where we are. That is life. It has taken this long, and I do feel it, I could be completely wrong, but I feel the students coming back to jazz. It's coming home, it is here. The students are coming into the club, not only here but also in Chicago. I saw some in just this last leg, students, in San Diego and all over. They're coming and they're coming to the stage. They are asking questions, they are buying a record and saying "sign this." It's on. We have periods like this, it may not last long, but we have periods like this in music where jazz takes a backseat, and then all of a sudden it's like, "Oh what have we been missing!" Somewhere along the way there is still people the want to hear the groove. Do you think there are people who get up and fix their hair and shit and want to get up and be boogying all night long? There's a few of them, but some people just want the intellectual concept to sit and listen and enjoy it. They want to shake from the hips down. But, they are sitting down, listening, letting this thing between their ears absorb what is going on.

**Brower:** Jimmy Merritt.

**Curtis Fuller:** Oh, great bass player. Underrated. He's from that Ron Carter mold. Ron look, later developed this technique of soloing and getting his things, you know, he didn't have to do Paul Chambers' style with those and all that (scats frenetic bass

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solo). He didn't have to go there. It was more like the master, like Ray Brown could just take one hand and (scats solo). He was telling stories, and painting pictures.


**Brower:** There were several iterations of the Blakey group, but when you consider that you are in, in the first period before all the reunion stuff came back, do you consider the Freddie, Wayne, Merritt, joining--

**Curtis Fuller:** That was it. That was it for me. That's just my personal opinion, that band, we lived in breeze what we were doing. It's like we took a song last night, Wayne would call my room, "Curtis, could you come to my room? I want to run over this thing" boom, six in the morning and we are still running over that thing without Art. We did all that stuff without ever rehearsing with art. He came in and we pulled him in and, when he came in, once he heard it, he knew what it was supposed to sound like.

**Brower:** Then the other part of him would click in.

**Curtis Fuller:** It was like he was already at the rehearsal, because he knew what it should sound like. By the time I did, "Buhaina's Delight" I knew his solo. I knew how he was going to approach it. So, I went to Benny first, because Benny had done "Blues March" and I wanted something that would show off Art's talent. It wasn't about playing solos all the time, I wanted something that would enhance what he was doing. There was something that would give him a line to play, is if he were reading. You know? (Scats drum line) it's can make him sound like he's... "Damn, he read all that?" And then Freddie Waits transcribed all the solos and sent them to colleges and high schools and people did arrangements for drums. It took off. Every drummer and school kid wanted to see it. I didn't read the solo that was what Art played. He first started on Germany, German television, and they guy couldn't even... It sounded like another song that's what Art was coming from. That's what he put down. But, that was my finest. I think Wayne would say the same thing, I know Freddie would. Art was the spoiler, once you played with him... It took me a while, I found one drummer that I could float with, and that was Billy Higgins. Later, it was Waynard because he would sit right on the table, right under Billy. He's one of those drummers that is coming up now. Well, Louis is not on ensemble work the way that Waynard is.

**Brower:** The sense of orchestrating the whole piece in understanding what the play, and how to define the piece, color it, keep grooving, keep it swinging, I think that comes out of the whole big band experience. Show drummers, not just show drumming, but the big-band orchestration and understanding it.

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**Curtis Fuller:** That is also true with horn players. You can tell the horn players that had big band experience you can tell with Jackie McLean you can tell that he didn't live the big band. You can tell with Sonny Rollins, he can play his ass off, but you can tell that he didn't play with a big band. He doesn't know how to play with the frame and shape. He creates his own shape. That's why he walks across the stage himself and plays, he doesn't want anybody of the in his way, you know? Gary Botts, he's a big band player, he will play all the leads you want, you know? There are players, you can tell that they have a gift. You have to look at the big picture when you are a horn player. It is the difference of playing chess or checkers. If you're just playing a game to pick up pieces or are you trying to study jazz? You have to have a follow-up plan, you have to have a plan to play. Your chess game will last three days if you're a good player, you don't have to be Bobby Fischer either.

