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NAT HENTOFF
NEA Jazz Master (2004)

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Schoenberg: It's February 17th, 2007. We're at 35 West 12th Street in New York City. My name is Loren Schoenberg. Our guest is Nat Hentoff. We're interviewing him for the Smithsonian Oral History project. I start off by saying, Nat, this is something I've been looking forward to do for a long time. It's an honor to be talking to you this afternoon.

Hentoff: Thank you sir. It's an honor to talk to somebody who's an actual musician, not a jazz master without a horn.

Schoenberg: We're talking with Nat Hentoff. There are so many places to go in this interview. Before I ask a question – I'm going to hopefully disappear pretty soon as a voice on this tape, because you don't need to hear me asking questions – I want to set a groundwork and context for the interview, the things that I would like to focus on, at least for a starter. We're talking with someone here who was on a personal level friendship with, just to name a few people, Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, Charlie Parker, Thelonious Monk, John Coltrane, Charles Mingus, Frankie Newton, Jo Jones, and Sidney Bechet. We're talking to someone whose personal experience includes anecdotes that include Sidney Bechet and Bunk Johnson and run right up until [the] current day. We're talking about someone who started – who had a record label that produced an outstanding group of recordings during its short-lived history. Of course we're talking about Candid Records. We're talking about someone to whom the First and Fourth Amendments specifically form not just an intellectual premise, but something that he has devoted a

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large part of his life to exploring and defending. We're talking with someone who has produced a television show and a book that amazingly let the musicians speak for themselves. Of course we're talking about *Hear Me Talking to You* and *The Sound of Jazz* television show, both of which let the musicians speak. We're talking to someone who was in a sense a member of a great tradition of being almost like – as I like to think of it – abolitionists of the twentieth century, in the way that – along with Whitney Balliett, Martin Williams, and a handful of others – had a personal relationship, a historic relationship, and an active relationship, in terms of race relations, in the twentieth century. Finally, the place to start to gather the basic outlines of your life, Nat, is to say that Nat was born just about 60 years after the end of the Civil War. It's important to say things like that, because the world that Nat Hentoff was born into was closer to the Civil War than we are to the world that Mr. Hentoff was born into. As odd a statement as that sounds, it's a fact.

Nat, where and when were you born, and what was your given name?

Hentoff: I was born on June 10th, 1925, in Boston, Massachusetts, where I grew up until I came to New York in 1953 as the New York editor of *Down Beat*. I wrote about those interim years in a book called *Boston Boy*. Boston at the time won a prize, if that's the word for it, as the most anti-Semitic city in the country.

Schoenberg: Nat, what was your name at birth? Was it Nat Hentoff, or Nathaniel?

Hentoff: What's that?

Schoenberg: Your first name. Is it Nat?


Hentoff: My first name, which I hardly ever use, is Nathan. There's a middle name, Irving, after some relative. But I've been Nat for a very long time.

Schoenberg: Tell us about your parents: your father's name, your mother's name.

Hentoff: My father's name was Simon Hentoff. He came here from the old country, which was Russia. He didn't want to be drafted into the Czar's army, and more to the point, he didn't want to be the victim of a pogrom. There were some of those then.

My mother also came – her name was Lena Katzenburg – from the old country. The story she tells is that one day the word came in the ghetto that the Cossacks were coming. Her own mother popped her into the oven and closed the cover. Fortunately the oven was not lit, or I wouldn't be here. That was the kind of, let's say, ambience, that she was happy to leave.

Schoenberg: When you say the old country, can you be a little more specific?

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Hentoff: One came from Minsk and the other came from Pinsk. You can say part of it was Poland, but the borders kept shifting. The old country was a place where you wanted to leave as soon as you could.

Schoenberg: When did the Hentoffs arrive in the United States.

Hentoff: I don't have the exact dates. If I'd known you were going to ask that, I'd have gotten my FBI file. When I wrote a memoir, *Boston Boy*, and later, *Speaking Freely*, about my New York years, my FBI file was very useful. I found out the names of the particular towns they came from, and I found out the name of my first employer in a haberdashery store when I was a kid. Let's see. I know they were here for some time before they married. My mother worked, for example, at Filene's, which was then a big-deal store in Boston. My father became at first a house painter. He later helped organize a house-painters' union. I don't know if that explains some of my DNA for being pro-labor. Eventually he had a haberdashery store in Chelsea, Massachusetts. Then came the Depression.


Schoenberg: Nat, could you do us a favor? The people listening to this interview long after we're all gone will be longing for some information. You mentioned your book *Boston Boy*. I hope anyone who's ever taken the time to listen to this interview will read that as a preface, but it's so good to hear it from your mouth. Could you paint – could you introduce your parents to us briefly. Give us a little character sketch, if we had met them.

Hentoff: My mother had been a very independent woman, growing up in Orthodox Jewish religion. For example, when her father died, she insisted on saying the prayer for the dead and speaking at the shul, the synagogue. That was rarely done. When she was at Filene's, she became, I think, a head cashier. Then after her marriage, she was pretty much a housewife.

My father was a role model to me in a number of ways. I'll give you a quick example. When I was a kid he took me to a restaurant and forgot to pay the check. After we'd walked a few blocks, he said, "Hey. We've got to go back," which was a lesson that I didn't need a book to learn from. Then later, when he became a traveling salesman, which was a – as he once said, Willie Loman had tough territory. In the South, he once had lunch with a black guy and almost was busted for it. So he was a civil rights guy and altogether a model.

Schoenberg: Nat, were your grandparents a part of the equation, part of the picture.

Hentoff: They died pretty soon after I was born. The only anecdote I have about my grandmother was when I was still in my crib, she came and gave me some kind of toy, and I threw it across the room. I guess that explains some of my writings.

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Schoenberg: Tell us about the neighborhood, the house that you grew up in, and paint a picture for us. You mentioned it being an anti-Semitic town.

Hentoff: Yeah. Roxbury was interestingly divided. It was mostly Jewish. When Franklin D. Roosevelt was running, and I thought he was the permanent President, he carried our ward, Ward 12, overwhelmingly, but we also had some communists and anarchists. I think the latter were non-violent. But the communists – for example, my barber tried to enlist me in the Young Communists League. I had recently read at the age of 15 Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon*, and I declined. I never got a good haircut after that.

The anti-Semitism was so pervasive that Father Charles Coughlan, who had a very popular radio program on Sundays from the Church of the Little Flower in Royal Oak, Michigan – that program was so popular that ball games were put on another time in Boston. The city was so polarized in that regard that if you were a Jewish kid and went out alone after dark, you were asking for a lot of trouble. One of the kids in my neighborhood had a pickaxe in his head, and he was not the same afterwards. I was once hit in the mouth, but that didn't have any permanent lasting effect. The effect was, I grew up knowing what it was to be an outsider. I think that's effected me ever since in terms of everything I write.

Schoenberg: How was it when you say that a Jewish kid going out at night was asking for trouble? How could they tell you were Jewish? You weren't wearing a yarmulke.

Hentoff: If we were in the neighborhood – the city then had ethnic neighborhoods. South Boston was Irish. East Boston was Italian. Roxbury and Dorchester were Jewish primarily, although there were blacks up the street, in Holland Street. But mostly it was Jewish, so if a bunch of kids came in from, let's say, south Boston or Dorchester – the non-Jewish part – [and] they saw you on the street, they figured you were – I tell in the book, *Boston Boy*: I was once – I once had a Muggsy Spanier record that I coveted. I was walking down Elm Hill Avenue, which is near where I lived, and a bunch of these kids surrounded me. I wanted to protect that record and myself. They said, "Are you a Jewish kid?" "No, I'm Greek." I must say that my embarrassment – when my older son Nick was Bar Mitzvahed, he told that story as part of his Bar Mitzvah speech.

I'll tell you one thing that changed my life in Boston. When I was about 15 or 16, a friend of mine introduced me to a woman named Francis Sweeney, who was the editor of a muckraking paper – that's an honorable term in my business – called *The City Record*. She started it to expose political corruption in Boston, which is easy. You just open the window and tips would come in.

Schoenberg: Was this the time of Mayor Curley, or who?

Hentoff: No, Curley was a little later. I got to know Curley when I was in radio. But at the time, the town was so anti-Semitic. She was a passionate committed Catholic and was furious at the Church because it didn't do anything about it. So she decided to do some investigative stuff on anti-Semitism. She got some of us kids to be reporters, sort of incognito. She was, I think, all my life my main role model. She wouldn't take any advertising. She said, "I'm the boss. They can come to me." After a while – after we had gotten into this job of ours, going to meetings and pretending to be sympathizers, she came in one day. We had a meeting. She slapped – she had given us what nowadays is called a sensitivity test – she slapped the papers down on the table and said, "You're the most bunch of bigots I've ever seen." It turns out the tests had indicated to her that we were pretty much anti-black, sort of anti-Catholic. Anyway, she really gave me a direction in life, somewhat like Ben Webster, the tenor saxophonist. He gave me a lifetime credo after that, in my early twenties. I was on radio already. I had a jazz program. Ben came to town. I knew him somewhat. At the time he had left Duke Ellington. The club owners usually around the country wouldn't pay sidemen, so he was playing with local guys, trying hard to get them into the groove. That night it wasn't working. We're sitting at the bar. He looked at me and he said, "You know, if the rhythm section ain't making it, go for yourself." I found that a very useful way to conduct my life.


Schoenberg: Was this woman you mentioned – Sweeney – was she doing something similar to I. F. Stone in later years?

Hentoff: She did the editorializing and the fact-checking. That's where I learned fact-checking. She said, "If I don't write stuff that's absolutely accurate, that's the end of me," because she was very unpopular. She was thrown out of some Catholic right-wing meetings, because she was denouncing the anti-Semitism and the like. She was a newspaperwoman of great integrity.

Schoenberg: Nat, when did music cross the threshold?

Hentoff: The first music that really got to me, that made me want to hear more of it, was when I had to go to the high holidays at the shul, the local Orthodox shul. There was no option about my being there, although I had no religious sense then or since. What got me was the chazan, the cantor. The cantors largely improvised on a niggun, a melody. They did it with such fervor, such passion. To use a later term, it was soul music. I once said to my friend Charles Mingus, "That was the Yiddish blues."

By the way, I was much moved many, many years later – only a few years ago – when – what was his name? Steven Bernstein and Sam Rivers – Sam Rivers is a man, maybe older than I am, who is always on the cutting edge of where jazz is going. What Bernstein did was to transcribe some of the recordings of the leading chazans, the leading cantors – Yossele Rosenblatt, Moishe Oysher – and made them into jazz and blues. It was called

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The Diaspora Blues. So for the first time in my life I had – in my head, I could hear what I had heard then.


The music, aside from that, that first got to me: I was 11 years old, walking down Washington Street, a business street in Boston. In those days, the record stores had public address systems. I heard this music coming out. I was so impressed I shouted. A Boston boy didn't do that, not then, especially a Jewish Boston boy outside of his neighborhood. I rushed into the store. "What was that?" It was Artie Shaw's *Nightmare*. I later found out – I always wanted to talk to Artie about that, because I got to know him when I was at *Down Beat*. I was going to ask him about it, but he died. The interview was cancelled just before then. I found out later that *Nightmare* was based on a niggun, which was a chazanic thing. That got me very interested in this thing called jazz. I found some record stores here you could get three 78 r.p.m.s for a buck. It was the Depression. I was working first on a fruit team – horse-drawn fruit team, where I was the delivery boy. I picked up – I began to pick up some blues singers – Bessie Smith. Then I went to Louis Armstrong, Count Basie, and the whole thing. That became an integral part of my life ever since.

Schoenberg: How did your family react to your interest in the music of . . . ?

Hentoff: My father, who was on the road most of the time, just thought that was part of my obsessiveness. I used to have so many books that the books crowded into the living room, which he didn't much like. My mother couldn't understand why I was playing that stuff. She said, "It all sounds the same." It almost drove her crazy. When Fran Sweeney died, I kept playing Ben Webster ballads again and again and again. As I said, it was an essential part of my life.

Schoenberg: The way you're talking about the books and the obsessiveness and everything, it brings up the Talmud to me. I think of you almost as a Talmudic scholar related to what it is that you do. Was the Talmud and that kind of study – was that something that you observed people doing at the . . . ?

Hentoff: Yeah. That was a shul where they not only davened – that is, prayed volubly – but you could see the – especially the elderly men – I had to go to Hebrew school, which was rather a drag, because I was going to Boston Latin school, where you had to do three hours of homework a night. I studied, in the original Hebrew, the Old Testament – I can't remember a word of it – at Latin school. I also had three years of Greek, and I can't remember a word of that. So I think essentially my yiddishkeit came out of the music, because the other kind of music that really got me as a kid before I heard Artie Shaw's *Nightmare* – the local synagogue also doubled as a catering hall for the weddings there. Usually the weddings – the music there were the klezmers, the klezmorim. This was a tradition that went back to Eastern Europe, where when they would travel, without getting killed, they would go round and play in various parts of Europe. They absorbed

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some of the music – the ethnic music that they heard. They swung. I remember I used to rush down the street, because it was only about a block away, my mother going after me so I wouldn't get hit by a car. Later on I kept going to those weddings just to hear the music. There was a clarinet player – I was a failed clarinetist. I was so impressed. I said something to him. He looked at me and said, "Where do you think Benny Goodman came from?"

Schoenberg: When you mention the klezmer band, and the way they swung – we have an interview with Ellington in 1939 in Sweden where the Swedish guy is trying to get him to say that jazz is the only music that swings. Ellington says – he said, "Swing is an emotional element." He said, "All music swings in . . ."

Hentoff: Oh, yeah. My goodness, Bach swings.

Schoenberg: Yeah, especially when Glen Gould plays it.

Hentoff: The Brandenburg concertos, if people know what they're doing, that swings out of the room.

Schoenberg: Right. So what we're talking about basically is a certain rhythmic lilt . . .

Hentoff: It's a pulse. I overuse the term, when I write about musicians, that jazz is a life force. You can tell if the music is swinging, if you can feel it. It doesn't have to be explicit. People like Mingus, you could – implicitly, no matter what they were doing, you could feel that pulse, what I call the pulse of life.

There's a wonderful jazz singer, Katherine Russell, who's the daughter Luis Russell, who had a very important big band in Harlem. Her mother, Carline Ray, used to be in the Sweethearts of Rhythm. One of the oldest biases in jazz, which still exists to a large extent, is that women don't have the chops to play jazz. Well, that band did. Carline Ray is still playing and also writing. Anyway, her daughter Katherine, instead of saying "swinging" or "groove," she says, "I look for the music to be in the pocket." You can tell when it's in the pocket, very clearly. You don't need a book to tell you.

Schoenberg: I'd like to talk about what is at the root of the different feelings, because I found – or I should phrase it this way: have you found that in the jazz version of it, that comes out of the black churches, there's a certain kind of joy, a certain kind of optimism, and a certain transcendence that is different from Hebraic-Jewish feeling of motion. I've never – I'd like your reaction to this. I've never found the Jewish music – the Klezmer music with a tremendous beat – to be something that is either optimistic or joyful in the same way that that handclap from the church is. How did you experience the difference between the two?

Hentoff: That is participatory music. One of the things I began to collect, still when I was a teenager, were recordings of black preachers and their congregations. That was – wow. At the radio station where I worked for quite a while – WMEX – on Saturday nights we had the local gospel guys coming in. That was a real celebration.

Mingus tells the story. His parents went to different kinds of churches. I think it was his father's church that was one of the real gospel churches where the people got involved totally into the praying and the singing. It was all one and the same. You can hear that in his music. Oh yeah, that was a different kind of feeling.

Schoenberg: At that point in Boston, did you get to experience the black church or the black dances in person? When did that happen?

Hentoff: No, I didn't get to the black churches until I came to New York. Then I was in Harlem one day and I walked into – I didn't even know what it was, but there were trombones, people were playing tambourines, and the preachers and the singing. It was Daddy Grace. I went to some of those afterwards as well. I wish I still had those recordings. In fact there are some – there's a man named Joel Dorn who recently put out a superb collection of the major gospel recordings. Talk about music as joy.

Schoenberg: Can you remember the names of any of the preachers whose recordings you had?

Hentoff: One of them I think was – I think it was the old man Franklin, Aretha's . . .

Schoenberg: C. J. Franklin.


Hentoff: C. J. Franklin. The others, I can't remember.

Schoenberg: Were you exposed at this time to Louis Armstrong's Elder Eatmore's sermon and the takeoffs that Bert Williams and other people used to do on . . .?

Hentoff: No, that came later. What hit me the hardest about Louis, the first time, was *West End Blues*. That was stunning. I kept playing it again and again and again. If I were teaching this music, I'd start with that.

Schoenberg: We have you walking down the street, exclaiming out loud, hearing *Nightmare*. What was the path that went from that to what followed? Was it meeting Jo Jones at the Savoy? What was it?

Hentoff: I hungered to hear the music live. Before I was old enough to legally go into some of the clubs – we had the Ken Club in Boston and a few others – I snuck in. I needed to shave long before most other people. That's one of the reasons I have a beard all these years. I would hear people like Sidney Bechet, Wild Bill Davison. In Boston

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they also used to have Sunday afternoon jam sessions where there was no age limit. There was some very good music there.


Then by luck I got into radio. I had worked in a candy store with a guy named Ed Blackman, who later became an announcer before he became a professor of religion, and there was an opening at this radio station. I was a staff announcer. I also covered politics. I was James Michael Curley's announcer most of the time on his campaigns. But I got them to let me do a jazz program on time they couldn't sell. That led to my inviting up [Duke] Ellington, Rex Stewart, and all those people. [I] got to know them somewhat. We started doing remotes from the Savoy, where I lived when I wasn't working. That was a club on Massachusetts Avenue, pretty much at the edge of the black and white section of Boston. They had some very good house bands. In fact one of the house bands had a pianist named George Wein, who wasn't too bad either. From the remotes there and at Storyville, which Wein himself later began, I got to know a lot of these musicians. They became – suddenly I learned a lot about the music.

But the adults I got to know – most of them, teachers, people in the neighborhood – these people were larger than life, because they'd been to so many different places. When you got to be able to talk to them outside of the clubs they worked – I remember Ellington said to me once, "I read [?], but you know I've been there. I know what he's writing about." The guys – the sidemen would come back and say what it was like to be in India with the poverty, and people sleeping in the streets.

The other thing about them was, it was clear to me that these were people who took risks all the time. That's what improvisation is about. If they were black, they took risks whenever they traveled down South. Or for that matter, one of the stories that later resounded in my head: Louis Armstrong's band was playing in Connecticut. There was a band bus. As they came close to a gas station, Louis wanted to go to the bathroom. The guy at the station locked the bathroom doors. So it continued. The whole part of it – that's how I got to write about education when I came to New York. Some of the musicians told me how awful some of the schools in Harlem were, but one was pretty good. So I found out what that one was, and I got the *New Yorker* to let me do a year-long piece on it. It's all part of a whole. It's part of – it sounds corny – of an American life.