**Brower:** Two questions on the Blakey thing. I want to know why you left. But, I also want to know how important, maybe it wasn't important, but how important the thinking, or the mindset that he had early on when they adopted Islam. Did that play out? Because, it wasn't a public scenario for him after the initial big band that he had where several guys were converted. But, this seems to be on undertone of guys who were influenced and took that practice, or what they learned, out of Islam seriously. But, it wasn't a public thing. So, I want to know about that, that public undercurrent, and why you left the first time.

**Curtis Fuller:** Well, the first time I left, it was because principal players left. I found that I couldn't right this ship; it was unbalanced. Good players, I mean he brought in different players, you know? It wasn't sincere anymore. John Hicks is a great player but, it wasn't serious anymore. Victor Sproles...

**Brower:** Yeah, Victor Sproles.

**Curtis Fuller:** Reggie Workman—it was different! It was like you change the wives! I guess, that's why in Utah they have seven wives. (Laughs) you can get one from this, and a little something else from this one, and what ever. But, that harem scares them, you know? The consistency of playing with each other every day, not because we could anticipate what the other player played, but within the realm of possibilities, whatever we played was ballpark. We knew the response we would get from the player. It becomes automatic. It was like a baseball game, I'm going to hit the ball this second, this guy knows where, it's going to second, sometimes he goes across the field because he know it is a better shot than trying to throw the ball to second and flip. Because, he knows he's got the better player at second, if the ball goes out to centerfield, you have lost the game. It is knowing the people that you are playing with and... That's what Michael Jordan needed, he needed a Scottie Pippen,

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someone that could anticipate, who knows his moves, Michael has the ball, Michael will go right, Michael go left, I've got to make myself... Wherever Michael makes that decision, I have to be there. This is what Michael does. You know? See, the other stuff is framed like a picture. He mace down front and shake it off, but ultimately he's can a have to do something that is expected or else...

**Brower:** Wild pitch, fastball.

**Curtis Fuller:** Something else is going on, it's not the same game. Art has to know that, he knew me well enough to know when I was winding down. He knew well enough to know... Like, his constant beef was, "Freddie, you don't even want to practice on the gig." The deputy comes in and plays, but he has to play and get out of the way..

**Brower:** That's you, a second nickname.

**Curtis Fuller:** Yeah.

**Brower:** From the roadrunner to the deputy. I guess the deputy was before the roadrunner.

**Curtis Fuller:** The roadrunner was from Basie.

**Brower:** But, that comes after you are the deputy.


**Curtis Fuller:** I got the nickname because I just wanted things to be right on ensembles and things.

**Brower:** You were "Ivy Divy" with Prez.

**Curtis Fuller:** It still bothers me. Last night, I was like, "Bang!" I look to my left, and the guy doesn't even have his horn in his hands. How is he going to hit the note with me? He isn't going to make it. So all I have to be there with the harmonic part myself (scats just the harmonic line). In the lead is standing there just on the side. But, I can't let the audience know this.

**Brower:** That something is missing and it bothers you?

**Curtis Fuller:** Yeah, and if I wait for him we've lost. Those are things you have to know, it all goes into the mix. We can't talk about it now, it's time to move on.

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**Brower:** Yeah, it's gone.

**Curtis Fuller:** Now, you've got to restructure. It's like any business. He can't go downstairs and get a whole new cast of players, or workers, to run his club tonight. You know? There's going to be some snafus.

**Brower:** Something is going to go wrong or he is going to try to do everything, or whatever.

**Curtis Fuller:** Yeah, like, you guys were together. You've got signs, feelings, you've done this enough together with the others. You're anticipating, he's been around enough with you to know that he's going here now. You've got to do what I can do on the bandstand, I can't slow down.

**Brower:** I saw you do it a couple times on the bandstand last night.

**Curtis Fuller:** Yeah.


**Brower:** That's pacing. That's knowing what you're going to do in the frame.

**Curtis Fuller:** Well, it's more than that. Well, the last set, the reason I did it two or three times is because Sharpe had to catch a train and he had the ticket. He plays in the church choir, for the choir. He had to be there, he's a very diligent young man.

**Brower:** He went to church last night too, on the bandstand.

**Curtis Fuller:** He went, will he stays in church. I fixed him. Since that guy didn't have a salary for him, I had to give him money so he could function and get home and get on the train and get to the thing that he loves a lot, playing for the church.

**Brower:** Now, you have a very interesting attitude about all of this, spending parts of yesterday as you sort of assess the situation you're in as a player. Given all that you've done, NEA Jazz Master, top of the everything in terms of... People think of the jazz trombone, they're going to go through the names, you're right there in the firmament with, you know, all the people that you've given your acknowledgement to as important. Everyone would understand what that constellation is that you're a part of. What kind of youth got to swallow something, so to speak to do this gig. Why do you do it? Because, you said to me, "I have got bills like everybody else." But, you really don't have to do all these situations. But, you choose to do it and you approach it with a certain composure, a certain acceptance of the situation. How do you get the best out of it? You're thinking about so many things because, you just said, you

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are thinking about the audience, you're thinking about what I can let them know, you are signaling to the bandstand, tour actually training them. You made a comment like "ain't no way to keep a job," but it was done in good humor.

**Curtis Fuller:** I got my point across in a loving way so he wouldn't be totally embarrassed. His girlfriend was there, I knew that, and I know that would touch on... It would hit home.

**Brower:** He's going to hear about that later.

**Curtis Fuller:** She was in Cincinnati, I told him... And she came unexpectedly. You have to be prepared like that. That could ruin marriages and relationships. You just try to get through, I'm not trying to be senior blues, I'm just trying to perpetuate an art form that is ingrained. The music, to me, is living. I am a living entity because of jazz. I am jazz. I am not a spokesperson for jazz. I am jazz. Jazz is a part of me. You see this live. I want people to know the Jazz did not get bogged down, or die the death of a dirty rat or something. I want just to live on and be a part of people's lives, you know? He could have only happened here in this big country. And out of all the things that have happened in this country, to everyone, every race of people that has been here had to go through some shit, Excuse the expression, but they had to go through some ignorant shit. I'm part of it, I'm part of the ignorance. But, I am also, your part of the problem in the solution. To see it through, so these other young men can live by virtue of what I do. I don't know if they are looking are watching me, or listening to me. I hope they are. But some of them are laying it on the line. I don't come on the bandstand drunk or disrespectful or anything. I come to work. I have work ethics that I use. I have decent work acumens that I follow. I want those principles to rub off on these young men. If I can see that, I am comfortable with going to the other life, you know? With a couple of bananas and a nice little boat to go off to Valhalla with, you know? I have seen it through. I have done what I'm supposed to be. I am a messenger, of not only God, I am a messenger of this music, to perpetuate it. I see that is my role, and I'm doing my best here. I may the singing, but that is who I am. This is my personification of Curtis Fuller is.

**Brower:** What did it means you to be named in NEA Jazz Master?

**Curtis Fuller:** It means one hell of a lot to be acknowledged on anything. (Laughs) to be a knowledge and respected nationally, by an organization it thinks... Your era, what you have given to the art form has been a stimulus of sort, at least part of the stimulus moving to keep the character in the music. You know? Just don't lose that character. Just don't forget who we are. I am from the old school, if you are a street sweeper, you're a good street sweeper. I chose to do this. Maybe it shows me, maybe

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it went the other way. Who knows what the Chinese came across the islands this way or that way are over there. But, anyways we all left the station at the same time, and here we are. It is incumbent upon me to do my darndest to see that it is maintained. I don't want any young whippersnapper to change or get me off course, or get me so wound up that I lose it, you know? I try to keep the same deportment I have on stage as I do in the classroom, or whatever. This is who I have become, I wasn't always that but this is who I am. I have evolved to this. And I rather like it here. I like who I am. I am a pretty good guy. Yeah? I don't do a whole lot of anything, but what I do do I do it. I may watch a nasty picture every now and again, on TV, "oh, you dirty old man." But, other than that, I don't do anything.

**Brower:** Outside of the realm of a performing musician, you know... It seems like you are one of those guys that, we don't want to contemplate the day, but we all know the day comes. I think you want to go out with your boots on.

**Curtis Fuller:** I do. And I want to be thought of as somebody... It is like an old Negro spiritual, "when I have done the best I can, my friends will understand. The Lord will carry me home."