Schoenberg: Just to get the chronology straight: you were at Boston Latin. Can you describe to someone who may not know anything about it, what did Boston Latin represent?

Hentoff: Boston Latin School is the oldest public school in the United States: 1635. That was one error that Sandra Day O'Connor made in a Supreme Court decision. She said that there were no public schools until the eighteenth century. She didn't know about BLS. When I was a kid, I got in on the seventh grade. You go in the assembly hall, and they've got some of the names of the graduates: Cotton Mather, Ralph Waldo Emerson.

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There was a ringer there, Benjamin Franklin. He left Boston before he graduated. He went to Philadelphia to be a printer.

That was a tough school, but it changed my life, along with Fran Sweeney. You had – this was the Depression. The rich kids went to Andover or Exeter. Most of us were Depression kids. The teachers didn't care who we were or what our background was. You either learned or you got out. That taught me a lot. I read a lot of legal briefs. I learned at Boston Latin School, if you stick with something long enough, you find things out.


Schoenberg: Your years there were from what grade?

Hentoff: I stayed there from seventh grade through graduation. By the way, I came back there a few years ago, and to my great surprise, there was a functioning jazz band, which was totally out of possibility when I was a kid. They have a very good bandmaster there. The kids – of course the front line was different from anything we had. There was a girl, a black player, an Asian player, some white kids. They were playing Ellington's *Things ain't what they used to be*, which was an apt tune for the time. At the end of it I said, "Duke would have liked that." I explained to them: he wrote for the individuals in the band. It was hard to play his stuff. One of them said to me, "You – you – you actually talked to Duke Ellington?" I said, "Yeah, I also told Beethoven someday his music would be recorded."

Latin School was an important thing. After Latin School, for some crazy reason I decided I would apply to Boston College. For some reason I wanted to continue Greek. Well, there were Jewish quotas there, not surprisingly. There were Jewish quotas everywhere. So I wound up at Northeastern University, which was then a very small, essentially engineering college. It was so small that our common room was the same one that the Y[MCA] had across the campus. But that was a lucky break for me, because I became a journalist working for the *Northeastern University News*. I was so green that the first copy I turned in was handwritten. That's when I learned I had to learn how to type. I eventually became editor.

Then came another life-changing experience. The president said, "You people think you are crusaders. From now on, you only write about the lunch room and the football team." So we all left, except one scab – there's always a scab – who became the editor. But that got me very interested in the First Amendment. Not that it worked there. It was a private university. But from the First Amendment I came to all of these wonderful stories about the Constitution. It's interesting how things you never expect to affect the rest of your life happen.

Schoenberg: In a sense in a very jazz-improvisatory kind of way, being open to the moment.

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Hentoff: Yeah, but also, the more I got into the Constitution – years later, when Max Roach was saying to me, jazz is very much like the Constitution in action. Here are these individual people, very attentive to all of the other individuals who are playing and collectively they create something bigger than themselves.

Schoenberg: To go back to Boston Latin just for one quick moment: was that an integrated school? Were there black students?

Hentoff: No, there were very few blacks then. That took a lot of doing. That happened when finally the Supreme Court said that in public schools, segregated education was inherently unconstitutional. Then Boston became a storm center there. But eventually, when I come back there now, there are a lot of black kids and a lot – girls couldn't go. It was like an orthodox synagogue, where the women had to sit up in the balcony. There was a Girls Latin School across the street. That no longer exists. It's integrated.

Schoenberg: At the Latin School – you're born in '25. So you weren't going to be drafted in the Second World War, because you were just a little too young? Is that correct?

Hentoff: No. By the time I got to be – let's see . . .

Schoenberg: 18 would be '43.

Hentoff: . . . 18 or so. I had had several operations on my left arm, one of them because the doctor had left some stuff in there when he operated. I went for my draft physical and seemed to pass it until we got to the last doctor in line. I didn't deliberately do this. I'm not saying I'm sorry about it. I had my Latin School ring on. He was a Latin School guy. He asked, "What about that arm?" I got 4F. Another accident that you don't expect.

Schoenberg: Were there any siblings?

Hentoff: My sister. She went to Girls Latin School. She's now a professor at Fairfield University. She's a published poet.


Schoenberg: Her name?

Hentoff: Janet. Janet Crauss.

Schoenberg: C-r-o-u-s-e?

Hentoff: C-r-a-u-s-s.

Schoenberg: Just the two of you?

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Hentoff: Yes.

Schoenberg: Is she younger or older?

Hentoff: Ten years younger.

Schoenberg: Ten years younger.

We have you hearing the Artie Shaw recording. Then eventually you mentioned the Savoy and all these people. I've read in so many of your books about the role that Jo Jones played in your life.


Hentoff: Jo Jones – Jo was not only a magical drummer. I say magical, because I never forget that once at Storyville, he got off the stand, just with a pair of sticks. He played all over the room, on the floor, almost on the ceiling, and the pulse never left.

He was also a very strongly opinionated fellow, and he had what he called his kiddies: young musicians that he mentored. For some reason I was very privileged. He made me one of his kiddies. He sat me down one night at the Savoy and said, "This music is very serious music. You're not going to play it, but if you're going to write about it, you've got to be straight in your head, and you've got to avoid things like drugs and stuff like that." It was like a preacher.

The best story about Joe I remember was his funeral here in New York at St. Peter's Church, where they have a lot of memorials. Two or three rows were filled with drummers, all the famous drummers. Max Roach told a story. Joe would – whenever he was in a city and one of his kiddies was playing, if he could get off work long enough to go hear them – Max was playing in Chicago. He saw Jo Jones in the audience, and he took a solo with everything he had. Afterward he was waiting for Jo to give some kind of reaction. Jo Jones looked at him and said, "All I could hear was your watch." Jo was an expert on time, on space, on letting the music breathe

Schoenberg: Let's start the specific talk about music with Jo, exactly where you took us: aesthetics, space, and breathing, and Lester Young and the Savoy. You mention in one of your books hearing Coleman Hawkins play the blues. I believe it was one afternoon at the Savoy?

Hentoff: Oh, that was incredible. It was a cold, blustery afternoon. I lived near the Savoy, and I was doing some kind of errand. Just by routine I looked in the window. On the stand were Coleman Hawkins – I don't know how this all got together – Jo and [Count] Basie, etc. They were playing basic blues. It was beyond words. I have this feeling right now. I just got a collection of Ellington live recordings from a label called Storyville in Denmark. I've gone through eight CDs, and now I think I have a sense of what heaven is like if it exists.

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Schoenberg: Jo Jones, Lester Young, and the Basie band. Let's start with them. Try and make me feel or understand what it was at that time to run into musicians like that, musicians with a philosophy, and what it was that they represented to you, because when I mentioned in the introduction, not tongue in cheek, "abolitionists of the twentieth century," what you did, what Whitney [Balliett] did, what Martin [Williams] did, and some of the people before you, in terms of your personal relationships with these black musicians, which at that time was so unusual for them to encounter young white people like you who not only – who didn't condescend and get into the noble savage and get into . . .

Hentoff: Condescend – I venerated them.


Schoenberg: Right. That's . . .

Hentoff: The first time I saw Johnny Hodges not on the stand was, he was coming out the stage door of the RKO Theater. I was so in awe I couldn't even speak to him. What I was amazed at, aside from the – the color thing slipped out of my mind, because I was so involved in the music and got to know them as people, but I was so amazed that these adults would take the time. I was still in my teens and early twenties. Duke would give me advice once in a while. He once said to me, "Yesterday I heard on the radio, they were talking about modern jazz. I heard a cat play like that in the '20s." Then he said to me, "Don't ever get caught up in these categories. It's one musician at a time, one thing at a time." I mentioned before what Ben Webster taught me: if the rhythm section ain't making it, go for yourself. But the fact that I was able to relate to these guys, or they to me in a funny way – funny because I wasn't used to adults talking to me like that – that I felt like a mensch, a person.

Schoenberg: Tell us about the Basie band specifically. Let's start with them. You mentioned Jo Jones, but of course he was part of a quartet with Walter Page, Freddie Green, and Basie, the way that they functioned all together, almost in a metaphysical sense.

Hentoff: The band and the rhythm section was all of a – I liked the excitement of some of the big, strong bands, but the Basie band, that was a use of space and time that none of the other bands had. Basie once said that he wanted his band to sound like a small combo. He was the fulcrum of the band. He did this by – he could play. He came out of the Harlem ragtime full-piano school – Fats Waller, James P. Johnson – but by the time he became a bandleader, he could do more with one note in the right space at the right time, backing up that band. It was another kind of experience.

Lester Young, not only on tenor saxophone – if I had stayed as a clarinetist, I would have wanted to play clarinet like Lester Young. It was a floating kind of extraordinary ease and

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yet strength at the same time. Years later I got a chance to talk to Lester at some length at his home in Queens, when he was off the road. I asked him about the ballad playing. People knew him as a swinger. He said, “I would never play a ballad unless I knew the lyrics.” “Where did you pick up the lyrics?” He pointed to a stack of lyrics near where we were talking. They were all Frank Sinatra records.

The other thing about Lester that I remembered from that – his son, Lester Young, Jr., later became a key figure in the New York school system. [I] said, “I was at your home once.” He said, “I know. They sent me to the movies, so I wouldn’t interrupt.” He told me that whenever Lester was off the road and came back, the first thing he’d do was go to the school to find out how the kid was doing. What I mean is, I got to know these people as people, not only as players. It sounds corny, but their music was their lives. Charlie Parker said that, and it’s clear.

Schoenberg: I remember once you wrote many years ago about – I believe you wrote that if the building was burning, and you had to grab some records, you would grab those Kansas City Six records before the collected works of Stan Kenton and a whole bunch of other people that you mention.

Hentoff: I’d probably get burned up trying to figure what else I wanted to take with me.

Schoenberg: Let’s get back to Lester Young. Again, for those of us that never experienced him in person, how can you – can you try to bring him to life for us in a certain way? – just paint a sketch of . . .

Hentoff: Lester Young was a person who – he didn’t go by anybody else’s stereotypes of either musicians or black people or anybody. He had his own language which I’m not going to try to reproduce here, because it would be corny. He had a sense of himself. He didn’t care if people considered him odd or whatever. He was a very thoughtful guy. It comes out in his music as well. In fact, the essence of Lester – and it was his music, but also his life – was in that program, *The Sound of Jazz*, you referenced. That day – this was toward the end of his life. I didn’t know that then. We were going to put him – Whitney Balliett and I and the producer Robert Herridge – in the reed section of a big band that we concocted for the occasion, with Coleman Hawkins and Ben Webster. But Lester was not feeling well, so I said, “Look. You don’t have to do that part of the show. Why not just a set with Billie [Holiday]?” There was a small combo. They were surrounding her. They had been very close, but had drifted apart to some extent. I told him, by the way – I said, “You don’t have to even stand up when you play your solo.” But he did. He played the purest blues I’ve ever heard. In the control room, we were watching so closely, because the camera had Billie and Lester looking at each other as he was playing, and it was as if they were talking to each other. You could tell by the expressions on her face and to some extent on his – like they were reminiscing. It was very intimate. There were tears in my eyes and the producer’s eyes. It was an

extraordinary moment. That to me, and I guess to people who have seen the show around the world, was the climax of that program. Fortunately we had a producer, Robert Herridge, who insisted that the camera guys improvise, just like the musicians. Otherwise, we wouldn't have had that shot. Before we started – it was a live show – he said to the camera guys, “No matter what you hear from the control room, forget it if you've got a good shot.”

That also was the time when I got Billie Holiday mad at me, because – she said I never told her. Maybe I forgot to. But she came strolling into a sound session. She said, “I just paid \$500 for a gown for this show when we do it.” I said, “Billie, look around you. That's the set. The studio is the set. The camera guys will be in the set. The guys will be wearing whatever they wear at rehearsals.” She was furious. But at the end of the live show she came over and kissed me. That was bigger than any award I ever got.

Schoenberg: It just dawned on me that I asked you to paint a portrait of Lester Young, and then we realize that, thanks to you, we have the only filmed evidence of him as . . .

Hentoff: Thanks to me and Whitney. I mean . . .

Schoenberg: Whitney and Robert Herridge.

Hentoff: Whitney got me into that. When you think about it, we had Red Allen, Thelonious Monk, Basie, all kinds of people, and I think only one or two of them are still alive.

Schoenberg: Yeah, Joe Wilder I think is the only one.


Hentoff: No, Jim Hall.

Schoenberg: And Jim Hall, probably, yeah.

Hentoff: So it was very fortunate that we had Herridge to – see, that was a Sunday afternoon prime-time show, which meant a lot at the time. During that soundtrack thing, a page came over to Herridge with a note. He looked at it and tore it up. I said to him afterward, “What was that?” He said, “The sponsor's representative said he did not want a woman coming into the homes of America on a Sunday afternoon who had been in prison on a drug charge.” Herridge sent back a note saying, “If Billie Holiday isn't on the show, I'm leaving the show, so is Whitney Balliett, and so is Hentoff.” That was the end of that.

Schoenberg: You mentioned the page. I thought of Walter Page . . .

Hentoff: Oh yeah. Oh my God.

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Schoenberg: . . . who was supposed to have been in the show.

Hentoff: Yeah. There was a recording date before the actual show. The people who taped that show off the air got the actual show. Walter was so intent on getting there during this storm. I guess he had trouble getting a cab, or whatever, but he had a heart attack and never made it.

That intention reminded me of a story about Coleman Hawkins. Somebody was supposed to pick up Coleman for a gig. He came into the apartment, and Coleman was on the floor, clutching his case. He was trying to get there, even though he was so sick that he died, just before the gig.

Schoenberg: It's that life force that he's trying for.

I want to take it back to 1943 and 1944, because the great temptation in talking to you is to focus on the musicians, which we will be focusing on, but we're interested in your story from your perspective. Getting back to graduating from high school, from Latin, getting a 4F and then going to Northeastern, writing, being fired from the paper, the guy who – the scab became the editor. Your early interest in the First Amendment manifested itself through this particular thing. You were – so this would be '43, '44, '45. I know it was around this time that Johnny Windhurst and Sidney Bechet were playing in Boston . . .


Hentoff: That's right – at the Savoy.

Schoenberg: . . . at the Savoy. I'm wondering if you could talk about how you were making a living at that time.

Hentoff: I was in radio. After a while, having had the jazz show, which had some kind of currency . . .

Schoenberg: I'm going to interrupt again. Could you describe – what was the jazz show? Was it you playing recordings?

Hentoff: Yeah, and interviews. It was called "The Jazz Album." The theme song was Rex Stewart's *Mobile Bay Blues*. That starts off like a call – a call to music, a call to prayer, a call. Part of the show, when I could arrange it, was to have interviews with the players. It seems to me that's the only way, aside from listening, you can find out about the music, because, again, the music is their lives. Everything I've written in terms of the books I do, the liner notes, is based on interviewing the musicians themselves. I learned something – I learned a lot every time, but I had a hard time at first understanding Charlie Parker. I grew up on Benny Carter, Johnny Hodges. I couldn't understand the sound and

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the speed and all that. So one day – I think it was Coleman Hawkins. In those days in the studio we had 16 and 1/3 machines, these big machines you played these . . .

Schoenberg: Transcriptions.

Hentoff: . . . transcriptions on. Whoever it was said, “All right. Take that Bird record and put it on” 16 and 1/3. It was a 78 rpm. And oh, I heard the ideas.

It was such a kick for me to be able to talk to these guys. Then came the remotes. That was a lot of fun. A lot of them are now at the University of New Hampshire. They have a classic jazz division in their music department. A woman who came to live there, she and her husband had taped the shows.

Schoenberg: Were there any recordings and/or transcriptions made of the many interviews that you did back at that time? Because I know in the '50s we do have some recordings of these things. But back in '44 and '45 and '46?

Hentoff: No. As a matter of fact, the one – there were two recordings, one then that I feel very bad about. Louis Armstrong had a show at Symphony Hall, where as usual he gave everything he had. But he was a very kind man. So he had agreed to an interview backstage when it was all over. It was about 12, 12:30. For an hour, we started talking about race and what it was like on the road for black musicians, what he'd experienced, etc. That was a side of Louis that – although it became clear later, when he sounded off on Eisenhower at Little Rock – it was very moving. I didn't go to the studio right away. I let the day go by before I picked up the transcription, and they'd erased it, to save money.

The other confession I have to make was in New York. This was before – Herridge wasn't at CBS then. There was an outfit called Dumont television, one of the first ones. He wanted to do an hour of Ellington. Not the Ed Sullivan show with the standards, but some of the longer works. We met with Duke, and I talked him into it, because at first he said, “People aren't going to want to hear the big numbers. They want *Solitude* and all that.” So we talked him into it, and he did *The Harlem Suite*. It was just phenomenal. Herridge, again, delayed going to the studio, and that – I never had the nerve to tell Duke that had happened, because the way I talked him into it was to say, we've got to think about progeny, about the generations to come.

Schoenberg: So you're recording people on the air, you're interviewing, and then eventually the live things from the remote. You mentioned at this time – it's just fascinating to think about your – you were the announcer for Curley, for the mayor. Could you give us a sketch of political corruption in Boston?

Hentoff: Curley was bigger than that. If you want to see James Michael Curley – if you're lucky, you might see on late night television *The Last Hurrah* with Spencer Tracy. That is about as accurate as you can get the personification of Curley.

Curley was – first of all, he had a voice like an organ. He had studied diction and speaking at Emerson College, but he was also a natural orator with a very keen sense of his audiences. He also didn't use any notes when he did these radio broadcasts. Once I did have to cut him off the air. He was going on about the State Street wrecking crew. These were the Republican Yankee bankers. That's when he used to go off on great riffs. I kept giving him the cut signal. Finally I gave him the final signal, and he started pulling \$20 bills out of his pocket. At the end, when I'd cut him off the air, he picked up the money unfortunately.

My favorite radio story about Curley was: he used to do an afternoon luncheon show for women voters. He was talking to the then Attorney General of Massachusetts, one of his comrades. He said, "I think I'm going to give them 'the quality of mercy is not strained'." "Oh no, Governor." He'd been governor once, so they always called him "Governor." "You can't do that. That's Shylock, and the Jews won't like that." "You're right. So we'll give them James Whitcomb Riley."


Schoenberg: What's Riley? I don't understand that.

Hentoff: James Whitcomb Riley was a homespun Midwestern poet. He was hip. He knew a lot.

Schoenberg: We know that in Kansas City someone like Pendergast, the mayor there, and a tremendous web of corruption that Harry Truman and Bennie Moten were both a part of. In terms of its practical application in Boston, was there a good side of what these men were doing? Did it help jazz in any way? Did it . . . ?

Hentoff: I don't think so. In Kansas City, I think the reason the music went on all night and into the morning, was that you paid off the cops. I would think so. But in Boston you had to close at one o'clock or whatever it was. As a matter of fact, the Savoy was one of the few places at that time where there was a naturally integrated audience. The cops didn't like that. Sometimes they would come into the men's room and find out that the soap wasn't where it was supposed to be, and put summonses to warn the owner that this shouldn't go on the way it was going on. No, I don't think the corruption helped jazz at all.