**Brower:** But, we're not ready for you to go home just yet.

**Curtis Fuller:** Well, you better be! (Laughs)

**Brower:** (Laughs) Yeah, right! Everything with you like "Alamode" and other things, it probably has three different layers of resonance four how are supposed to take it. So going home, and going home, and going home. You have, also outside of your life as a working musician, a cat who goes out and hits, who will hit as an all-star group on a tour in Germany, or Italy, and be celebrated that way, and who will also get on a plane, fly into DC and play with some cats that you're basically taking to school. Who does all of that with a certain equanimity, and a certain evenness, and a love, and you've told us why you do it. But, there is a whole other part of you, teacher, participate in things like the Kennedy Center. Just talk about some of those other activities. Not the playing stuff, but the other stuff that Curtis Fuller has been involved in: organizations, things at the Kennedy Center, teaching activity, so that we get a fuller sense of what you've done.

**Curtis Fuller:** There is a lot to consider. I have seen a lot of good men in this business, teachers, scholars get caught up into some not so comfortable situations. I encouraged them, girls, women, being at the college level, to dig in. We are here to learn, you know? I have made some pretty good choices. Young ladies still keep in touch with me. "Mr. Fuller how are you doing? I am playing with so and so." I have

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this work ethic. When I am teaching a young lady, a trombonist, I make sure the door is always open. I don't close the doors so that for two hours, somebody says, "I wonder what they are doing in there?" If we are talking it's minimal. I always want them to know that they are hearing music. I have that working situation with young ladies, and I want them to dig in. I always pick them against the boys so they will not feel like second-class citizens. I make them feel challenged so that... I have pushed some buttons. Every girl that I have had has turned out to be a pretty good trombonist and writer. This is what I never could do. You can deal with improprieties and things like that, you know? I will take pictures with the kids and stuff like that, you know?

**Brower:** That isn't it is very important to Dr. Taylor, is the cultivation, or the equalization of the participation of women in this music. But, does that harken back to may be the experience of Melba Liston and how important she was? Talk about that relationship


**Curtis Fuller:** Oh yeah, that was a beautiful relationship. I've seen her sit on the bandstand and cry. And that organization actually had to women and it. Patty Bowen was on piano.

**Brower:** We're talking about Quince?

**Curtis Fuller:** Yeah, Quincy. Melba was also in Dizzy's bandwidth me. There was one band that I was, Chuck Israel Orchestra with a bunch of people. Janice Robinson was fresh out of Eastman. She was a good little girl and I was her hero. Actually, both of us being black, the pitted us together with both of us in a room on the road. I actually sat in the lobby so she could have the room and be a little lady, you know? We talked together the other day and they laughed. "Is that what you were doing? Is that why you were gone?" "Yep, I was giving you your space."

**Brower:** So, they actually, rather than having you room with another male, they put you with a woman.

**Curtis Fuller:** Well, because we were the same cloth, the same patchwork. We were just talking about that with Janice. She was thanking me for, you know, giving her that respect. But, I didn't have to take it to that dimension. She thought I was just hanging out. But, I was close by. Dennis was a young girl and I just wanted her to have a you know... She was conscious of it. Because even when she got in bases band she worked too many clothes. She was covering up a lovely body and stuff, just so guys wouldn't hit on her. She looked like a little old maiden. You don't have to go

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that extreme. Guys are going to be guys and you'll learn to get through that. You know the girls and the basketball team, you're going to get those whistles and it is demeaning sometimes. Her father was a preacher and stuff and I tried to give her the encouragement that, "you are here to play and that is the essence of what you're here for."

**Brower:** With Melba, was it a learning situation with you and her?

**Curtis Fuller:** Oh, I loved every moment of it because when I first met her I didn't know Gerald Wilson was her husband. Did you?

**Brower:** I have learned that since, yes.

**Curtis Fuller:** I had the twofold thing going. Patty Bowen was an amazing arranger too. Do you know Quincy had an army of arrangers and composers in the band? Phil Woods and everybody... They were constantly changing what Quincy did, you know? But, that was a gift. It was a nice band and a great opportunity. Do you remember when I spoke of the yellow brick road yesterday? I've always felt like I was walking that road. And one of the highlights of my life was playing with Blakey in Los Angeles. Judy Garland came in. I didn't even know she was there. I was playing my feature, "Never Never Land" which nobody ever plays. It's very soft. It's from Peter Pan. When I finished the song she ran up to the stage and kissed me. It was just down to me, "this is Judy Garland!" She said, "Oh, that is my favorite song." I was just thrilled to death – because it just changed the concept I had of her. I was with Quincy's band when she stopped us from recording one night at Newport. That is the night that Duke Ellington's guys played at 27 choruses on that. Everybody – – the war of the bands, they were four or five big bands there. Judy Garland went up and stayed on stage for four hours. By that time, that is too much time for Phil Woods and all those guys. But Judy Garland could do it. That is too much time for musicians to be sitting around and doing nothing. It is a recipe for disaster. But, I love every moment that I had with Melba, Patty Bowen and I have some young kids. You know, Sara Rockavino out of North Texas State. She studied with Dave Weiss. There's some pretty good people there that I have had my little signature on.

**Brower:** Let's talk about some of them. You mentioned Steve Davis. Can you talk about some of them, and some of the trombone players that you helped?

**Ken Kimery:** We gotta change the tapes.

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**Brower:** Okay, we'll come back. And we have, I think we can safely do 40 more minutes. We can safely do that.

(Recording Stops)

**Curtis Fuller:** Life is a gift. I don't take anything for granted you know. I love it so much that I wish I had more time to explore it. You know, music, and myself see if I'm capable of going to release other different types of music things in my lifetime. I am glad that I will always be a student. I am a student. I am a jazz master per se but only in title. I am a student. Not only of music, but also of life. I don't know everything. I am learning. You know, when you teach it is a process of learning. You find out what you don't know. There will always be a student that will ask you a question you can't answer. I found that out quick! But, in doing so I do just like I tell them, I do a little research and I come back. You can bet your bottom dollar I will have their answer before the day is up (laughs). That is what I am all about.

**Brower:** But, some of the trombone players that you have either worked with, or you have developed, or are developing now, just touch on some of them.

**Curtis Fuller:** Well, Steve Davis came some of my classes. I worked for almost 20 years with Billy Taylor in New York Jazz Mobile and Steve was my student there. When he got with The Messengers, I helped him. He was by my house almost every day practically, when I stayed down the street from Miles with Jim Green, Art's manager. Not only him, Isaac Smith, Steve Davis, and name it. Every young trombone player saw them... Delafield flew all the way from... Even Trombone Shorty came to me. He knows who I am.

**Brower:** Trombone Shorty!

**Curtis Fuller:** He's a tall kid now. I say (scats frenetic melody) and he says (scats second line marching line). But, it works for him.

**Brower:** Okay. That's more of that Illinois Jackquette stuff.

**Curtis Fuller:** Yeah, he's not going to win an award for his trauma on, but he's a good kid. He played for Lenny Kravitz. So, he is a good kid. He is getting a lot of play. I see a commercial coming out, and everything is Trombone Shorty, Trombone Shorty. This last one was Trombone Shorty. I heard his band and Finland and he has got his thing. It is like the dirty dozen. He is climbing the curtains of the show and shit (laughs). It is kind of discouraging the way they put in a sense to me, if I can be honest. I don't think they should overdo the thing about New Orleans so much. I love

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Pops. There are a whole lot of trumpet players, Red Saunders, all those guys from that period. I love them...he did the inauguration of Louis Armstrong...but they have made another thing out of it. It is almost cultish. Do you know what I mean? I also have to give my props to Miles Davis, to Roy Eldridge, Sweets, and everybody that had something to do with it..."Hot Lips" Page. Cootie, Clark Terry, and

**Brower:** Red Allen.

**Curtis Fuller:** Red Allen, and anybody that had something to do with it.

**Brower:** Doc Cheedham

**Curtis Fuller:** That is what I'm saying. You know, like when New Orleans was going so was Buell Street in Memphis. They had areas all over the country. While all this New Orleans business? Detroit had the same thing going. Pops couldn't wait to get to Chicago and when he got to Chicago, he found people playing their ass off. He went in there and upset the world.

**Brower:** Well that's... Well, there is a need, where there seems to be a need for a simple narrative that explains everything. We live in a star system so they only make one room for one start. We have sat here and we've been discussing trombone players up ying yang. You can do that and we have gone from city, to city, to city and identified cats as killer.


**Curtis Fuller:** I'm gladly while it up at the heavens I see thousands of the stars. They light up my world. I don't think one star could do that. It may be good for a seamen, "Oh, there's the north star, I think I'll follow that." I'm talking about in general.