Schoenberg: You mentioned – you've thrown out some names of musicians that you knew and were mentored by. Now you've raised also the specter of integration at the Savoy Ballroom. The Savoy would be a rare place where black and white couples could

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go at that time if they wanted to dance together, which would be unheard of, probably even to have dinner in a restaurant, right, would have been impossible . . .

Hentoff: Oh yeah.

Schoenberg: . . . at that time. Was it a haven for interracial relationships?

Hentoff: To some extent, yeah. The haven, however, was limited, because I got to be very fond of a black singer who appeared there for a while, Shirley Moore. I would walk her home. That's all I ever did in the black section of town. There was a black detective who didn't like that at all. There was some threat of retribution. A very good trumpet player and human being named Frankie Newton . . .

Schoenberg: That's where I was going.

Hentoff: . . . was in the Savoy playing, and he saw what was going on. He decided – he was about six foot – he decided he would follow us when I walked Shirley Moore home, and we didn't have that trouble. He said to me afterwards, “You weren't hiding it, so I decided if I could be of some use, okay.”

Schoenberg: It's so interesting, as opposed to – because I wanted to get into Frankie Newton. I'm glad that we went there. Analyzing his recordings from a musicological point of view is interesting. Hearing an anecdote like that I think certainly tells us as much about who he was or maybe even more about who he was.

Hentoff: Also, he used to give trumpet lessons on the side. Some people – some of the kids couldn't afford it. He said to me, “How could I charge anybody who didn't have the money if they wanted to study music?”


Schoenberg: Let's focus on Frankie Newton, because outside of the fact that Eric Hobsbawn took a nom de plum from him – I believe he wrote under the name Francis Newton.

Hentoff: Yes.

[recording interrupted]

Schoenberg: This is tape two on the 16th [*sic*: 17th] of February interview Smithsonian with Nat Hentoff. Picking up, you mentioned the name Frankie Newton. He's someone who is of endless fascination to me. And yourself and George Wein and Barbara Lea, probably some of the few people left who knew him well.

Louder? You want me to talk louder?

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Hentoff: Yeah.

Schoenberg: Yourself and George Wein and Barbara Lea are probably among the only left who knew Frankie Newton. I know that we've talked about him in the past. There's a woman who was – there is someone who was working on a book or something. I really would like you to give us everything and all you can about – let me ask you like I'm interrogating you. When did you first meet Frankie Newton?

Hentoff: It must have been at the Savoy. Frankie Newton is an example of why Nat Shapiro and I put together *Hear Me Talkin' to Ya*. Back then, in the '40s etc., even a good many of the jazz enthusiasts had the notion that these were really wonderfully eloquent people on their instruments, but otherwise maybe like Amos and Andy. There was still some of that. Those of us who knew how – if I could use a term these days – how articulate they were, and knowledgeable, that's why we put together *Hear Me Talkin' to Ya*. Frankie was a perfect example of that. He was so politically involved, and hip, and controversial as a result. He was also – I'll give you a quick epiphany of Frankie. The Savoy was a place where it was natural for integrated people, but I remember once there was a photographer. For some reason he owed – Frankie owed him some money. At the bar, Frankie gave him the money. The photographer said something like, "That's mighty white of you." He wasn't thinking. Frankie pulled him up by his collar and said, "No. That's mighty black of me." So you couldn't avoid what was going on outside the Savoy.

Schoenberg: Let's start with the physical characteristics. Mr. Hentoff, what did Mr. Newton look like?


Hentoff: He was tall, athletic. He was a tennis player. He was also a painter. I never saw much of his painting.

Schoenberg: How was he complected? Light? Dark? Medium? Coffee color? How would you characterize it?

Hentoff: I can't be sure about that. I never took that sort of stuff into cognizance very much.

Schoenberg: I'm sure. How did you – how would it have happened – I know if Scooter Libby can't remember what happened a couple of years before, you're not going to remember what happened 60 years before with great specificity, but maybe using him as a matrix – the evolution of your relationship with someone like Frankie Newton, from hearing him on a bandstand to actually having him escort you home as you walked home a black girl – how did that actually happen?

Hentoff: It happened in the sense that I got to know some of these musicians – at the time, in addition to the radio show, I was a stringer for *Down Beat* – that is, not a staff member, but I'd write in stories. So I did interviews. That's how I first met Charlie

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Parker, for example. Getting to know them that way – with some of them, like Rex Stewart, for example, we became quite good friends. We socialized together when he was in town, at mutual friends' homes. Local musicians I knew, like a bass player, John Field, would create that kind of atmosphere. So it wasn't only the radio announcer or the journalist involved. There were – we were just friends. The same thing happened with Frankie. Once I talked to him about music, it was quite clear where he was politically – not that we agreed on all those things, but that was part of the fun of it. It was just a natural evolution. Just like I feel privileged to know Clark Terry, and we don't talk just about music. We talk about life.

Schoenberg: Tell me as much as you can remember about Frankie Newton, specifically, where was he politically?

Hentoff: Politically he was to the left of me. I was pretty liberal, but having read *Darkness at Noon* by Arthur Koestler and got to know what Stalinism was like, I was a total anti-Communist. Frankie was so idealistic in some respects, but so pragmatic in terms of the effects of Jim Crow etc., that he was, I think – entranced isn't the word – influenced by the rhetoric of people on what I consider the far right – the far – well, far left, far right, it's all to me the same religion.

Schoenberg: They meet at some point.

Hentoff: He wrote for *The New Masses* and that kind of publication and got himself on various lists. So did I, as a matter of fact. My FBI file has been very useful to me, because I don't have that good a memory.

Schoenberg: Would you say in a sense that – not in terms of being an unrepentant Marxist or Communist – but that Frankie Newton's experience might have been similar to that of Paul Robeson?

Hentoff: I think so, yeah. That reminded me of a story about Robeson. When Paul Robeson was so much an anathema to so many people that there was a riot about him – Peakskill [????] riot, I think. When Dizzy Gillespie was playing the Apollo, Paul Robeson, he found out, was in the audience. Dizzy was so impressed. He expected he'd go back stage. So Dizzy called him afterwards and said, "I was glad that you heard the band." Robeson said, "I would have gone back stage, but I didn't want to get you in trouble." That shows you something about the atmosphere then. There was such a high tension in the air, which among some black musicians led some into – these days – into the Nation of Islam, which I think is a quagmire, to say the least. All of that, interestingly, came into the jazz scene, whether you were far left or whatever, when race became part of Crow Jim, like when Miles Davis hired Bill Evans. He got a lot of flack from black musicians. "What did you want this white guy for? There are a lot of good pianists." I

talked to Miles about it. He said, “I don’t care if somebody is purple with pink polka-dots, as long as he can play.”

Then we had a famous, or infamous, panel discussion about Abbey Lincoln and Max [Roach] and the recording I did for Candid, the *Freedom Now Suite*. I think it was Ira Gitler who said, “Abbey,” something like, “You’re a race woman” or something like that. That all blew up. That stuff was around.

Schoenberg: Take it back to Frankie Newton. I’ve heard from some folks that some of the black musicians of that era who were going to Camp Unity and some of those places – like Sidney Bechet – in the summers, that some of them were going to – let’s put a nice word on it – to meet women, because there was a certain kind of young Jewish woman or young liberal woman who would love to meet an older black musician, and they did it under the umbrella of a Communist camp, or something like that. But Frankie Newton’s involvement was obviously very serious and very different. Was he married? Was he married to a white woman, or a black?

Hentoff: I know he lived with a white woman. I think he was married to her.

Schoenberg: Was he living in Boston when you knew him?

Hentoff: Toward the end he was living in Boston. The gigs weren’t coming. I think he was – at that point he was either a janitor or something like that.

Schoenberg: He painted, didn’t he?


Hentoff: Yeah, he was a painter, but not – he didn’t sell much, I don’t think. He was like Pee Wee Russell. He found painting late in life, and it was very rewarding in that way.

Schoenberg: This question is almost unanswerable, but I’m going to ask it anyway: when Frankie Newton woke up in the morning, how do you think he assessed his life, his career, his lack of opportunity, his plight as a black man at that time? How did he – from how you knew him, how do you think he had a handle on . . . ?

Hentoff: I would be presumptuous to answer that, but I will speculate, as we say, because he also had a very sharp ironic sense of humor. He probably woke up both angry and sardonic, and not giving up. That was the characteristic of all these guys I knew. That was part of being a musician – jazz musician. You didn’t give up. I once said to Jimmie Rowles, the master accompanist – I said, “What do you do when there’s no gigs?” “It’s all right,” he said. “I wait for the phone to ring.”

Schoenberg: I’ve heard that, in a sense, Frankie Newton was blacklisted . . .

Hentoff: Oh yeah.

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Schoenberg: . . . even maybe by John Hammond. As we start to talk about Hammond, Marshall Stearns, Roger Pryor Dodge, George Frazier, and all those people who you knew, I'm curious about – let's start with Hammond and make our intersection Hammond and Newton.

Hentoff: That is news to me, because John Hammond wrote for *The New Masses*, and although he was the scion of a wealthy family, was pretty left himself.

Schoenberg: Absolutely, but as I understood it – and again, I was not there, and you were, so that's why I'm asking you. I'm not certainly telling. I'm asking – when you were a member of John Hammond's stable, of his people that he had, that there was a certain – that you had to toe whatever line it was, and that someone like Frankie Newton – because when you look at Newton's discography – he makes these records when Hugues Panassié comes over, with Pete Brown and all these wonderful records, '40, '41, and then from that point on to the end of his life, there's one session with Stella . . .

Hentoff: Stella Brooks.

Schoenberg: Right. There's like nothing. How could it be, when all these second- and third-rate musicians were making all kinds of records, that Frankie Newton does not wind up in the studio once?


Hentoff: Milt Gabler had him on Commodore, because I know he was on Billie's records, some of Billie's records.

Schoenberg: Just in '39. Just those first records.

Hentoff: But then I think partly – now here I'm speculating, but Frankie's health began to fail. That might have been a factor. I can't imagine that he was blacklisted politically – if Hammond didn't use him, I think that's because nobody told Frankie what to play or how to think musically. Of course there's that famous rift between John Hammond and Duke Ellington, where Hammond was presumptuous enough to say about *Reminiscing in Tempo* and so on, "He's listening too much to European classical music," as if this cat had the right to tell Duke Ellington anything like that.

Schoenberg: That's that great line that Jo Jones had, where he said about one writer who was telling him. He said, "This guy can't fix his own hi-fi, and he's telling me how to play the drums."

To get back to Frankie Newton, just give us an indication of the scope of your friendship with him. Was it just during your Boston years? Did it . . . ?

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Hentoff: We talked every once in a while. The thing about Frankie that comes back to my mind most, aside from the fact that he was a guy who was himself, no matter what it cost him – the music. There’s a recording that keeps resounding in my mind: *The Blues My – what was it? The Blues My Naughty Sweetie Gave to Me*. That’s one of those recordings that is in its way like *West End Blues*. It tells you something about the heart, the soul of this music.

But as a person, I – there are some people, when I see them coming, I’m so glad that I’m going. I always felt that way about Frankie, because he was stimulating. He always had something to say. He was a very bright guy. These days, like a lot of people of that time and generation, I wonder how many people, including people who write about the music, think about him or know about him?

Schoenberg: That’s what struck me over the years, was yourself, Barbara, Ruby Braff, who whenever the name Frankie Newton would come up – just like you do – would come out with these things, which always made me really curious about who this guy was.

Hentoff: He also was a good writer, politically. Again, whether one agreed with him or not, he was – he wrote with a very clear, determined prose.

Schoenberg: I don’t believe – I’m making a note about this – that his writing has ever been collated, so it’s time to start to look for this.


Hentoff: No. Probably you could find it . . .

Schoenberg: In *The New Masses*?

Hentoff: . . . at the J. Edgar Hoover Building in the old *New Masses*.

Schoenberg: Bunk Johnson and Sidney Bechet, and Sidney Bechet throwing glasses . . .

Hentoff: Bunk Johnson was one of the New Orleans icons for people who followed the music. He was – he preceded Louis Armstrong. We all heard about Buddy Bolden, but he never recorded. But Bunk Johnson was a legend. Then he fell into ill health. He lost much of his teeth, etc. Some jazz people got together. I think he went to Sidney Bechet’s brother, the dentist, in New Orleans. He got his chops back. At least that was part of his chops. He was lionized then when he came up North. A lot of the young chicks wanted to meet him. He was like a myth coming to real life. He came to the Savoy with Sidney Bechet. Sidney, however, took his music very seriously. Whether it was that Bunk had been drinking a bit too much, with all the drinks that were plied to him by his admirers, but he was hitting clinkers during that first set. I was there that night. This is not mythology. Sidney decided to sit out the first part of the second set with Bunk. He ordered – I don’t know – six or seven shot glasses of brandy. He sat there, next to the bandstand, and whenever Bunk hit a clinker, whack.

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Which reminded me of a teacher at Boston Latin School, Mr. Doyle, who had, behind him, on a ledge, small pieces of chalk. If he saw some of us dozing or otherwise intended, same thing.

Schoenberg: If I tried that teaching now, I'd be hauled out with . . .

Hentoff: Oh yeah.


Schoenberg: What I'm curious about in your coming of age, this Boston boy turning into this Boston man in the mid-1940s. When we hear Nat Hentoff talk about being around Bechet and Bunk Johnson and Frankie Newton, and Duke Ellington talking to you, and all this kind of stuff – I know many times, when history is written, it's not – it's written with hindsight, of course. At that time – you mention that adults didn't talk to you as a young man like that. So these are human beings who are respecting you and showing you interest. So you respond. How did the awareness of who they were in historical terms become manifest to you? – that these were not – that they were wonderful men and women and friends, but you were with the Beethovens of their time and the Bartoks of their time.

Hentoff: I think part of my natural propensity to read whenever I could – anything. I was one of the kids at the Public Library that wasn't limited to a few books because of my age. But also, the Latin School experience – I really looked into the history of jazz as I got so much pleasure from it. So I knew who these people were historically in terms of the music and how important they were.

Schoenberg: But you would have been still among a relative few who would have taken that seriously, because we're talking about things that, in terms of years, would be like someone now talking about Watergate – it wasn't that long ago. We're talking about 1945, about things that happened in 1925. Jesus, I mean it was only 20 years before. It wasn't . . .

Hentoff: These days, the attention span of most people is what was on cable yesterday. But even then, there are a lot of people around – people I knew who loved the music so much they had to know more about it, so they would read Charles Edward Smith, for example, who was an early chronicler of New Orleans and some of the other stuff. It became a natural part – you wanted to know as much as you could about these people, especially after you knew them.

Schoenberg: Let's start to talk about these writers and people whose footsteps you followed in. You mentioned Charles Edward Smith. I'd like to talk about George Frazier and Roger Pryor Dodge and people like that. Let's start with Smith. What's his place from two perspectives: (a) you, the young 20-year-old, in 1945?; and (b) from our perspective today? Where do you see Charles Edward Smith?

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Hentoff: I wish people read him now. I don't think it's a name that would mean much, even to some of the people – younger people who write about the music. He and Fred Ramsey, who was also a very good writer and researcher and traveler, they wrote a book called *Jazzmen*, I think. I read that pretty much as it came out. That was like reading a romance. They made not only the musicians come alive – obviously they talked to various – a lot of people – but you got the whole ambience, the sense of what New Orleans was like and then Chicago and all that. For example, he once wrote about Pee Wee Russell, whom I later got to know very well – Pee Wee was not the easiest guy to get to talk, but you learned the full-blown Pee Wee Russell from reading Charles Edward Smith. That influenced me in the sense that I wanted to be that kind of writer. I don't think I ever got as fluid as he was. He was a very important figure.

Schoenberg: Did you meet him, Nat?

Hentoff: We talked on the phone several times. I think I met him once. Yeah, as a matter of fact, I did meet him down here in the Village.

Schoenberg: Did he live in New York? He didn't live in Boston?

Hentoff: I don't know. I think he lived in New York.

Schoenberg: He was a writer by trade. He made a living writing.

Hentoff: I assume he did. He was involved in a number of books. He did liner notes and the like. You see, in those days, though, I don't know that anybody made a full-time living out of writing about jazz. Ralph Gleason in San Francisco did to a certain extent, but he wrote about the whole cultural music scene, etc. Leonard Feather probably came closest to a writer who made a living out of writing about jazz.

Schoenberg: Were you aware of Roger Pryor Dodge at that time? Or was that someone . . .?

Hentoff: I'm sorry. I didn't . . .

Schoenberg: Roger Pryor Dodge. Was that someone at that time that you knew about, or was it later?

Hentoff: He lived where I lived for a while, at 25 Fifth Avenue, but we never met.

Schoenberg: When you go back and read his early writings, it's remarkably prescient, from the '20s.

Hentoff: I ought to, but he's one of the ones I never really got to read. I know he was interested in dance a lot.

Schoenberg: Let's talk about a Bostonian, George Frazier.

Hentoff: Frazier was another important figure in my life. First of all, he was one of the first people I think in the United States who had a regular column in a daily newspaper. It was called "Sweet and Lowdown," first in the *Boston Herald* and later in the *Boston Globe*. He had a style of writing that has never been equaled in terms of when he didn't like a performer, or liked them, he had a way of writing that could make you want to hit him or adore him. He once did a set of notes that I just finally got again on Lee Wiley that was the only writing I've ever seen that really captured the sensuousness of which she was capable. He was also very strongly opinionated. I once wrote him a – he had a radio program on WEEI. He did something that I later copied. He sometimes would play recordings and not tell you who it was until it was over, so you'd suddenly find that some of your worst prejudices weren't true. I had a classical music program for a while. I tried that, and people were calling in and saying, "You're telling me that was Tchaikovsky? Oh, my goodness." So that was very interesting. It certainly got your ear, if not better, at least more acutely – but I once wrote him a note that for some reason I took umbrage at what he wrote about Tex Beneke, who was Glenn Miller's singer, but I also thought, not a bad tenor [saxophone] player. But anyway, we got – he invited me up to the studio, and we got to know each other. Later on I – on the bad advice of my mother-in-law and my wife – tried to sue him for defamation, because he was angry at me in one of his columns. This is after I had come to New York. He implied that I was – I wrote these liner notes just to make money, that it was a conflict of interest, r-r-r-r-rm. Fortunately for me, the trial took place at the same time as the trial of the Boston Strangler, so not many people paid attention.

Schoenberg: There's another writer, George – was it Hafer? Hoefer?


Hentoff: George Hoefer, yeah, who wrote for *Down Beat*.

Schoenberg: H-o-e-, right.

Hentoff: I didn't know him. He was pretty much a discographer and that sort of thing.

Schoenberg: Marshall Stearns.

Hentoff: Marshall Stearns was – George Wein reminded me of this the other day – fortunately, to a large extent, there's a large emphasis now on education in jazz. That means historical education as well. Marshall was one of the first. He wrote a book called *The Story of Jazz*. George reminded me that at the early Newport festival, some of those panels presaged the kind of scholarship that later came into jazz. I remember there was a man named Willard James who was an expert on field hollars, early gospel, [and] that

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sort of stuff. He was the kind of person that Marshall would get into these panel discussions. He taught jazz as well. So he was an important progenitor.