**Brower:** The heavens, the galaxy.

**Curtis Fuller:** Yeah. The heavens, the galaxy.

**Brower:** We sort of live on the notion of impoverishment. Like, there can only be a few great things.

**Curtis Fuller:** That's why few religions bother me. They're not all inclusive. I always had this trouble in the Jesuit school. Everything I read from Job two ecclesiastical, it is not inclusive. There is nothing about the whole race of China. Which is a third of the world population. Ying and yang.

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**Brower:** Well, I think that's a function of who has the political power over the last three or four centuries.

**Curtis Fuller:** That's what I'm saying. In my own family, my wife was devout. She was a Eucharistic minister at her age. But still, other kids went there. They were all sent to private schools. They were the very best in the Catholic world. But still, there was a line. They all became, even the girl became an altar boy.

**Brower:** By the way, we mentioned your children. You have three?

**Curtis Fuller:** Three from this wife. There are a couple others. A few of them used to live here in Washington. My first wife, I say wife, but we were never married. We had children. She was a dancer. We attempted to get married, but the mother toward the license. She figured that I was not worthy of marrying her daughter. So she ended it before it began. But, we had an association for 18 years because of the child.

**Brower:** Are your children involved in your music, and your legacy?

**Curtis Fuller:** My daughter, to keep the ship afloat, she's very influential. Because, she did her last graduate work in Sorbonne, in Paris. She was used a lot once they found out that she was my daughter. That opened a few doors for her, which helped out because the euro was so low. I sent her \$1000, which was only good for 300. It is said. "The euro is only 57!" (Laughs)

**Brower:** What is her discipline?


**Curtis Fuller:** Good.

**Brower:** No, I mean in an academic sense. What was she studying?

**Curtis Fuller:** French as a second language and marketing. That is the same thing my son out of Amherst, he studied finance. Nobody followed me. I guess were having an awful lot of trouble now. Maybe they should think of something else! (Laughs)

**Brower:** But do you think they were happy?

**Curtis Fuller:** They better be because my wife left the property and everything to them. It was thought that I was going first because I was 23 years old and my wife.

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She left my daughter as the inheritor of her will. But, by the staff so I can stay here as long as I want. I am undaunted.

**Brower:** I am talking to your personal legacy. Do you think it will protect that if they understand your stance?

**Curtis Fuller:** I'm sure. Their intimate. My daughter especially, and the girls love their dad. She would give me anything. She is always concerned about my health and everything. And every time I play close around, she is there. Every girl that went to Smith, she brings the whole crowd in there.

**Brower:** Now, do you have a lot of personal memorabilia? Things like pictures from a period of time?

**Curtis Fuller:** Yes, Like I told you I opened the door one day and is For FedEx brought this great big thing. This thing I could fill up the whole thing there where the fire places. It was a gold record for "Blue Train." (Laughs) they didn't know what to do with it so they gave it to me. It is only one left they said, "oh, give it to the trombone player." And my daughter wants it. She wants to keep my papers, my music, and everything. Dolphy, he's organized my music. Steve Davis has done that. All the guys, they come in. It has been said that I am a lot like a hermit in that I am un tidy, in the music room it is a mess. That tapes, CDs, I had tapes from everybody, Basie, everything Ellington did. You would not believe the tapes I had. I have over 5,000. I ran out of this site have to use this little disc. I am trying to have my son transfer them to smaller disks so we can get in it. The guy brought me home, I was working at the New England Conservatory, and he said, "Curtis, do you want a will ride home?" I don't drive or nothing. So, he brought me home and he came in the house and he said, "Jesus, it looks like Hunter's place!" So, I didn't know whether to feel embarrassed or... Was he right? Alan Chase, you probably know Allen Chase of the New England Conservatory. I told you, I promised you that I had the most darling picture of Coltrane and his children. Want to see it? I wish I could give you a copy.

**Brower:** I got a camera. We just have a little bit of time left. There is someone so we haven't touched on. We talked little about -- when we started ISU to talk about the one thing they don't want to be asked about. I thought it was "Blue Train" because he said if I asked about the record he would leave. I thought that is what you are talking about.