Another one, whom I think somebody ought to write – maybe they have – write a book about him, was Sterling Brown.

Schoenberg: He was black, right? Howard University.

Hentoff: Sterling Brown was a black. So was Willard James. Sterling Brown was an expert on the blues, on black culture, on black history. He taught for a while at Howard University. He told me once that he was never allowed to teach jazz or blues as such, because in some of the black colleges – Billy Taylor talks about this too – they didn't want jazz mentioned, because jazz had come out of these places, these brothels and gin mills, etc. So the way Sterling Brown got jazz into the curriculum at Howard, he would play [Igor] Stravinsky's *Ragtime* or something by [Darius] Milhaud and say, "Now, I'll show you where this came from."

Schoenberg: There's a recording, just parenthetically, of Sterling Brown giving some introductions at the Spirituals to Swing concerts in '39. They're remarkable. They're wonderful. They're just . . .

Hentoff: He was a great figure.

Schoenberg: Did you know him? Did you meet him?

Hentoff: Yeah. I met him, talked to him. I don't think anybody has mentioned him in years.


Schoenberg: Hardly. We'll have to do something about that.

Now we come to . . .

Hentoff: The Jazz Museum should have a section on Sterling Brown.

Schoenberg: Let's get a home. Once we get a home, then we'll have something on Sterling Brown and Frankie Newton.

These men that you're writing about, and the way that jazz was written about in your own early urges as a writer – when you go back and read *Jazzmen* or read maybe even more – Rudi Blesh and things like that – one does encounter an understandable but nonetheless present – it's not condescension. That's the wrong word, because if they were condescending, then they wouldn't be writing about these people. They loved them. But nonetheless the inherent racism of the time filters through some ways, into the way that the story was told. I'm wondering how you perceived that at the time, and did you

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consider yourself of either a new wave of writer or a different kind of writer who was somehow going to try and write in a different way?

Hentoff: I'll tell you what I felt then and wasn't able to do entirely what I was able to do when I was finally fired from *Down Beat*. Having read Charles Edward Smith, particularly, I wanted – and having met these people, which was so important, I wanted to tell about their lives, and that would be part of their music. So interviewing became what I really wanted to do. But while I was at *Down Beat*, I had to write most of the record reviews. I was very uneasy about that. I didn't want to cause somebody to lose some gigs or whatever, but I had to be honest with myself. At one point, my daughter, who was then – she's now a composer and a master teacher and all that – she was just beginning to play some gigs herself. This was in New York. She said to me once, "How can you write about people's careers when you can't tell one chord from another?" That hit me hard. I was brooding about it. I was walking down 12th Street in the Village one day. Coming toward me was Gil Evans. I had known him when he was writing for Claude Thornhill, and I was in the session he made, *Sketches of Spain*, with Miles [Davis]. I decided I was going to make him my rabbi. I told him what was bothering me. He said, "No, no, no." He said, "Look. I read you. I know you. I know what you listen to. I know how you listen. I know musicians who can tell you every chord and passing chord, but they don't have taste." He made me feel better for a while. But as soon as I got fired from *Down Beat*, from then on I only write about musicians I really care about and do that not as a critic, but as a journalist, as an interviewer. I'm much more comfortable with that.

Schoenberg: I remember you also wrote once about meeting Gil Evans and talking about the meaning of the music. Gil Evans said something to you along the lines of, it's whatever you bring to it.

Hentoff: Oh, yeah, and I learned something, a shading of that, from Charlie Parker. The first interview I did with him, he was riffling through the pages of *The New Yorker* and barely said anything. The second interview – this was on radio in Boston – he was very reflective. He was talking about a Bartok concerto he'd heard that made him think about maybe doing a jazz approach to that sort of instrumentation. Then he said something that has stayed with me ever since. He said, "The first time I heard that work, it didn't register at all. It was years later, in Paris, I heard it, and it opened up. Then I learned that where you listen to music, or more to the point, who you are when you listen, either in terms of your mood that day or who you are later, makes a difference."

Schoenberg: You've mentioned Charlie Parker's name. I'm not going to forget the chronology and the fact that we're still in Boston in 1946, 1947. But as long as you mentioned Parker, I'd like to talk about – and again, I'd just want to say [inaudible], you've written about this. You've written books about it. Your feelings on it are on the record. But of course many of the books and things you wrote were decades ago, and maybe you've changed or reflected in some way. Let's talk about the specter of

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alcoholism and narcotics use as you encountered them from a personal level, not maybe from a philosophical level, but from a personal level, one on one. How did you see it? How did you react to it?

Hentoff: There was a period, and this is well known, when – and I think Bird had something to do with it – people felt – it was like a religious thing – he played so brilliantly, so originally, and he was on heroin, so maybe if I got on stuff . . . I don't there was necessarily a direct tie with everybody, but it was part of the so-called culture or subculture, not only of jazz musicians, but of other people who were bohemians, let us say – whatever the euphemism was – people on the outside who were breaking away from traditional norms. It was sometimes very sad to see what it did to them and their careers. On the other hand, it was extraordinarily impressive to see somebody like Miles go cold turkey suddenly. He holed up in a hotel, suffered at it, and then broke through it. Bird – I guess it's a pretty well-known story now – when he was walking down the street with a protégé of his in the Village, Jackie McLean, he said, "I want you to kick me hard in the ass." "Why do you want that?" "Because if I had this kind of influence, you ought to kick me hard in the ass."


Schoenberg: I'd like to get to the personal experiences with either knowing musicians who were on junk – later, I'd like to ask you – not now – about your being with Ellington one day, and Paul Gonsalves and Ray Nance were in jail in Las Vegas, or something like that.

Hentoff: Oh yeah, Willie Cook.

Schoenberg: Right, but that's later. In terms of your going to the clubs and your intimate friendships with these people and being around it. Can you tell us any anecdotes or experiences that we can learn from, just about how you saw it happen, by the people asking for money, or nodding out, or changing – or Shadow Wilson, or people who for some reason . . .

Hentoff: You mention asking for money. Bud Powell, who was obviously an extraordinary pianist – really a pianist-composer, because that's what that's all about. You just don't improvise out of thin air. But when he was on heroin, he was worse than pathetic. He'd come up to me and say, "Can I have a dollar? two dollars? five dollars?" I'm thinking, here is this genius, so to speak, and look what happens to him. I didn't have too much experience with that kind of thing. You didn't expect it, but you weren't surprised when you found out that somebody was on something.

Schoenberg: How about the – it's almost become a cliché nowadays – I mean, it was a cliché, and you still hear it: what's your reaction to the thought that heroin was put in the black community on purpose by The Man to keep people down on a political level? Is that just a bunch of horse . . .?

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Hentoff: Oh yeah. There were all kinds of horrible things that totally defaced the Constitution that J. Edgar Hoover and other people did, but this kind of conspiracy theory – there was never anything to substantiate it. People tried very hard. But this goes on all the time. This is how now, with the kind of technology the government has for surveillance and checking on e-mails and phone calls, the government itself creates these conspiracy theories and puts people away. It's something that become very pervasive once it starts.


Schoenberg: Why do you think – we've talked about heroin. Let's talk about alcohol. Answer me this: your three great tenors of *The Sound of Jazz* t.v. show – Ben Webster, Coleman Hawkins, and Lester Young – each drank themselves to death in a protracted, long, slow-motion suicide. I'm saying that you knew these men. Maybe I'm wrong. Maybe I'm using the wrong terminology. I don't know, but that's how it seems to me, like a long, slow-motion something. Again, you mentioned the word – I'm not asking you to be presumptuous, but these were people that you knew. Explain to me: why did these three men, each of whom were radically different in temperament, one from the other, wind up like that?

Hentoff: They didn't all wind up like that in some kind of terminal way. It was a process up and down. I never thought of Coleman Hawkins – although I knew that he drank and all that – whenever I'd seen him, he was still the magisterial Coleman Hawkins. Ben – and this was well known to musicians – when he drank, that kind of wonderful, gentle lyricism that you hear in *Chelsea Bridge*, let's say – he was a monster. They called him "The Brute." So he was a man of varying temperaments, and he was a bad, bad drinker. I never saw him in that situation, but I heard stories about it. Lester Young was a loner. I'm not a psychiatrist or anything like that. He went through – of course a lot of people think that his experience in the Army really did some damage to him psychologically, because he was – he suffered a whole lot of Jim Crow. He had a photograph of, I guess, his lover, a white woman, up on his locker.

Schoenberg: His wife, actually, is who that is.

Hentoff: His wife, yeah. But he was also a very sensitive person. As a result he was very kind and gentle to everybody else. I never heard him raise his voice or anything like that. But toward the end, he not only drank himself to death. He was also – used heroin. I'm not so sure. Yeah, the heroin was there too. He used a lot of things. I think he might have been, if not clinically depressed, often depressed.

Schoenberg: But what I'm trying to understand is the fact that these three great artists did drink themselves to death. Is it because they were black? I mean, it's all these things. Was it – and let's throw Billie Holiday in there too, although she was a junkie, and they weren't. Was it race? Was it racism? Was it an inherent personality tract, that if they

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hadn't been musicians, they would have wound up like that anyway? We know that – and again, you said that you're not a psychiatrist, and I don't mean to put you in that position. We know that Coleman Hawkins's father committed suicide. He walked into the water one day. So things like that are genetic maybe. I'm just, knowing at this remove how these three men are lionized and are inspirations – paternal inspirations – that their ends were sad ones, not like Ellington's, not like Armstrong's, not like Sonny Rollins, not like Charles Mingus. They were different men.

Hentoff: Or Clark Terry.

Schoenberg: Or Clark or Joe Wilder or Hank Jones and Benny Goodman.

Hentoff: Again, speculatively, I think – the three you named, I think if race was a factor, I don't think it was the major factor. Because after all, Lester Young was The Pres. He was the president of the tenor saxophone. He was treated that way. He didn't lack for gigs. Norman Granz, for example, would use him whenever he could. Ben Webster, the same way. Ben I think later regretted leaving Ellington for economic reasons, but when he went off to Denmark, he was lionized there, toward the end of his life. In fact Storyville Records, the Danish firm, is coming out with an eight-CD boxed set of Ben Webster in those years, and early years as well. And again, as I said before, I never thought of Coleman Hawkins as somebody who was drinking himself to death.


Schoenberg: But he did.

Hentoff: I think in each of those cases – and I didn't know them that intimately – there was family, genetic, who-knows-what kind of experience, emotional experiences they'd had. I think it was more an individual path to that end than it had to do with some general or generic, race, or anything else kind of reason.

Schoenberg: I just thought of a wonderful image. If this was a film documentary, at this point I'd want to take this film from the Robert – is it the Robert Herridge production of the Miles and Gil Evans?

Hentoff: Oh, yeah.

Schoenberg: . . . and then this show where they had Ahmad Jamal – a group by Ahmad Jamal and a group led by Buck Clayton. There's this wonderful image of Ben Webster, Jo Jones, George Duvivier, Vic Dickenson, all playing – Hank Jones – and you're there with your beard and your pipe, looking very natty – no pun intended. You're listening to the music. And how I'm beginning to realize that you and Ben, you and Jo, and you and these people – you weren't some jazz writer from the magazine who happened to be at the session. You were with people who were almost like family with you. There was that relationship in the studio.

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Hentoff: I never felt, not being a musician, that I was totally part of the tribe, as it were. But I remember, years later, I was in Joe Williams's dressing room. We were talking about musicians we'd both known who had come to an untimely end of their own doing, to a large extent. Joe looked at me and said, "You and I are survivors." I figured, this is like I'd been knighted, that he could consider me in the same class that he was.

But I'll tell you: you mentioned that particular Herridge show, and also Herridge with Gil and Miles. Miles at one point hated television. I had to talk him into meeting Herridge. That's how we did that show. Herridge also had that – he was not just a producer-writer doing a show. He felt these guys. He and Mingus became very good friends. That comes through in the way those shows flowed. There have never been jazz programs like that.


Schoenberg: They are unsurpassed.

Hentoff: You look at, as I do whenever I go into a bookstore, in these encyclopedias of television or histories of television. His name is never mentioned. He used to do his own series. He had the Robert Herridge Theater. He put Faulkner, Conrad Aiken, and all these people that he wrote scripts about. He had actors do Dostoevsky. There was never anything like it. It disappeared. So much for historical memory.

Schoenberg: Before we get back to Boston in 1946, I want to – we talked about some of the writers and all of these people. I want to talk about the fact that, at that time, there were precious few black writers on the music. So I'd like to talk about Richard Wright and about Ralph Ellison and maybe about Langston Hughes – how you became aware of them and how they came into your life. I know that you were associated with Langston Hughes later. I think in the '50s.

Hentoff: As a reader, interested in – first of all, once you start into jazz, you naturally flow out into all kinds of things that have to do with the history of race in this country. Richard Wright came out with a bang. He was a very strong writer. Then he became strongly political and controversial. He influenced a lot of other writers as well. I never knew him, but I certainly read him.

Ellison was really – we never had a writer like him, except maybe for Herman Melville or Hawthorne or people who thought in such deep and complex ways, and who by the way, I think – there's a Modern Library collection, *Ralph Ellison on Music* – he was the best writer on the music of any of us, because he wrote out of his own experience, what it was like being a kid in Oklahoma when these gentlemen in the Ellington band came in, and you saw this kind of presence and sophistication. He wrote the whole scene: what it was like hearing Jimmy Rushing coming at you from your neighborhood, that sort of stuff.

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But Ellison, he broadened and deepened the whole scope, not only of what it was like to be black, but like to be a human being who is a novelist. That's what he wrote. He said, I refused – even though of the prejudice at the time – I refused to enclose myself. I wanted to break through that window and see what it was out there. And he did.

Schoenberg: What was your – can you tell us about your personal intersection with him, when you met him, and or what your – how do you think he saw you? How did you see him? Because you were both people seriously writing about things in different spheres. He was a novelist and writing occasional essays. You're a journalist at one point and then becoming an author. What was the dynamic between two people writing about loving the same thing, coming from different places?

Hentoff: I tell you, there wasn't much of a dynamic. I only met him a couple of times. I don't – he was on a level way above me as a novelist and as a figure. No, my interaction with him was reading about him. I didn't know him that well. I remember, there was a party once though. I forget how it came out. People were talking about race and mixtures. Ellison drew himself up and said, "I have in me the blood of white Kentucky colonels."


Schoenberg: How about Langston Hughes?

Hentoff: He was – I enjoyed knowing him very much. I didn't know him that well, but I knew him. I liked him – I was then briefly at Harvard, after Northeastern. There, there was a man named F. O. Matthiessen, a professor, I think the first person who made American Studies as a major part of curriculum. I decided – I did a book – not a book, but a paper on the first black poet, Phillis Wheatley, who was a slave. Then I wrote about Langston. I remember I got the paper back from Matthiessen saying, are you seriously thinking of saying that he's a serious poet? I said to myself, yes I am. It showed me there was a divide there in background or consciousness.

But when I was writing the paper, Hughes for some reason was in Cambridge, so I interviewed him and later got to know him somewhat when he was writing the – what was that?

Schoenberg: *The Simple Stories*?

Hentoff: *The Simple Stories*, yeah. Because he told me he spent a lot of time getting material for those stories, the not-so-average average black man and his views of life. He spent a lot of time at bars at night, picking up conversations. Then, he said, "I was able to write after midnight, because the phone didn't ring." The last time I had any contact with him that I remember, Amiri Baraka, who was then known as LeRoi Jones, had a play with his usual sharp-edged views of whites. It was being performed at a kind of theater-in-the-round, where you were in the audience but also a part of the play. At some point one of the actors just pointed at me as part of the play, as some kind of not quite white

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devil, but something like that. So Langston wrote me a note the next day, asking how I liked being in the theater?

Schoenberg: We have you at Northeastern, writing for the paper. You just mentioned you were at Harvard for a moment?

Hentoff: Yeah. I was in the American Studies program. I was interested in it, because my fantasy at the time was I would finally get a Ph.d. and have an easier life as a professor, take the summers off, have sherry in the professors' lounge, etc. But the more I saw the academy – I was supposed to do a paper on James Fenimore Cooper and the Indians. I found out doing the research in Widener Library, I didn't know any Indians to speak of. So I'm sitting there in Widener one night – by the way, one of the professors that saw me in the stacks one day, he'd been listening to my jazz show. He was a very good, sharp guy named Kenneth Murdoch, I think. He said to me, all of a sudden, "What are you doing here?" He says, "I don't think you're going to be a – I don't think that academic life is the life for you. Well, who knows?" But that night in Widener, I knew that Sidney Bechet was at the Savoy. I figured to myself, maybe echoing what the professor had said, what am I doing here?

Schoenberg: James Fenimore Cooper or Sidney Bechet?

Hentoff: So I decided, that was it. I left.


Schoenberg: Maybe Sidney played *Indian Summer* that night.

Hentoff: He certainly beckoned me.

Schoenberg: Nat, at this time you turned 20 in 1945. Were you living at home? Did you have your own place when you came back to Harvard?

Hentoff: No, by the time I was – let's see. By the time I was in radio, I had left home and moved to Hemingway Street, which was part of the Back Bay. It was sort of a bohemian place. Nat Pierce, the pianist, lived there. More to the point, it was within walking distance of the Savoy and another club, Wally's. Also, I could walk across the Fenway to where I worked at the radio station. I remember when I left home – to show you the extent and depth of the consciousness of anti-Semitism at the time – my mother's parting remark, as I got on a wagon with my belongings, "Remember. Don't trust goyim." But I knew a few that I trusted.

Schoenberg: Without getting too personal about it, but at this time in your life, was there a steady woman or person in your life in this era, 20, 21, 22? Or were you just living a free life? You know what I mean. Were you with somebody for a long period of time?

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Hentoff: Oh yeah. I met her through jazz. She was a friend of John Field, the bass player. I used to meet Rex Stewart as his home. I met this woman there. We eventually got married and then got unmarried.

Schoenberg: I see. So, you're making a living from the radio station . . .

Hentoff: Yeah, and a pittance from *Down Beat*. Then all of a sudden . . .

Schoenberg: May I interrupt again? How did the *Down Beat* thing happen? How did it actually occur that you wound up writing for *Down Beat*?

Hentoff: The regular stringer left to do something else – be a promoter, I think. I guess it must have been Norman Granz or somebody like that who knew me – or Nat Shapiro – one of the New Yorkers who came through Boston and heard the radio show and told whoever was editing *Down Beat* at the time, why don't you try this guy Hentoff? Then I got to be a columnist there, because I was so controversial. There was one of Rudi Blesh's people, Conrad Janis. They were the revivalists. I once wrote that they were so careful to revive the old style of music, they put in the scratches on the old records they heard. So that didn't endear me to a lot of people, but it raised controversy. The magazine liked that, I guess.

Schoenberg: What were some of the other controversial things that you wrote that got the letters to the editors coming in?