**Curtis Fuller:** I am not going to leave. It was a bit of an exaggeration. There are things I don't like to hear repetitive. I made the date. The date is done. Like sticks

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and stones, it is back to that. You can say whatever you want. It is done. It is 50 years old. Will

**Brower:** But, this is standard you had to meet as an instrumentalist to make the date. I think you're very proud of the fact that "Trane never played with another trombonist. That is probably because of the technical challenge opening with him. So, there is a significance in this. I mean, you don't like to be asked, "why were you on that date?" But...

**Curtis Fuller:** I'm kind of like Jay and every other trombone player, sometimes we are guilty, I know I am... I have a friend that went to school with me, from grade school. He was with the '76ers. He was our champion basketball player. He was just in Detroit when I was there. He said, "Look at it this way Curtis." I said, "There are just things I can't do anymore." He said, "I go out to the playground and play with the kids and my knee keeps giving out on me just like the way it did on the basketball court. What we do, Curtis..." Now, he's an analyst because he works with kids from around the country. He's like one of those truant officers. He is a national truant officer that brings always kids to Detroit, to this main place. And he says, "sometimes, we set the bar level too high and we sulk later because we can't keep that standard calling, you know?" I think that happens. We are all guilty of that. That's why Joe said, "just call me that old soldier and just fade away." I just can't fade away into the dust like that, you know? I have to try. There was one author that at least give me credit for trying to do things another way. I now I have lost a great breathing capacity and I once enjoyed. I do play long phrases in things and now I have to break them up. I have to use different methods, you know? Now, I try bursts of ideas. I don't have the liquidity of long sustainable things so I break it up. It's like I'm talking. I get my breathing circulated right. Then I come back with another one. It's like that. You rebound. It is like a car company, you have to retool things and learn to do it another way. If I don't, they'll probably send in one of those mechanical motor things. They don't need me anymore! "There he is!" You know, that is where I'm coming from. I try, I try to be what I... These are treasures, in the sense that... I had to -- I will tell you little something. I had this compassion one day. And I had the patience of Job that day, that God gave me. I wanted to step out of this book and do "Bouncing" with Bud. He wasn't there. He said, "Idaho." Idaho, there it is! Idaho, you the pimp. (Laughs) it was like in his face, This is going to be like what I thought. Had to play straight because he was like... That look. You know that look when you see it. It was just like -- it is almost like a fixed special. He did not change the whole day. I had to be tempered for that. I thought, "oh, man I practiced all night and I thought we're going to go in there and... Man is Bud Powell. I didn't know what to think"

**Brower:** No infidels, none of that?

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**Curtis Fuller:** Nope. None of that. You know, I had sort of like tried to prepare mentally. I said my expectations were almost stymied. I had no idea to know where to begin with his thinking. I did know what seed plant where, you know? And what groove to light it up in. So, it is what it is. God had these three guys there, you know? Oriental, a white guy, and the brothers. Good Lord, I tried to do everything I was supposed to do. "What do you think I can do to better myself?" He said, "You are what you are." So he went about his business he asked the other guy who was like my friend... I've done everything I can do and I'm still stuck right here. What can I do he says, "you are what you are." Some brother came up to him said, "Lord, I got the same problem. I don't know" He said, "You is what you is." (Laughs)

**Brower:** You are, you is, but you're my children (Laughs) whatever you are or is.

**Curtis Fuller:** It was the same thing but he had to tell the brother in a different way so he can understand it so he can get the gist of where he was coming from. So, that little burst kind of keeps me in check. But, I did... And you know, the funny thing about it, they got him looking at this saxophone and there wasn't a saxophone player within miles of where we were. But, they got a saxophone that. That's what it is. He played all these things, keeping the grooves and some solos. He kept all this simple. If you look at it, "Blue Pearl" he said there and just, sort of whatever his mind was, I don't know where his mind was there. There was coherency, and I mean that's an implied that it wasn't a degenerate mind. I don't mean that. But I mean certainly not... So, I take when people asked me about the day, I take this as -- I looked upon as a chance the with one of my heroes of all time in my life that I listen to it. The night I met Bud, he heard me with Willie Wells and a guys playing his song, "Bounding with Bud" at breakneck speed.

**Brower:** In Detroit?

**Curtis Fuller:** In Detroit he heard me. (Scats an extremely fast head) you know, so he heard that. He grabbed my hand and squeezed it, "you play so nice, Curtis Fuller." And so, I didn't think I would end up playing for nobody, you know? Then, in those days, I was working for brother Yusef. When I got to Paris, I walked into the Bluenote. Bud comes up, he wasn't playing that night. Kenny Clark was playing with Nathan Davis and them. True enough, he comes up and he must've thought I was one of his old buddies or something. "Curtis!" Bud Powell calling me Curtis like he knows me! "Buy me a drink!" (Laughs) I thought the irony of it and I said, "was the drink it? What exactly did he remember of me" But something in his mind kept that name.

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**Brower:** He didn't call you James.

**Curtis Fuller:** He didn't call me James, or Joseph, or nothing. He called me Curtis. So, something that stuck with and... I like him because his wife, Buttercup, was there. She was looking over and he needed that. So, having a chance to do this with him, it wasn't what I wanted to, or anticipated but, hey it is a chance to be with the master, you know? Three songs, we actually played another one with that. He had a little trouble with that one so I think they left that one out. This... I just rushed in there. The thing about this one -- I used to call Hugh Lawson, you know? Hugo is his name but, yeah. So, it's a cross because we used to always make fun of that Igor stuff, you know with Frankenstein. So, we called him Hugo. It was written for him. It was like a line used to play so I took it and sung a little diddy from it. I've always liked Nat Cole as a lovely way to spend the evening. "Here's to My Lady," all that is Nat Cole. When I did "Wee Small Hours Of The Morning" I actually used to listen every night to Frank Sinatra do "When The Leaves Blow..." How is listen to singers. You know Tony Bennett... So, each one of these songs, "Lizzie's Bounce" I told you my sister, I called her Lizzy. Her name is Elizabeth. That's where that came from. Soon, I learned that from Pepper Adams, that's only used to play. That's the story behind that.

**Brower:** You know, I think we should wrap. As with all of these opportunities to talk with the greats in this music, I feel like we just scratched something and, you know I could spend like a week--


**Curtis Fuller:** Yeah, we're being repetitive.

**Brower:** Well, but it would -- there may be things that would be repeated but, it is like when you do another interpretation, there will be something else there that wasn't there before. There will be another idea that will come.

**Curtis Fuller:** That's what we are. We are not going to ever do something the same way.

**Brower:** There is just so much more we could do. If you want to leave us with a parting thought, or something that you want on the record that we did not ask about, maybe we have five minutes or so.

**Curtis Fuller:** I would like to say this on behalf of you gentlemen I thank you for taking your time out from your very interesting work that you do, that you've done, and that you will be doing in the future with different artists like myself, or with different jazz masters. We are just regular guys. I appreciate what is happening here. I think it is a good thing. It is something that needs to be done, and should continue

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to be done. It will help the listener, or the reader get a chance to know us a little bit better. People want to know something about the product they would like to buy, or whatever. It is how you present it, you know? This is a form of marketing, it will give some insight to hear. You know, to she or he or whatever. I think it is a terrible thing that has began to happen with the Hollywood crowd, now that we have so much equipment that we can get into people's lives Twittering and doing what ever that we are doing. There is so much mud slinging, and this, and that and the other. I am glad to get a chance, and for people to get an opportunity through your thoughts, and the way you've conceived, or received what I have told you. We have shared, and pass that on to your readers and listeners. I am glad that I have had the opportunity comment as an artist, to express this side of myself, things that could lay dormant forever, but you brought some things out in me and you have given people a chance to have a better understanding as to who Curtis Fuller is and I thank you and your organization for allowing me that privilege. Thank you.

**Brower:** Okay. Well, I hope we are not done. I mean, we are done right now but I hope *we're* not done.

**Curtis Fuller:** Oh, no. Done? (Laughs) No! I hope not either. I don't know what the Creator has in store for me. I pray I get home safely to my family, and stuff like that, but whatever! Should I not? I have had this opportunity and this could be the last living thing they will hear of their father. You never know what is going to happen. If you get this out, that will be a memorandum for them to live by.

**Brower:** Great.

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***END OF INTERVIEW***

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***Transcribed by Kyle Kelly-Yahner***

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