Hentoff: It wasn't so much that. Once I got to *Down Beat*, I was one of the first people, I think, to make a point of writing about the business end of jazz and how people would laugh when I'd say, "What are your royalties from this record?" "Royalties! We got the advance, and that was it." Later, as John Levy pointed out in his memoir – he was the first black manager of any kind of substance. I didn't realize this at the time, though I should have. He said there were black contracts and white contracts. The kind of royalties you got and the kind of publicity you got from the company would depend a lot on your color. Other than that, I guess the controversy was when I came down too hard on a musician, which made me feel bad myself.

Schoenberg: When you wrote *The Jazz Life*, and you wrote about all these issues and about the realities of Cannonball Adderley and all these wonderful – not taking the romance out of it, but taking the fan magazine reality – say these are men in a station wagon, driving somewhere, and all these various things. Let's get back for a moment to you writing about Conrad Janis and the scratches on the record. I'm thinking in light of Stanley Crouch's dismissal from *Jazz Times*, which I know you've written about and all this kind of stuff. Let me posit it this way, and then tell me if I'm right or wrong or in the middle somewhere: everybody throws a thousand bricks at Wynton Marsalis. That's okay, because he's a major figure. Jazz writers tend to be still mostly white people, white

magazines. It's okay to throw a thousand bricks at Wynton, because he deserves – because he's a big fish.

Hentoff: Although I've changed my view of Wynton.

Schoenberg: Okay, wait. I'm going somewhere else. Meanwhile Stanley, a black writer, throws one brick at Dave Douglas, a white trumpet player, and not even that much of a brick.


Hentoff: And he is right.

Schoenberg: So he throws a brick and boom, he's gone. Now if I – having raised that issue, now I don't want to talk about it, but just leaving that on the table for a moment – now we go back to you writing about the Yerba Buena people and idolizing these old records to the point that if they could put scratches on the records, they actually would, because that's how much they were into it. Looking at both those things, but being specific about your experience, what do you think the argument about the controversy that you stirred was actually about at the root of it? Was it about white versus black? Was it about white people idealizing a form of black expression from 30 or 40 years before, that in some sense, like when people idealize – this is a much too long question. I'm an old radio guy myself. I know what it's like when you ask a long, convoluted question. You totally miss the point. So let me try and rephrase it. When people try – when white people try and go back and play an old black style, or when people talk about the '30s and '40s as these great old jazz days, and can't we go back then, to Father Coughlin and lynchings, isn't the white desire sometimes to capture an old black style almost an unconscious form of wishful thinking and/or racism and/or misunderstanding?

Hentoff: It sounds like Norman Mailer's [essay] "The White Negro," where [Mailer] so misunderstood the dynamics, the history, the actuality of what it was to be black in this country, that he mythologized all this. But my concern in terms of writing about the music was simply, why aren't they original? Why aren't they themselves? There were players – Steve Lacy, for example, started out playing traditional jazz. To this day a man like – to reverse the races – Wycliff Gordon can sit in with a white dixieland band. No, my concern was they were not so much stealing, but they were in a sense merchandising other people's music and romanticizing it, but who were they? I didn't hear – I don't know what Conrad Janis really ever sounded like.

Schoenberg: But in the same sense, weren't a lot of the black and white second-generation beboppers and all those people just turning out poor imitations of Charlie Parker records?

Hentoff: That's one of the problems that we are with now. I went – there's a college, North Texas State. I was just stunned when I went there. They have big bands and all

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kinds of small combos and the like, but something was missing. I talked to Benny Carter, who had been there around the same time I was. He said, “Yeah, it’s amazing. They can cut anything. They can read anything. But they all sound alike.”

That’s not exclusively. There are people who sound like themselves now, but that is becoming a problem. If you come out of Berklee [College of Music], you’ve learned a lot, but there’s another stage: you have to find out who you are.

[recording interrupted]

Schoenberg: You became the correspondent for *Down Beat*. You’re on the radio. At that point were your ambitions to leave Boston? Did it happen – how did it . . . ?


Hentoff: No. What I expected I would do – I thought I’d stay in Boston. Then Public Radio was starting, with WGBH. I did some moonlighting there. I rather liked that. I did a historical series – I think it was for GBH. It went around the country – on a history of jazz. Then all of a sudden Leonard Feather left *Down Beat*, where he was the New York editor. Norman Granz, with whom I’d become very friendly – one of the few people maybe who ever did, because Norman was pretty brusque and the like, but we got along always. I got to know him when Jazz at the Philharmonic came to Boston, and later his recordings. He told the then-publisher of *Down Beat* that I’d be a good replacement for Feather, which was quite an adventure. I’d never been outside of Boston. I had been to New York a couple of times. But it looked like it was a challenge. That’s how I came to New York. My whole life for the next few years was the music. I’d go to the clubs most of the time, I’d have great dinners at the hotels where the big bands were playing, and I’d write on weekends and whenever I could.

Schoenberg: You were coming into a position of great prominence in a field that was morphing gradually out of a main place in American popular music. *Down Beat* and *Metronome* had come to their place in the late ’30s and ’40s, when the big bands were it, so they were magazines reflecting great popular taste and great money.

Hentoff: I’m not so sure about the power. There was an audience for the music that began to diminish rapidly when rock came in. But I don’t think there was ever a large jazz audience. There was a large audience for, let’s say, Benny Goodman, once he had the air shots. Yeah, I guess, come to think of it, it was a major part of the pop music scene, yeah.

Schoenberg: Let’s stay there for one moment: the misnomer that jazz was America’s popular music, which it never was.

Hentoff: No, no, never.

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Schoenberg: It was a spice on the rack, so to speak. It was something that influenced things. But nonetheless, you took over a magazine that record labels and the industry and everything had a great interest in, because it steered people to certain people and away from other people and all this kind of stuff. How did you – you’re a young man at this time. You’re in your mid-twenties . . .

Hentoff: Yeah.

Schoenberg: . . . I would assume – late twenties. How did you go from being in the stacks at Harvard and James Fenimore Cooper and Indians and announcing things on the radio to actually having the responsibility yourself for making decisions that had nothing to do with art and aesthetics – had something to do with art and aesthetics, but also had to do with commerce and record labels? It was the time of payola in the business. How did you deal with those pressures and responsibilities?


Hentoff: Actually, I wasn’t reacting that way. I considered myself, then as now, as essentially a journalist, and I was after stories. The stories happened to fortunately be involved with the people and the kind of life that I was most interested in – was sort of a part of, so I didn’t see myself as a figure of much consequence. I was doing a job. It sounds like false modesty, but I’ve never – I’m always surprised when somebody says, “I read you.”

Schoenberg: You mentioned *The Last Hurrah*, about Curley. And all the interviews with John Ford, he said, “I make Westerns. What’s the big deal?” But Ford is a major American director, and you’re a major American writer and thinker, so nonetheless you were in that position at that time.

Hentoff: I tell you: there were a couple of times when I felt that I had been – I was in a mythological world. Benny Goodman called me up once. I’d never met him. He said, “I’m looking for a tenor player. Who do you think I . . .?” My goodness, Benny Goodman’s asking me? So I said, “Zoot Sims.”

Schoenberg: As the editor of *Down Beat*, can you describe the duties and responsibilities that you took over from Leonard Feather?

Hentoff: The main thing – there were two main things. Doing the record reviews was important, because a lot of revenue came in on that. But the main legwork was finding out what was happening in the business, for example, meeting Dizzy Gillespie coming down the street with a big smile on his face. I said, “What’s up?” He said, “I just told Billy Shaw that ‘I don’t work for you. You work for me’.” That gave me a lead to go into the whole business thing. So it was always finding stories, which is what I do all the time anyway.

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Schoenberg: But you were taking over the position from someone – I’d like to start to talk about Leonard Feather – in which there were compromises and there were conflicts of interest. There is a composer – he was a composer and an A&R [artists and repertory] guy and a record reviewer and all that stuff, which we all know. But again – I say we all know, because in this interview, we’re talking to people who don’t know. So to whatever degree you’d like to, can you . . .? – tell us about Leonard and what he represented, all the wonderful things that he did. Also, there were, honestly, conflicts, and that the musicians must have reacted a certain way, saying, “Man, you better record this guy’s tune, because we know that he’s writing the reviews in this magazine.” That’s something that you never got anywhere near. I’m curious how you defined yourself against his example.

Hentoff: I knew about it, of course. I obviously wasn’t going to go that route. I wasn’t interested in that route. The interesting thing about Leonard was, he was born in England, grew up in England, and yet, because of the growing sense of the internationalization of the audience for this music, and later the players who became part of it, he was one of the first people in the United States to make a considerable impact as somebody who was not born here, not bred here, but obviously, aside from his conflicts of interest, was serious about the music, knew its history, and had been a major player in some regards. The conflict of interest stuff I thought was tawdry, but that was one – he was – he – in some ways he had more of a capacity than he ever realized, I think. His book was disappointing. He knew so much, and yet it didn’t get in there. Something was missing, but I never knew what. I think maybe the way he related to people.

Schoenberg: That’s a great insight. So you took over from him. So clearly, to the musicians, it was like a new regime in town. Again, I think it was important . . .

Hentoff: It was a one-man regime.

Schoenberg: That’s my next question, but I just wanted to comment, parenthetically for the people listening to the interview, that they really must understand the tremendous importance of *Down Beat* to that world at that time.

Hentoff: Oh yeah. I used to – I had to review it, because it came in, but I never understood Charlie Ventura. I thought it was mainly playing notes at a hard tempo, and loud. One day his manager called me up and said, “What have you got personally against Charlie? You’re really hurting him economically.” I said, “I never met the guy.” In that sense I realized I had power. That’s what led to my brooding about it after a while.

Schoenberg: Right. But, to stay there for a moment, you said “a regime of one.” What was the reality of the *Down Beat* office in 1950?

Hentoff: There was me and a guy named Mel Mandel, who handled advertising, and there was a receptionist, and that was it. Now the main office was in Chicago. The owner I think had a printing business. He had no interest in the music.

Schoenberg: This is Maher?

Hentoff: Mr. Maher. He was the reason I got fired. He was not only, let us say, hostile to blacks, but he was anti-Semitic as well, or didn't like Jews, let us say.

Schoenberg: But outside of that he was a lovely man.

Hentoff: I understand so. Fortunately I never worked in Chicago, but people who did, like Gene Lees, who is a very good writer and an important figure – apparently it was rough, working in that scene. They left us alone. Jack Tracy was my editor then in Chicago. Jack was very knowledgeable, cared about the music, and also was a journalist, so we got along fine. But finally I did something that led to my termination. I wondered why we didn't have any black people on the staff. We wrote not exclusively, but certainly much of what we wrote about was black music or originated as black music. No-one – I never saw a black byline on the magazine. All I could do in New York was, when the receptionist left and a woman came in who was dark, I hired her. I didn't check with Chicago. I just did that. By the way, later on, when I wrote about this, she wrote me a note. She said, "I wasn't negro. I was Egyptian." Under the race theories these days, that could qualify her, but never mind. But that was it. I got a call. I was to clear out my office. I had come in from the weekend. I had spent the whole weekend writing. I plopped some stuff on the desk to be sent to Chicago. That was the end of my days at *Down Beat*.

Schoenberg: Over hiring a dark-skinned receptionist. Talk about a situation.


Hentoff: Then I was freelancing . . .

Schoenberg: But I have a question. When you moved to New York, where did you first live?

Hentoff: I first lived in the Village . . .

Schoenberg: Where?

Hentoff: . . . on Christopher Street, which was then becoming, not as openly as it later became, pretty much of a place where gays felt comfortable. But it was part of the Village at the time. It wasn't the Village of Eugene O'Neill and e. e. cummings, although cummings was still alive. But it was a very comfortable – it had the feel of a college town, though that wasn't it, because NYU hadn't owned the buildings yet. It was a bohemian place. You could go to the Whitehorse Tavern, where Dylan Thomas –

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speaking of people drinking themselves to death – used to preside. But you could go into the bar and get into a political argument just by saying “hello.” Mike Harrington hung out there, the guy who wrote about poverty in America; Rupert Hill, who was a major figure in the NAACP, though he was Jewish and white, but he was the guy who went after the labor unions for their Jim Crow practices. It was very lively at the time. There was a guy name LeRoi Jones at a place around the corner from here, the Cedar Tavern. You could go and argue with him. It was nice to be part of it. Then there was the *Village Voice*, which started as a community newspaper. When I got fired, I was stereo . . . – it was hard for me to get any kind of writing, because I was known only as a writer on jazz.

Schoenberg: Fired from *Down Beat*?

Hentoff: Fired from *Down Beat*. So finally a guy from the *Voice* said, “We’d like you to do a column.” I said, “Okay, only on one proviso, that I will not write about jazz.” I started writing about other things that interested me, some of which came out of *The Jazz Life*, like education in Harlem, politics, etc. The way things were then, you were an expert if you had a byline twice on a particular subject. So that opened it up for me.

Schoenberg: Let’s talk about your peers as a writer in the early 1950s. Was there a sense of community with – eventually, when people came to New York, like Martin Williams and/or the others – Whitney Balliett, these people who you had historic collaborations with?


Hentoff: Yeah. Once I read Martin, I knew I was in the presence of somebody I had to learn from. Same thing with Whitney: nobody was ever able to put the music into words without being precious or self-exalted, etc., and he also had very good ears. I liked him. He was – both – Martin, and there was a guy named Hsio Wen Shih who wrote very well historically. Yeah, there was some camaraderie. Marshall Stearns was part of that scene, come to think of it. Eventually Dan Morgenstern and all that. Yeah, there was a lot of that.

Schoenberg: So you’re saying that it’s the *Village Voice* column is when you began to expand your written topics outside of just jazz music.

Hentoff: Yeah.

Schoenberg: Did you feel at that time that – did you realize that you were on a train that was going to take you eventually out exclusively of the jazz world and frankly that the jazz world was either limited or not a full expression? You’ve kind of said this already.

Hentoff: I’ve never been out of the jazz world. Even then I would do liner notes. I did a lot for Norman Granz when I was broke. I started at the *Village Voice*. They didn’t pay us anything. I once called up and said, “At least give me \$10 a column.” “No, you’re

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through.” So I called back and said, “All right, but eventually . . .” Eventually we organized the place, but that’s another story.

No, I always was – from the time I was a kid, reading, I was always interested in a lot of different things. I liked being able to write about all these things, but jazz was always a central part of what I did. The *Chronicle of Higher Education* once had a music supplement. I wrote for that. I wrote for *Atlantic Monthly* and other places on jazz as well. But not at the *Voice*. I wanted editors of other publications to see that I could write about this other stuff too.

Schoenberg: In terms of the jazz clubs when you came to New York – let’s go back to Boston just for one moment. The major clubs in Boston – you mentioned Wally’s. I’ve never heard Wally’s referred to. They always write about Storyville and the Savoy. Tell us about Wally’s. Where was it and . . .?

Hentoff: Wally’s was down the street from the Savoy. There was also a place called the Hi Hat, which was farther down the street. That’s where Bird [and] Dizzy Gillespie came to town, because they had a music policy aimed at the younger people, the guys who were hip to bop, etc. So it was a pretty rich and lively scene. We also put on concerts at places like Jordan Hall. There was a local – pretty much thriving – various groups like the Vinyl Rhythm Kings. So there was a Boston jazz scene. In fact I’ve suggested to Dana Gioia, who runs the National Endowment for the Arts, that one way – he’s on a wonderful crusade. He wants Americans to realize what they have here. It seems to me if you could celebrate – have each city celebrate its heritage, have concerts with some of the people who are still alive, who came out of there, and bring in some of the other jazz masters who worked with them – there’s a rich Boston jazz scene. I didn’t realize until I wrote about it recently: Queens. My gosh, the history of jazz in Queens. Scott Joplin is buried there. Phil Napoleon is there. Milt Hinton and all those people. Bird used to be – living around the corner from Louis Armstrong. That sort of thing. There’s a lot that has to be developed in terms of people’s consciousness of what’s going on here.


Schoenberg: Of the musicians – just to go back to Boston for one moment – the musicians that you heard, you mentioned John Field, the bass player. I met him in Florida several years ago. I think he passed away, but he . . .

Hentoff: Yeah. He was a taxi driver in Florida.

Schoenberg: I think that’s how I met him.

Let’s talk about Nat Pierce, Boots Mussulli, Dick Twardzik, and also Jaki Byard.

Hentoff: Jaki – I never understood why he didn’t get more recognition than he had. I recorded him for Candid. I don’t know what ever happened to that record, because by the

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time Candid disappeared, we had a Jaki Byard set in the works. I think it was finished. I think it finally wound up in Japan, where a lot of these things haven't. Some of the musicians who play there will come back and say there's a whole Candid line out there, and other places in the world.

But Byard was one of those people [?] talked about. He was himself. He had absorbed all kinds of influences, but he was very much himself.

Schoenberg: Who are some of the individuals that stand out? Would Dick Twardzik be one of them?

Hentoff: Twardzik was also – still is, I think? Isn't he still around?


Schoenberg: No. He died in the '50s.

Hentoff: Oh. Shows you my sense of chronology. To me, they're ever-living presences. He was very original and could do all kinds of things. There was a very good singer, Teddi King, who had a style all of her own. Barbara Lea, who has matured and matured. There was a dixieland group that had people like Ralph Firino on trombone and Howie Gattboys on clarinet. There are – one thing I learned early on from Coleman Hawkins – he was always on the road, and he was often challenged when he'd come to a town. Sometimes he told me he'd be challenged by another tenor player who was very good and promising. Coleman would always say to him, "You've got to go to New York or go to Chicago. Otherwise people will never hear about you." Who knows? We don't have territory bands anymore, but there are players, I'm sure, still in Denver or Canton, Ohio, that never made it that way.

Schoenberg: Did you encounter Ruby Braff in those days?

Hentoff: When I was still a clarinetist, taking lessons from an alumnus of the Boston Symphony, I was playing scales one time on a summer afternoon. The window was open. We were on the first floor. As I was playing, I hear a shout from downstairs, "Hey kid. You want to go to a session?" I looked down there. There's a short guy. I said, "Yeah, okay." I figured to myself, I can't improvise, but I can read. So I went to the session. When this kid picked up the trumpet, I figured, I'm going to have to find a day job. It was Ruby Braff.

We got to know each other very, very well, up to the time he died. I kept calling him and trying to lift his spirits. There's a story about that. His sister told me the story. When Rudy was nearing the end, he said to her, "I'm sorry I didn't have any children, so the name will never go on." His sister said, "Ruby, your name is known all over the world." But at the time, that was Ruby Braff, some kid in Boston playing the horn. In fact, he was playing at a real joint called Izzy Ort's, and Benny Goodman, coming out of the stage

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door of the RKO, heard this horn. He came in. Who is this guy? He was in high school. Benny wanted to take him on the road. His mother wouldn't let him. A Jewish mother wouldn't let a kid go on the road, not finishing high school.

Schoenberg: Did you encounter Vic Dickenson in Boston?

Hentoff: Oh, my gosh, Vic Dickenson played the Savoy often. One of the pleasures of jazz to me is its humor, its wit. Vic Dickenson embodied that. He was a quiet, reticent sort of guy, but I wish I had gotten to know him better, because what there was in the music was a man of considerable depth.


Schoenberg: Edmund Hall?

Hentoff: Edmund I got to know very well. He led the house band there for a long time. Of course he was a bridge from New Orleans. He grew up in a town near there. He was part of the New Orleans scene. He also – he reminds me of this time with Louis Armstrong. He was with the All Stars for a while. He said something to me. They often played the same repertory almost night after night after night. I didn't quite have the nerve to say, doesn't it get boring? But when he said to me – I forget the context – he said, "I still get the chills sometimes standing next to Louis, hearing what he's doing." I figured, wow.

Schoenberg: Let's talk about that for a moment. Those of us that never heard Armstrong in person, we may listen to the *West End Blues* or all this kind of stuff. But from what I understand and from what you just alluded to – not alluded, but what you just said – that there was something in his sound – there was something there – like you heard him at Symphony Hall – that of course could never be captured on a record, like there is I guess about every artist. How would you direct us towards that indefinable thing that has been lost to the ages, about Louis in person?

Hentoff: It reminds me of what his long-time friend and now the woman who runs the Louis Armstrong Foundation says. She gave me this. You gave it to me again. When he said, "I want to give back to the world some of the goodness that the world gave to me." What he gave to the world – and that's what *West End Blues* was like – was joy. He could play deep blues. He could play all kinds of moods. But there was a glory to what he made of the instrument and what the instrument made of him. He once said that. He was always – it doesn't sound like a neat segue, but Mingus told me that he studied hard and he practiced hard until one day he became the bass and the bass became him. That's true I think of Louis and the horn. His temperament was such, wanting to give back the pleasure that – for all the hassles he had, being black in the South, etc., having a strong manager who I'm not so sure was as ethical as he should have been – I don't know, but I have a feeling he was exploited to some extent . . .

Schoenberg: By Joe Glaser.

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Hentoff: . . . by Joe Glaser, yeah. But he never lost that joy. As often as he played – I was standing in the back – I forget what the performance was – with Bobby Hackett. He was playing *When it's Sleepy Time down South*. Bobby almost had tears in his eyes. He said, “Do you hear that? He stays with the melody, and yet it becomes something else.” That was part of that magic he had. It's hard to put into words.

Schoenberg: Going back to your days in Boston and these musicians, Vic Dickenson and Edmund Hall and all them – was Ken Kersey there also?

Hentoff: Oh yeah.

Schoenberg: Talk about him, because he's someone who has been pretty much erased.

Hentoff: Ken was part of Red Allen's band. He played with Red Allen – speaking of joy. Red privately was very shy, sort of reticent, but he was a showman, as many of these people were, because you had to entertain to make a living. He really lived that thing. It came out in his music. By the way, having come out of the New Orleans band music, the old New Orleans style stuff, it was Miles who told me that he heard stuff in Red's playing, when Miles came to New York, that later became part of what is loosely called modern jazz.


But the Allen band always was full of life. Kersey played with that kind of a vigor and elan and pleasure and joy. He was a wonderful piano player.

Schoenberg: Jimmy Crawford?

Hentoff: Crawford, who had started – got his reputation with Jimmie Lunceford – he was pretty much a house musician for a while at the Savoy. He gave me, along with Big Sid Catlett and some of the others – I heard Big Sid a lot at Storyville, and Jo Jones. It was like a post-graduate course in what drumming could be, the subtlety of it, the use of brushes, the dynamics. It was extraordinary. And his temperament – he was a very lively, funny, sharp guy.

Schoenberg: Tell us about Sid Catlett, because I'm fascinated by him. The fact that you heard him a lot in person makes me extraordinarily jealous. I covet your experience.

Hentoff: When I'd got to Storyville after I'd do a remote, or just to go in to listen, I'd try to get a seat right next to the bandstand so I could watch this guy. There was a grace, a subtlety, and yet a continuum of rhythms upon rhythms. I can't even put it in music. Whitney could do that. I can't do that. Whitney, he was – to Whitney, he was God. But there was such a sense of – continuing adventure is what comes to my mind. What he could do with that set, with the rhythms and polyrhythms, at the same time being so attentive to the other musicians, because obviously a good drummer has to anticipate,

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know where the player is going. There was a story I read about Dizzy Gillespie. I forget the name of the drummer. Dizzy said to him, “You’re supposed to inspire me.” The drummer said, “Yeah, well you’re supposed to inspire me too.” There’s a constant interplay there, and a drummer is such an important part of it, because if he drops out, where are you? Unless you’re Dizzy or Bird. Then you go on without him.

Schoenberg: I love the way you said it, about the constant adventure part of it. It never just sounded like ding ding g’ding ding g’ding. With Sid you’re always in the process of becoming, like you’ve written about Ellington.

Hentoff: That’s the word. When I say life force – Clark Terry told, being a part of Ellington’s band, and I saw this occasionally. I’d see this at a record session. Duke was never satisfied with a piece. It always had to be changing. He’d ask – he’d listen to the guys, their suggestions. Clark said, to him, music was always – had to be in a state of becoming. No song was ever over with. No interpretation was ever set. That’s part of the joy and the – to use Whitney’s phrase – the sounds of surprise, that is the music

Schoenberg: Before we leave Boston – we already left, but before we leave Boston, you mentioned that dixieland scene and some of these musicians. Can you give us the names of musicians unlike the ones that we just talked about, Ruby and Vic and Sid Catlett – the ones who didn’t leave Boston or the ones you heard that impressed you, who have fallen into obscurity, because they either never recorded or never played too much?

Hentoff: Among the dixieland players, there was this trombonist, Ralph Firino. There was a pianist named Ed Swartz. John Field sat in with everybody. At the Savoy, Sabby Lewis had the house band. He was good, but he had a trumpet player who should have been much better known, Joe Gordon. He had a tenor saxophonist who became very well known, Paul Quinichette – Paul Gonsalves, rather. The local scene, there were some very, very good musicians. Sandy Sanderford was a pianist and arranger. I expect – I had left by the time Herb Pomeroy had become the center of another jazz scene. But you have that in every city I hear about. This band I heard about in Honolulu and did the liner notes for. Lord knows what we have going on around the country.

Schoenberg: So you’re in New York and you’re the editor – you’ve mentioned his name already, and I’m wondering when – actually I think, if you don’t mind, I’m going to wait until tomorrow to really get into Charles Mingus, because that’s going to be a long one.

Hentoff: Yeah, I met him in Boston.

Schoenberg: Oh, actually you met him in Boston? Why don’t we kick off tomorrow – I’m just going to make a note that when we come back tomorrow, I’m going to start with Mingus, because I don’t want there to be any limit on that in terms of time.

You left *Down Beat* and started writing the column for the *Village Voice* and all these places. You made a living from being a writer at that time? Unlike many other people, you didn't have to have a day gig? Or did you at some point have to? How did you actually make a living?


Hentoff: No. For a long time it was like Jimmie Rowles, except waiting for the phone to ring. I would phone people. That's what freelancers do. Then I got an idea. I worked for a time at a very good magazine called *The Reporter*. It was edited by a man who had fled Mussolini's fascist Italy, Max Ascoli. He became a player, too much of a player for a journalist. He became an intimate of Lyndon Johnson. He was a factor in keeping the Vietnam War going.

The Reporter covered politics in a way that other magazines didn't. It was through *The Reporter* – there was a freedom there. So when I heard musicians talk about Malcolm X – and he wasn't in the news at all then – I decided I would do a piece on him. I wrote, I guess, the first piece on Malcolm – who became a friend of mine, to our mutual surprise – in *The Reporter* magazine. That's a story – I'll quickly go into that, because there's a music part of it. I called the mosque there in Harlem and arranged to meet him at the Nation of Islam luncheonette. I came in, about nine in the morning. I wasn't there. Nobody paid any attention. I ordered some coffee, and it appeared magically in front of me. There was a tune on the jukebox, *A white man's heaven is a black man's hell*. I figured that was being played not as a request, but as a message. But I liked the sound of the singer. It was a high tenor, a calypso kind of tenor. I walked over, and it was Calypso Louis, who later became Louis Farrakhan. He used to make his living as a singer.

So, I'm still waiting for Malcolm X. I finished reading the paper, and I figured, the hell with this. I'm going out. There's a man sitting at the door, at a table, and he said, "You're looking for somebody?" I said, "Yeah. Malcolm X." He said, "Sit down," and for about an hour or two I listened as he talked. Later we came to know each other. But that was a part of journalism, when I could get that kind of gig, that was very interesting. I still kept writing about the music. It was all part of the same thing. It was life.

Schoenberg: Let's talk about the mainstream of American politics as it was changing from the HUAC [House Un-American Activities Committee] hearings in the late 1940s and then evolving to the '50s and McCarthy and Eisenhower and all these changes. We've talked at a local level about your experiences writing and moving to New York and knowing these people, and then slight political intersections with Frankie Newton and these various things. How were you experiencing the large picture of the shift of American political life and repression and witch-hunt and red-baiting?

Hentoff: That's it. I was about to say. We were in the era of Joe McCarthy. I remember watching those hearings on television, absolutely riveted. I would do nothing else until those hearings were over. I was covering some of that for the *Village Voice*. We had a

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Red squad in the city. Some of them were so inept – I remember I was covering some kind of anti-war demonstration. A guy said he was a reporter from a local radio station. What was I doing there? What were my politics? I noticed the mic was upside down.

The Red squad also filtered into music. When I did the show with Herridge, I also talked him into a folk-music show. I wanted to have Cisco Houston on. He was a very good folk singer. There was that message from the page to the producer. He was in Red channels, which was a way that they got people off the air. It pervaded every aspect of our culture, of our lives.

Schoenberg: Of course that's a major part of American history, but from your perspective, can you just give us an overview of, why do you think that happened in America at that time, coming from Roosevelt's administration and Henry Wallace and all that kind of stuff, going to Martin Dies and then going to McCarthy and all that? In your opinion, why did that happen?


Hentoff: It happens – it's happened every time we've had a fear in this country of some other country doing us some harm. In 1798, it looked as if France was going to be our enemy. They were hijacking some of our ships. So President John Adams sent a bill to the Congress, which was only seven years after the Bill of Rights and the First Amendment were enacted. The bill made it a crime punishable by prison to say or write anything that might put Congress or the President in ridicule.

Schoenberg: Was this the Alien and Sedition Act?

Hentoff: That was the Alien and Sedition Acts. We had it again in the first World War, when Woodrow Wilson practically suspended the First Amendment. If you were caught listening to Wagner, or whatever, or Beethoven, you were suspect. Then there was the McCarthy period. Before that we had the Palmer raids in the early '20s, because the Bolsheviks were rising in Russia. This happens all the time. We're having it now here. If you're a Muslim – you can be a Muslim with a Boy Scout troop, but if you are a woman wearing one of those head scarves, [and] you walk down the street, you're in suspicion. Now with all the electronic – now we have face recognition, which is becoming very popular. Your driver's license is now going to be a way of identifying you by your eyes or your lips or your nose. If you've got the wrong configuration, who knows?

Schoenberg: Lincoln suspended habeas corpus.

Hentoff: Lincoln suspended habeas corpus. He also arrested members of the Maryland legislature. He arrested newspaper writers who were against the Civil War. After he was assassinated, the Supreme Court in 1868 in a case called "ex parte Milligan" said – and most people don't seem to know this – Lincoln – what Lincoln did, even though he – after he did, he got the consent of Congress – but the Supreme Court said this was totally

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unconstitutional. The Constitution survives so long as there are civilian courts. Of course the President and [Vice-President] Cheney, etc., have forgotten that part of the Constitution as well. Not only people at Guantanamo, but under a new law called the Military Commissions Act of 2006, if you're an American citizen giving aid or comfort to the enemy – let's say, supporting some kind of charity – you can be picked up, called an enemy combatant, and put away for who knows how long. So this is part of the – that's why it's amazing we have as resilient a Constitution as we have. It depends upon people complaining about this sort of thing for it to stay alive.

Schoenberg: That's why you're such a leading light to so many people.

Hentoff: At least I've got to get my new FBI. It will take a long – a lot of place to put it in.


Schoenberg: Have you been following the case of Tarik Shaw?

Hentoff: That's a very interesting case. He's a musician who's apparently well regarded by musicians. So far as I can tell, he is in the position he is – I think he's still in solitary confinement . . .

Schoenberg: Yeah.

Hentoff: . . . and what he's being charged with is talk. I'm not that conversant with the details of the case, so I don't want to presume guilt or innocence, but he's – there have been on any number of tapes and stuff, they claim, in which he's been talking about maybe he would help terrorist groups – Al Queda or whatever – in some capacity, but it's all conversation. But under the Patriot Act and the further executive orders that came out of the White House, they may have him. I suggested to some of his friends that he – they get a good lawyer, and they did, one of the best lawyers in the business. You can't have a better lawyer. He's still working on it. He's writing briefs and all that stuff. But the way the courts are now – especially with the fact that the President has managed to get Roberts and Sam Alito onto a court – it's hard to tell how his case, if it ever gets to the Supreme Court, will come out. That why, without saying, "The sky is falling and it's only raining," we're in dangerous times now. If there's another 9/11, I'm not so sure this Constitution will survive, because people get conditioned. There was a case in Mississippi where on the ceiling there was a television eye, because they wanted to see – catch people – kids misbehaving. Some of the parents objected, but they don't object any more. It's become part of the scene. If your driver's license has a thing in it that tells what you look like, and that can now be adjusted to a huge data base of possible terrorists, that's the scene now. I hope the music will survive.

Schoenberg: Going back to the 1950s, as we wrap up. Let's wrap up this first part with the jazz clubs of New York, when you came here. I can look it up in your book. What year did you move to New York? Was it . . .?

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Hentoff: I came in 1953.

Schoenberg: I assume that you had come to New York to visit from Boston. Did you ever go to Birdland?

Hentoff: I was in Birdland once. I never was in Jimmy Ryan's or all those fabled places on 52nd Street. I used to fantasize it. But by the time I came, there was still Jimmy Ryan's. Roy Eldridge was there, playing dixieland – very well, I might say. But I was at Birdland a lot. There was a place called the Metropole, which was a huge place with a bandstand on – open bandstand. Red Allen was there a lot. It was a very lively place. I also went to Minton's, because I was very taken with the intermission pianist, Carmen McRae. I wasn't there when Charlie Parker and Dizzy were there. But I was there one night. It was after hours, practically, but the club was still open. It was a cutting session between Sarah Vaughan and Ella Fitzgerald. I wish I had a tape recorder. Wow. I think Ella came out that she was more of an instrument, maybe. I don't know. But there were things like that going on all the time. There was a place called Basin Street East, a rather sophisticated club. A lot of account-executive types. Sonny Stitt was there one night. He was doing a stop-time chorus, when everybody laid out. The place just froze. It was so exhilarating. I enjoyed that gig.


Schoenberg: Do you think that there's something to taking a music that was meant to make you shake your rear around and dance, because it swung so hard, and ultimately placing it for audiences that are told not to move and to sit in chairs, and that it's something vital – something vital was lost?

Hentoff: I think there's no question about it. When you hear on this – I've heard this before, in another version. The Ellington band once played a joint in Fargo, North Dakota. There was a very good engineer who later became an expert at remastering: old Jack – I forget his last . . .

Schoenberg: Jack Towers.

Hentoff: Jack Towers. He happened to be there, thank God. One of the guys in the band told me they just had one of those punishing road trips. They were all tired and hungry. They made it to the bandstand. Then, he said, something happened. You can hear it live. As Duke told me, the audience, when it was live – he loved playing dances, for example, “because what happened on the dance floor came back to us. If Johnny Hodges was playing one of those ballads and you heard a sigh from the audience, that sigh,” he said, “became part of our music.” That's lost when you're in a concert hall. You get some of that, but it's not live. It is live, but it's not live.

Schoenberg: Did you go to the Apollo Theater?

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Hentoff: Yeah, sometimes.

Schoenberg: Tell us about that, just about the experience, because again it's a foreign experience.

Hentoff: The audience – I used to go also to hear the comics, like Pig Meat Markum, Red Foxx and those people. There was a liveliness there you hardly got anywhere else, because it was – I guess you could say, in a broad, vague sense, it came out of the church. The audience participated without any kind of self-consciousness. I hope that's coming back. Maybe when there's a jazz museum with live music, it'll come back there.

Schoenberg: Is it possible that all the music that we're talking about now was purely a function of its time and place, done by people, again, who were born close to the Civil War – experienced from the Civil War as we went through the twentieth century, and that what we're talking about is, like everything in history, something on a train that's moving slowly away, and that jazz, as we define – as we're defining it here today, is something that was of a certain time and naturally has to be replaced by something else, and that those that are trying to keep it somehow related to the church of the nineteenth century and the vaudeville of the twentieth century and the dance halls of the 1930s and '40s, it's kind of a mistake?

Hentoff: It's not a matter of keeping it that way. I don't think Bach is out of fashion. When people can play Bach or Haydn or Mozart or Bartok – there's a 20-year – he must be 21 years old now, a violinist named Aaron Weinstein. His first recording was from a very good label called Arbors. Fortunately the owner doesn't have to make his money out of his recordings. He believes in what he calls classic jazz. Aaron Weinstein is like channeling Stuff Smith, if you can believe that, and yet he's also part of what happened with Bird and everything else. He's Aaron Weinstein. As long as that keeps happening with players – and I think it will. Who knows what, in one's temperament or what you hear or when you hear it. I don't think the music is ever going to go. What bothers me now is, there is an audience for it, coming up in the schools, even in the high schools and the middle schools and all the colleges, and all the people involved in the International Association of Jazz Educators, but – and this something that goes back to Duke, saying you need to have somebody who people will follow. Phil Woods keeps saying this. We need a leader. We need somebody who's going to be Bird, Ornette, Coltrane. John Lewis once said to me one night, "As we're talking, there may be a bass player in some club in Bulgaria who's going to be that person." I'm thinking that even if there isn't that person, as long as you have Clark Terry, Jimmy Heath, and 20-year-old Aaron Weinstein, who has learned from them and found out who he is, this music can't die. I hope newspapers won't die, but they'll die faster than jazz will.

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Schoenberg: I think I heard some statement saying that the [*New York*] *Times* might not be printing five years from now, or something like that. What do you think is happening with print journalism? Is it all just going to the internet?

Hentoff: The problem is – this is the paradox of all history of civilization: we have never been a people that had more access instantly to all kinds of information from all over the world, including the libraries of Congress and the British Museum, and what happened to Anna whatever-her-name is – the woman who died. But there is so much confusion as a result, and the media, so-called, is so caught in a 24-hour news cycle, that what I learned when I was a kid in the business – you’ve got to follow up on stories – that happens less and less. At the *New York Times*, for example, increasingly, when you finish your story for the print version, then you have to update it on the internet, so I’m thinking, when do you think? When do you follow up the story? So that’s another problem.

Schoenberg: Thanks Nat.

[recording interrupted]

Hentoff: If only Dick Cheney had heard jazz.

Schoenberg: Oh, Jesus. He’s got such a scowl, such a [growl].


Hentoff: He’s a man who’s fueled by ambition, and ambition with power can be very dangerous.

Schoenberg: As Shakespeare noted.

We’re back on the 18th of February, once again with Nat Hentoff, our guest. Loren Schoenberg interviewing with Ken Kimery. He is here. You mentioned, Nat, that you remembered something that Mingus had said.

Hentoff: Yeah. Mingus and I were talking once, and somehow this came up. He said we create – many people create their own slavery, either to a job, to a relationship, and they never quite get out of it. That is a very, very sad way to live your life. The thing is, you have to keep aware of the fact that you can lock yourself in to a dead end. I thought that was a very intelligent point of view.

Schoenberg: We’ve been talking so much in the last segment here about everyone you worked with and all this kind of stuff. What we don’t want to get lost in the shuffle is your life story and what’s happening with you and how you came into a position to be doing all these things. So to get back to the chronology, just to make sure that I have it all straight: Boston, Boston Latin, Northeastern, Harvard, James Fenimore Cooper and the Savoy, a stringer for *Down Beat*, radio, Mayor Curley, coming to New York, hiring a dark-skinned secretary, leaving *Down Beat*, *The Sound of Jazz* . . .

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Hentoff: Being ushered out of *Down Beat*.

Schoenberg: Being ushered out. *The Sound of Jazz*, *Hear Me Talkin' to Ya*, which we really haven't talked about quite yet, Candid Records, and as we have here in front of us some of the – you're starting to write – I was pleased to see and did not know the breadth of your work at the *New Yorker*. For instance, I knew that you wrote for them, but not that you wrote "Talk o' the Town," that you were a far-flung correspondent . . .


Hentoff: No, I was what they called the long-piece writer. That was a great luxury, although it could be very taxing. You had – there were no deadlines, unless it was a particular story. So you had all the time in the world to do the research. I did a series on – I did a profile of John Cardinal O'Connor, but before I dared do that, I studied the history of the Catholic Church. I never would have done that before. One thing I learned about being a – I'm an interviewer. That's the way I consider myself as a journalist. You can't go into an interview unless you know enough about the person and what the person has done, so you don't sound like he has to start with the alphabet to talk to you. So it was a great training at the *New Yorker*.

Schoenberg: You also interviewed – you also did a big profile on John Lindsey, among others, and Lennie – a very early one – which I was shocked. I'd never read – your early one on Bob Dylan.

Hentoff: Oh, Dylan lived . . .

Schoenberg: Which is '64, right? That's very early.

Hentoff: We lived near a place called Gerde's Folk City, which was a folk-music place. At that time folk music was beginning to be a very important factor here in the Village, [and] San Francisco, etc. We went there one night. There was this kid playing guitar. I didn't know his name. I didn't think he was much of a guitarist, nor did I think much of his voice. There was something about him, though. My wife got this faster than I did. That was, of course, Bob Dylan. Then he began to record. I got a call one day from John Hammond, who had discovered him for Columbia Records. Hammond not only discovered jazz people. He had a pretty wide range, even if he sometimes was very opinionated as to what the people should do. He said – he called me up, and he said, "I know you've got a lot of records. I want you to go through the stack. Pick out the Dylan one." Then I heard his lyrics, and that's what got to me. So I did the notes for the second one. I think it was called *The Freewheeling Bob Dylan*. It's interesting, with the way the culture is. When I was talking to a correspondent at ABC News television about some civil liberties matter, and I started to spell out my name, he said, "Oh! You did the Bob Dylan album." Then he could talk to me.

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Then I did an interview with Dylan for the *New Yorker*. Then we did our famous, or infamous, *Playboy* interview, which tells you a lot about Dylan. At the time, I did these long interviews for *Playboy*. I did Eldridge Cleaver. I did William Sloane Coffin, people like that. The rule was that you had to send the text to the interviewee before it was printed, which is a bad mistake for a writer to have to do, because sometimes they want to soften things. Anyway, I'm in my office on a Saturday morning. Dylan's on the phone. "They screwed it up." See, we had done a straight interview at Columbia Records. It was okay, you know, born, and all that stuff, Woody Guthrie. It was kind of bland, I thought, but what the hell. He said, "No, no, they can't print that." I said, "You tell them that. They have no right to print it unless you agree." He said, "No. We're going to do an interview now." "Now?" I didn't have a tape recorder. So it must have been an hour and a half or so. My hand practically wore down trying to write what he was saying. It was a totally surreal, impressionistic interview. I played the straight man. He came out with some of the most extraordinary fanciful correlations, God knows what. It was like a Chagal painting.

Schoenberg: Where – if we were to juxtapose, let's say, Charles Mingus and Bob Dylan, what could we learn from that juxtaposition?

Hentoff: It think in terms of, to use the big word, art, I think Mingus was a much bigger artist in his music. Dylan was important, I think, primarily to show how somebody dealt with fame and resisted sometimes – resisted what Mingus talked about to me that time, when he said people get trapped. Give Dylan a lot of credit. He never got trapped in that image of his that first made him famous. *Masters of War*. This was the anti-Vietnam-war period. Even at the beginning he felt very uncomfortable at being a symbol, at being some kind of political preacher or something. There came a time when he was given an award – it was the Tom Paine award – by a very left-wing organization. They sometimes did some good work. They would take cases that the ACLU wouldn't take. But at the dinner Dylan really broke through all of this persona of his and began to criticize people who thought only in terms of propagandistic terms, and it wasn't him, and he didn't – there was a big tumult as a result. But it comes through as the years went on. He wrote – I hope it goes on – he wrote a book, a memoir, a couple of years ago that people really ought to read. To me it's more important than a lot of his singing. It was called *Chronicles*. There was the Dylan continually evolving. In that respect he's very much like Mingus. I have a lot of respect for that.

Schoenberg: Sports figures. Going back to your days in Boston: were there sports figures that you admired? Were there ones that occupied some of the same universe that these jazz musicians did, that were political in some sense, that were inspirational to you, that you got to know?

Hentoff: I always was a great fan of Ted Williams. I saw him at Fenway Park, his home runs and all that. But what most impressed me was, he never wore a tie. He'd go to these

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functions when he was being honored. I say that to people now. “No, I’m not going to wear a tie.”

I was a sports announcer. That is, I did what they called color. I was at a lot of sports events. One thing I’ll never forget was, we did some amateur boxing shows. A young guy named Cassius Clay showed up, and wow. Of course he later became known as the world champion boxer. Then another time Sugar Ray Robinson was boxing. As I say, I was doing color. There was a moment when he came and whispered to me, “Is this national?” I said, “No, this is a local broadcast.” So he knocked the guy out in the next round. But watching him and watching Willie Pep showed me something about professionalism, skills, craft, etc., which also you can find in the music.

Schoenberg: Can you stop there for a moment and define that a little more clearly?

Hentoff: It was like Ornette [Coleman] saying about trapeze artists: when you see people who know what they’re doing, at what they’re doing, and continually perfect what they’re doing, that becomes part of your understanding of all kinds of other things. I wish I could point to a political figure these days that I felt that kind of respect for.

Schoenberg: Who would be a most recent political person that you could – the most recent person that you could . . .?

Hentoff: I could give you a person right now whom I have enormous respect for: that’s a Senator from Vermont named Patrick Leahy, who – when people ask me my religion, I’m an atheist, but I always say the same thing. It sounds corny. I say, “The Constitution.” If we lose that, as somebody said in the beginning of the Bush administration, and the attacks on the Bill of Rights, we lose everything. Lahey is one of the few people – in or out of Congress – in politics who is utterly passionate about that. He sometimes can be very sharp. In a *New Yorker* profile that Jeffrey Toobin did, he would talk about how the influence that Dick Cheney had on – has on the Republican leadership. He says, “I’d look out the window sometimes. There would be a fleet of limousines coming to the Capitol. It was Cheney and his entourage at their regular meetings with the Republican leadership.” He said, “I saw the limousines, and I knew what was going on. It was like watching a Mafia funeral.”


Schoenberg: That was just recently, yeah?

Hentoff: Yes. Right.

Schoenberg: You mentioned color. What is color? You were doing color.

Hentoff: The blow-by-blow announcer is doing the fight . . .

Schoenberg: Jesus.

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Hentoff: . . . and then in between rounds, I would – we also did wrestling matches. Sometimes a guy would – they’d make a mistake and actually hurt somebody, so I had to fill the time, sometimes a lot of time. That’s how I learned to ad lib.

Schoenberg: So you’re on radio at a time, I believe, in Boston when Bob and Ray were becoming popular.

Hentoff: When who was?


Schoenberg: Bob and Ray?

Hentoff: Oh, yeah. I heard Bob and Ray. Talk about improvisation. These were humorists, comedians, whatever you want to call them. They could take – they were like Lenny Bruce, or they were like Dick Gregory, who was a master of that. Gregory would come onto the stage with a newspaper, folded newspaper, and just riff on something that had just broken, improvising it with very sharp, cutting, personal humor. That’s also to be – Lenny Bruce, whom I got to know very well – Lenny broke in at strip joints on the West Coast. He began to be influenced by some of the jazz players at those strip joints. A lot of his improvisation originally came out of that sense of it: the way, even later, he would play the microphone. He knew the dynamics of sound. I think he got some of that – he told me he thought he was beginning to get somewhere when the jazz guys, instead of – during the breaks, instead of going next door to get a drink, some of them would stay to hear him. He was very much the part of the jazz spirit, as I understood it.

Schoenberg: Tell me more about that part of the jazz spirit, Lenny Bruce.

Hentoff: Lenny used to say, he’d like to take the covers off of all the hypocrisy that was going around in political and other affairs, but he was also kind of a – I guess you could call him a social etymologist. He would say, why are these words – it’s still today. It’s getting worse and worse. The FCC can fine a station \$500,000, according to Congress now, because of some word that’s offensive. So I’ll never forget. He would play the Village Vanguard in New York, which was a jazz club that Max Gordon was hip enough to know that jazz people would dig him. In those days, even then it was kind of rare to see as integrated an audience as Lenny had, by age, by color, by everything. He would sometimes begin his set by saying – looking around and saying, “Any niggers here tonight? Any spics?”, and the place would freeze, the ones who didn’t really know who he was. Then he’d say, “Hey. Now wait a minute. What about those words had such a chilling effect on you?” Then he’d go into the whole riff about discrimination, etc., but you’ve got to think in terms of actuality, not just words.

The one surreal experience I had with Lenny – either I hadn’t told him. I don’t think that was true. He had forgotten that I was in radio for a long time. The Canadian Broadcasting

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Corporation wanted to do me interviewing Lenny. We went to the Vanguard in the afternoon. There's nothing quite so desolate as a nightclub in the afternoon, just the tables in the – he, I found out later, had decided he didn't want me to feel uncomfortable, so he filled himself full of bennies – benzedrine – that morning, so he could really be on and cover any kind of hesitation I had. The program that they showed on television had me trying to follow him under the piano, up the walls, etc. It was a rather disjointed interview. Culturally, what interested me was the reaction in Canada. The writers – the critics for the hip towns like Montreal and Toronto would say, this is a new breakthrough in television, a very creative interview. Then in the other towns: why are we paying our tax dollars for this nonsense?

Schoenberg: You experienced the onrush of rock-and-roll at a time when – yeah, okay. You're born 1925, so you're already 30 years old, Bill Haley and the Comets and Elvis and Little Richard and Fats Domino and all that. I'm wondering if you could chart for us your take on – from a personal standpoint – the change that happened in popular music from when you were 20 in 1945 to when you were 30 in 1955 to when you were 40 in 1965? It was a tremendous change.

Hentoff: My take was the diminishment of the audience for jazz, because until then, I think it's fair to say generalizingly that even though jazz was never a popular music – I mean Benny Goodman was popular for a time because he played dances that got radio appearances, etc. – but there was always a nucleus of young people who were jazz fans and prided themselves on being apart from the rest of the folks. But now that nucleus was diminishing fast, and the hip young people went for either black soul music or the Rolling Stones or people who – many of whom capitalized on black music, but turned it into music that had even much wider appeal. I was getting very discouraged. Teddy Wilson once said to me, "No. Don't be that discouraged about it, because among that cadre of people, the people who think they're hip, they may not be into jazz now, but some of them can hear music, and eventually they'll come around." To some extent that did happen. But among the music at the time – first of all, I like to hear lyrics, and I didn't like to hear those lyrics, though I wasn't so sad that the music was so raucous you couldn't hear the lyrics. I liked some – I liked Jefferson Airplane, because they were witty, and a few other things like that, but I stuck with jazz.

Schoenberg: But what do you think that change said about America and the relation of that change in the music to the political environment? How did they – they're all part of the same historical change, but . . . ?

Hentoff: Yeah. I'm not so sure about how you can correlate those. There was a period of self-satisfaction in this country, after the – before the Vietnam War. So that might have been part of it. I hesitate to go into these deep historical, cultural references. I think what happened was, there was an ethos, a spirit in the times. I think one of the things probably that had a lot to do with it: there was something called garage bands. This was something

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people – young people thought, “Hey. They do it. I can do it.” It was as if they had liberated themselves from the – they wouldn’t call it sophistication – the old-time tastes of their parents. This was something they couldn’t listen to with their parents, because only they understood what was going on. Who was this Cole Porter or Irving Berlin? That was old-hat stuff. “We’re with it now.” So that kind of esprit, I guess, had a lot to do with the popularity of the music.

[recording interrupted]

Schoenberg: Nat, to go back to your career, the problem is – and it’s a lovely problem to have – that whenever I ask a question about your career we wind up to references to all these things and I go off on tangents.


Hentoff: To me they’re all part of the same piece.

Schoenberg: Okay. I understand.

Hentoff: Anything I write about has to do with what it is that makes people transcend themselves as they become more of themselves. That’s why civil liberties is so important. The only – I once asked Justice Brennan – whom I got to know pretty well – what was really a corny question. I said, “What’s your favorite part of the Bill of Rights?” He said, “It has to be the First Amendment, because if you can express yourself, if you can petition the government, if you can say what you want to say, if you have free exercise of religion, then everything follows from that.” That is what I write about in terms of politics and civil liberties and the like. When you’ve got a government that makes people afraid to be themselves, to say who they are, then we’re all in trouble, because eventually that becomes part of the conditioning of another generation that follows.

Schoenberg: Let’s take Nat Hentoff in 1960 and then try and see where the angle goes to what we were just talking about. How did Brennan and how did politics . . .? – as we’ve seen from your *New Yorker* pieces and the *Playboy* interviews, I guess, and everything that you were doing, you were defining yourself way beyond most of your peers, the great majority of them, who stayed within jazz. I mean your jazz peers, not the other peers. How did that trajectory begin?

Hentoff: It began when I was kicked out of the *Northeastern [University] News*, because the president didn’t like what we were writing. But I think being at the *[Village] Voice* was important. In those days the idea of objectivity – as if that were ever possible. I think the only thing a journalist can do, and has to do, is to be fair, that is, to go into a story – I used to tell this when I was teaching – you’ve got to know what your own prejudices are when you go into a story. That way, you can get rid of them if the facts are different. But then, at that time, so-called personal journalism was beginning. At the *Voice*, we participated in our stories. So when I was part of an anti-war demonstration, I could write

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about it and be part of it. I got to know, during the anti-Vietnam War period, particularly a person named A. J. Muste, who was a direct-action, non-violent pacifist.


Schoenberg: M-u – how would I spell Muste?

Hentoff: M-u-s-t-e. Martin Luther King told me that Muste was the guy who turned him into non-violence. He said he was at the Crozer Theological Seminary, a student, and this old guy came in. A. J. always looked like an old guy, even when he wasn't. He spoke softly, but he taught me – he turned me [King] onto this non-violent thing. A. J. was the chief strategist of the anti-war movement, for example. Watching him and some of the others – people who went to prison. They were conscientious objectors. There was a lot of that going on in the anti-war period. Then following that as a journalist, into the Supreme Court and Congress, the whole thing came together. You had – and you still have – people like Senator Orrin Hatch. Every two years or so [he] tries to put a footnote on the First Amendment, making it possible for Congress to criminalize desecration of the flag. Here you had Justice Brennan saying you can't do that, because that's what we're all about.

That led me into a direct experience. I was giving a commencement address at a college in Pennsylvania. A very angry man came up to me afterwards. He was a Vietnam War veteran. He'd been wounded. "How can you say that about not honoring the flag?" He was about to give me a whack. I thought fast, and I said, "Wait a minute. How do you define liberty?" He thought about that. Then he turned away.

Schoenberg: So if I take Nat Hentoff leaving *Down Beat* and writing for the *Voice*, and then go to your experiences with Supreme Court Justice Brennan – how did that happen?

Hentoff: Writing about civil liberties, writing about the constitution – Brennan had a lot to do with the so-called Earl Warren Court, which was, let us say, not a revolutionary Court, but did a lot of things that changed the law, that changed restrictions on the police, for example. I did for the *New Yorker* a long piece on a homicide squad. It was interesting how they felt about the Miranda warning, which came out of the Warren-Brennan Court, where you have to tell people – it's on television all the time. You have to warn them that anything they say can be used against – it was interesting. The older cops said, "Oh yeah. That's a good thing. That means our arrests will hold up." The younger cops – in other words, it all intertwined. What I was writing about was all part of what I called, in the title of a book, living the Bill of Rights. I find this a very exciting way to be a journalist. It can be very frustrating as well, but it's a way to – this sounds very corny – to be an American. My parents came from the Old Country. One of the first things they wanted to do, like many of the people then did and still do – they wanted to Americanize me. That's why, instead of sending me to the cheder, the Hebrew school and college on the next street, I had to go across town to Boston Latin School. It took. To me, jazz is part of Americanism. I sound like a dotty patriot.

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Schoenberg: Let's say your definition and Norman Podhoretz would be quite – both going on about – a Jewish person of a certain generation going on about what it means to be an American. You both join in your desire to be American. However, the way that you get there is very different. But I'm still curious on a biographical level – the specific personal steps that occurred in the evolution of your career and how you redefined yourself in your twenties, thirties, forties as you grew into something that you weren't when you started, I think, maybe, or maybe not. How did – what were the actual events that led you to being intimate with a Supreme Court Justice? How did it actually happen in terms of day-in, day-out, phone call, meeting, knowing people?

Hentoff: Actually all of this came naturally out of being a journalist. Being a reporter – when I walked out of Harvard graduate school, it was the smartest thing I ever did, because being a reporter is the sound of surprise. Given my predilections anyway, in terms of free speech, free press, when I was in college, and then being anti-war then and being part of the McCarthy period – before I left Boston to come to New York, to be a New York editor of *Down Beat*, I knew that I was under suspicion by the state. It wasn't only McCarthy. Each state had its own Un-American Activities Committee. I had been teaching at what was called the Samuel Adams School in Boston. I taught there, because it was the only place that would let me teach jazz. But it was pretty much a Communist-front operation. I had become anti-Communist totally, having read Arthur Koestler and all that stuff. Before each lecture, someone would come in with the latest agit-prop instructions. Then I would give my own views on that to the class, and then we'd start talking about Duke Ellington and Count Basie. But because I taught at the Samuel Adams School – I'd forgotten the years I taught there, but when I got my FBI files through the Freedom of Information Act, very helpfully they told me what years I had taught there. They even told me my salary, which was very little, I must say. So I had to go before the – I decided to go before the state – because I didn't want to go to New York and then be dragged back. Yeah, they had a file on me. Apparently it wasn't strong enough for them to say, no, you've got to stay and go through some more hearings. But that was part of the scene. I was not only writing about it, but I was part of it, in that sense. When I got my FBI, I realized that they were very interested in me.

So, being both a journalist and, to use that corny phrase, an activist, I guess you'd say, all of this came – as things happened in the culture, as things happened politically, I was writing about them and being part of them, as a writer.

Schoenberg: What did you think of H. L. Mencken and Walter Lippman?

Hentoff: Aside from the fact that Mencken was a terrible anti-Semite . . .

Schoenberg: Although he had Jewish friends.

Hentoff: Yeah, well, look. Some of my best friends . . .

Schoenberg: Ezra Pound.

Hentoff: Ezra Pound, my goodness.

Schoenberg: No, no, not Ezra Pound. I'm sorry. That was a mistake.


Hentoff: I didn't read much of Mencken. I knew who he was. He obviously had an influence on – not on me writing, but on the culture, because he was an iconoclast, and he spoke – Lipmann. I would read Lipmann, but it seemed to me kind of academic, to use the term pejoratively. I learned about writing more from sports writers, because we had good ones in Boston. Also I used to read Westbrook Pegler {?}, who used to be a sports writer, not because I agreed with him, but I liked the style. There was a directness there, kind of a jazz style, if you like. No, in terms of commentators and the like, even to this day, I only pay attention to the ones who do what I consider what I do. They write reporting columns. They do their own work, they do their on research, then come out with their opinions. There's a guy named Jonathan Turley – T-u-r-l-e-y – who's an active law professor at George Washington University in Washington. He's an active litigator on national security cases. He writes for a lot of it. But he is what I try to be. He came up with a great phrase recently. He was on MSNBC with Keith Olbermann, who's somebody I've come to like, because he's very direct. Jonathan was talking about how Congress at the time – and still does – so deferred to the President as he was combatting the Constitution as well as the terrorists. Most Americans didn't care enough. Jonathan said, "We're all – not all of us – but most people are Constitutional couch potatoes. They just don't become part of what they're supposed to be as active citizens." Again, all of this to me is part of a continual flow. I can't say there was one moment when somebody came down from Mount Sinai and broke a tablet for me.

Schoenberg: When you mentioned Constitutional couch potatoes, then I go back to your friends Rex Stewart and the people in the Ellington band – let's say all – to make a general – all black people, but especially the African-Americans of your generation that you knew, to whom the Constitution, I guess, was not some abstract thing, or the real manifestations of it on a day-to-day level, I guess that so many . . .

Hentoff: That's what . . .

Schoenberg: white folks – so many others were just kind of blind to, and on a day-to-day level they . . .

Hentoff: That's why, when you think about it, somebody like Max Roach was the first person I ever heard who said jazz was like the Constitution in action: individuals getting together and being more than their individual selves. Yeah, these guys were so much more involved in – despite the pervasive Jim Crow at the time, they were more involved

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in what this country was supposed to be. They had hassles being themselves. That made them even stronger as people and through their music.

Schoenberg: We talked in the first part of the interview that we did yesterday. You mentioned Norman Mailer's *The White Negro*. I'm wondering about your entry into the jazz world as a non-African-American and also about the usually unstated, but the endemic insecurity of a lot of white jazz musicians, that somehow they still feel that they have to be validated, in a sense accepted into the fraternity, to get that nod from the black player, in some sense.


Hentoff: My favorite story about that is the one that Phil Woods tells. He was still a young musician. He was at Birdland. In fact, insofar as people were writing about him, they would essentially say he was copying Charlie Parker. He was – as he puts it, he was whining one night. Dizzy Gillespie was there, and Blakey – Art Blakey was there. He said, "I'm not going anywhere. I'm white. I'm never going to make it." So Phil said, "Then they kidnapped me. They put me in a car – Dizzy and Blakey – took me out to Dizzy's home in Queens, and Dizzy said, 'When Bird gave us what he gave us, he gave it to anybody who could hear it. You understand?'" Apparently that was an important moment in Phil's life.

But there's – I wrote a book about that years ago.

Schoenberg: Yes. The . . .

Hentoff: It was my first book for young readers. It was called *Jazz Country*. I was very moved to find out that this musician in Honolulu who has his own jazz combo, who is Hawaiian – he read it when he was eleven years old, and apparently it meant something to him.

But it's funny how the culture changes. I've had more success in terms of sales and international translations from these books for young readers. One was called *The Day They Came to Arrest the Book*, about censorship in a library. The last book I wrote, which was called *Color Changes* and was dedicated to Charles Mingus, about how I keep changing – I can't get it published. I've tried publishers that I still get royalties from, from Japan, for example, where my books do well. They won't publish it, because it's about Crow Jim. It's about a white kid and a black girl in a school, who is trying to break through what I would call the Nation of Islam mindset among some black kids. It's meant to be funny as well. You can't write a book without a plot and characters in it, but no, the market doesn't like that these days. You're supposed to write only about prejudice going one way.

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Schoenberg: We were talking about Lenny Bruce and those words before, and I meant to mention that article that was on the front page of the *Times* yesterday, about the word “scrotum.” On the first page . . .

Hentoff: That really astonished me.

Schoenberg: Isn’t that amazing!

Hentoff: That that could create such a tumult.


Schoenberg: It’s like we’re back with Cotton Mather. I mean, what the . . .

Hentoff: And it shows, important as Lenny was – and he had more than a following. I think he affected a lot of people, certainly a lot of so-called humorists and comics after him – it didn’t take. We’re now in a worse state than we were back in – well, back in if not only Cotton Mather’s time, but when you couldn’t mention birth control in the mails, because of Anthony Comstock. It’s just astonishing that there is such a fear. This is really beyond what Bush and Cheney are doing in terms of people who are considered to somehow bringing aid and comfort to the enemy by what they say. But in the culture now – that’s why one of the things that bothers me a great deal is that Democrats now have bills in Congress to bring back the Fairness Doctrine. That was a crippling of free speech on radio. I was in radio at the time. The law was, if somebody said something offensive, politically or otherwise, you had to give that equal time to somebody who would answer it. The push for it now is because Sean Hannity [and] Rush Limbaugh, have big audiences, and there are very few liberal commentators. We ought to equalize it. Now, that’s going to do – what happened in radio – when I was at WMEX, I had Pete Seeger, for example, as a guest on my folk-music program. Some of us occasionally said controversial things. The letters from the FCC – they had to get the lawyers together. They had to go through the tapes of the programs. Finally the boss came in and held a meeting and said, “You can’t say anything controversial any more.” The Supreme Court, which had originally said the Fairness Doctrine was constitutional, turned around and said this is diminishing controversy, diminishing speech. So now they want to bring it back again.

Schoenberg: I was going to ask if, in a sense, LeRoi Jones / Amiri Baraka is a tragic figure, almost like a Paul Robison, but I decided not to ask that. But I say that as a lead-in to the following question about the schism in the wake of the Black Power movement of the ’60s and the relationship between Jews/white/blacks as it was evinced in the jazz world that you were part of, and how – because you knew Max, and you knew . . .

Hentoff: I knew LeRoi . . .

Schoenberg: . . . Cecil . . .

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Hentoff: . . . before he became Amiri.

Schoenberg: Right, and when he was married to the Jewish woman, I guess.

Hentoff: Right.

Schoenberg: So how did you and your jazz peers – let's say Dan Morgenstern and Martin Williams and the handful of you who we'll call peers – how did they and how did you experience – what was the difference between your relation with blacks 1957 and 1967, after Stokely Carmichael and Huey Newton and all that? What did it do to the jazz world?

Hentoff: I can't speak for Dan and the others. But again, being a journalist writing about a wide range of things, there was no difference, because they knew me. They knew what I wrote. If we had disagreements, we talked them out. But it was disheartening to see the divisions going on, but not surprising, because anger clouds judgement. It was Jews who helped finance the beginning of the NAACP. And the people who were killed in Mississippi – [Michael] Schwerner and – they were Jewish.

Schoenberg: Cheney and Goodman.

Hentoff: Yeah. But these things manifested themselves in jazz for a time. Some jazz people even took umbrage at the *Freedom Now Suite*, saying that jazz shouldn't get involved in this kind of racial propaganda, even if it was for the right reason. But you can't tell people what to think or what to say. When Amiri Baraka had that poem which more than implied that there were no Jews when 9/11 happened, because they had been given instructions apparently from Tel Aviv to stay away, that showed me that LeRoi had grown stupid. But I didn't want to censor him. I did think making him the poet of New Jersey was kind of bizarre, but all that did was show how foolish the legislators in New Jersey were.

Schoenberg: How did your career grow in the '60s? Where were you making a living from? How did that all happen? You've mentioned the *Voice*, the *New Yorker*, *Playboy*, and all the other places that you were writing for at that time. Were you making a living from being a freelancer to all these places?

Hentoff: At the *New Yorker* – and I was there for over 25 years – we had a draw, as it was called then. You'd get a check every week or every two weeks. That would be – then you'd get paid for the pieces and it sort of equalized. They paid very well. I once got \$2,500 dollars for a profile. That was stunning.

Schoenberg: Back then.

Hentoff: Yeah. And I made a fair amount of money, even though we didn't sell a lot of records, for the year or two I was at Candid Records. But I've never done all that well. So I don't – when I hear the term "career," what I do is make deadlines all the time. I'm very pleased when somebody in this building whom I hadn't known before – an elderly man came up to me just a few days ago and said, "I read you on jazz, and I want to thank you for turning me on to Ben Webster." I figured, wow, there's something I've done in this life to make somebody's life better. But I don't see myself as that kind of a figure or a career-whatever. The deadlines just keep going on and on.

Schoenberg: So you're like a musician with gigs, in a way.


Hentoff: Yeah. Some people have said that some of the books have had an effect on them, and that's good to hear. But all I care about – I have to write a piece now about the Military Commissions Act of 2006, which is the worst piece of legislation in American history, without exaggerating, and the attempts of Pat Lahey and Christopher Dodd to change it. So I don't know how that's going to affect my career. That's a gig.

Schoenberg: Where were you living in the '60s and '70s? You mentioned earlier being married first and then being married again. Just for the . . .

Hentoff: We were living for a time in the Village. When I was first married in New York, I lived on the upper West Side. But I've been in the Village pretty much since the last 40 or 50 years. After all, it's one of the few places in New York where you can still see the sky. But even though it's no longer anything like Bohemianism – the rents are too high – but it's still somewhat freer as a culture. It's a college town, so you get some of that. I just like it in the Village.

Schoenberg: Can you tell us about your children – the names and which marriage?

Hentoff: The oldest child, Jessica – Jessica Day Hentoff – Quincy Jones wrote a piece for her called *Jessica's Day*, which Cannonball recorded. I get a big kick out of that. Occasionally it shows up. She had a career change, a real career change. She was a fresh-person, to be correct, at the first years of State University of New York at Purchase, which was supposed to be a pretty wide-ranging college. Every month – there was a month break where they had people coming in and talking about what they did, which I thought was an interesting part of education. A circus performer came in, and she found her calling. She became a juggler. She ate fire in the street, became a trapeze artist. Now she runs a circus in St. Louis. It has, I must say, the most unique circus band I ever heard of. The musicians are jazz players, klezmer players. There are some Chinese players and the like. She even got together a group that played for the kids at a Nation of Islam church in St. Louis. One of the kids said, "Gee, I never saw a Jew before." The term multi-culturalism has been much abused, but Jessica pretty much embodies it. As we speak, she's preparing to take some of her circus people, including her three children, to

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Israel, because in the summer she's going to spend a month playing as part of an Arab-Israel circus. I didn't even know such a thing existed.

The other daughter, Miranda – Mandy, who you know. You went to school with her, I think.

Schoenberg: That's right.

Hentoff: She's a pianist [and] singer. Hasn't done much club work lately, because she has a kid. She spends – she makes her living primarily as a piano teacher. In some circles in New York I'm known as Mandy's father, because she's taught their kids. And she writes for television. She's written for "Front Line" and other documentaries.

The boys – the first son is Nick – Nick Hentoff. He's a lawyer who takes cases that very few other lawyers would take. He's based in Arizona. He does criminal defense work, civil liberties work for the ACLU, and he's sort of an expert on Indian law, because there's a lot of civil liberties abuses there as well.

The other son, Tom, is part of the legal establishment. He's a partner at Williams and Connolly, which is one of *the* prestige law firms. But he does a lot of First Amendment work and intellectual property. I almost got him into trouble during the Clinton years, because Clinton's lawyer was – lawyers were at Williams and Connolly, and I was then writing for the *Washington Post*. Every – I guess I appeared on Saturdays. Then he'd come in on Monday morning and a partner would say, "I see what your father wrote about Clinton." But he survived.

Schoenberg: Are they both – are the two – are the four children from the same marriage?

Hentoff: No. The first two . . .

Schoenberg: The girls?


Hentoff: . . . the daughters are from one marriage and the sons are from the present marriage.

Schoenberg: I see. Can you give us, as much as you'd like to, just a sketch or just basic information about both wives please?

Hentoff: About?

Schoenberg: About your two wives – how you met and when . . .

Hentoff: There were three wives.

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Schoenberg: Three. Okay.

Hentoff: Yeah. I'm the only person who's been married three times and the last one will reach it's fiftieth year, I think, next year. That's part of the surprises of longevity, I guess.

The first wife I got to know [as] part of a jazz circle in Boston. Her parents had been supporters of Sacco and Vanzetti. The father was a Unitarian preacher, so you know where the politics were there.

The second wife . . .

Schoenberg: Can you explain that? Because I'm not sure that a lot of people will know where the politics were for a Unitarian preacher in 1927.

Hentoff: Unitarian preachers – among the abolitionists, I would say, were a great many Unitarians.

Schoenberg: Got it.

Hentoff: I know if William Lloyd Garrison was. But I went to the William Lloyd Garrison public school, so I have that kind of tie.


The second wife was introduced to me by Paul Desmond, who was a good friend of mine. I forgave him for that afterwards. We did not get along. But out of that came the two daughters. So that was worth the trip.

Margot is a very independent – she used to write for the *Voice*. She was an editor there. She wrote for the *New York Review [of Books]*. She is a conservative – strong conservative. As I used to tell – still tell people – I think the reason both my sons became lawyers was they became used, at the dinner table, to the adversarial process, which is the heart of our system of law.

Schoenberg: Absolutely. Nat, I'm wondering if you can characterize for us your experiences at the major journals that you've written for, and what it was in the same way that we would try and compare Ben Webster and John Coltrane, to talk about the years that you were at the *Voice*, the years that you were at *Playboy*, the years you were with the *Journal*, and . . .

Hentoff: You mean the *Wall Street Journal*?

Schoenberg: The *Wall Street Journal*. What – just explain the gist of those publications and your role there and your experiences.

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Hentoff: My role was the same as it always is. I just do what I want to do, and if they don't like it . . . I've been fired from some of the most prestigious newspapers in the country.

Schoenberg: That's a great recommendation.

Hentoff: After many years at the *New Yorker*, when Tina Brown came in and she certainly changed the culture of the *New Yorker*, a week or so before Christmas I got a note from her managing editor telling me I had retired, which was very kind of her, because I didn't know I had retired. But they didn't like what I was doing. I was at the *Washington Post* for about 18 years under Meg Greenfield, the editorial page editor, but when she died and there was a change of editors, that was that.

But wherever I am, I still think of what Ben Webster told me: "If the rhythm section ain't making it" – if the editors don't like what I do, I still do what I do. There's been a change of ownership at the *Voice*. We'll see what happens there. So far I seem to be surviving there.

Schoenberg: One of the very few and probably the longest-term writer there that's still there.

Hentoff: Yeah, I'm the oldest survivor, because I started – I'll be at my fiftieth anniversary, I think, next year. I don't think I'll get a gold watch, but I hope I've still got the check.


The *Journal* is a very interesting paper, because there is a separation of church and state there that's very impressive. When I first came to New York I got to know some *Journal* reporters. They'd say, "Look. Whatever they say on the editorial page doesn't effect what we do as reporters," and that's still the same. The so-called "torture memos" in the Bush administration in 2002 and '3, how they rationalized the use of torture, which they didn't call torture . . .

Schoenberg: John You, or Yo?

Hentoff: John You – Y-o-u – who is the chief theoretician of the Bush administration.

Schoenberg: From Stanford.

Hentoff: All of that was broken in a story on the news pages by Jesse Braven, a *Wall Street Journal* reporter, but on the editorial pages they have supported the Bush-Cheney administration all the way. Where I write, in the leisure and arts, there's been total independence. The only time there was a possible question that came up – this was last year. I was writing about the Detroit jazz scene, and who better to write about than John Conyers, who grew up with all of these people: the Jones brothers, Pepper Adams, Betty

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Carter. They all went to school in the high schools there. As I was telling the editor then, he said, “They might not like it up there, the editorial page.” I said, “Let’s write – I’m going to write it, and let’s see what they do.” They didn’t do anything at all, and he never would have thought of censoring it, the editor. He just told me to watch out, in case there’s some kind of a – but I give them credit. They kept to the independence of – that’s a news page too.

Schoenberg: I’m curious from that angle: how do you compare the *New York Times* in terms of its editorial policy, its world purview, in terms of the *Wall Street Journal*, which has a reputation of being a conservative paper in terms of its editorial policy. Does the *Times* have the same freedom, do you think, that the writers of the *Times*, in terms of the ying and yang of . . . ?


Hentoff: I’m not so sure about the *Times* in terms of – not all of its reporters, but it’s come down in its quality I think in recent years. There is something that happens at some papers. You don’t have to be told at some papers what the editorial position is, but you follow it one way or another. There’s that to some extent at the *Times*, even when I agree with it. There is independence. They have in their people who cover the law – Adam Liptak; Linda Greenhouse, who’s probably the best reporter on the Supreme Court; and some of the – Eric [?]. They set the standard. I wish the other papers had people anywhere near as good as they are. But in terms of Washington coverage, if there is a fair shake to be given to anything the Bush administration – and sometimes there is – you don’t hear about it in the *New York Times*. So that’s a lessening, I think, of the quality there. You don’t get that at the *Wall Street Journal*. There is no taint in the reporting there of what the editorial people think.

Schoenberg: Did you follow the BBC?

[recording interrupted]

Nat, we were just talking about the difference between the *Wall Street Journal* and the *New York Times* and the different places you’ve been. Do you lament the state of jazz journalism and the – and even though you write for *Jazz Times* – *Jazz Times* and *Down Beat* – do you lament the – you’re a great interviewer. Let me ask you a question. It’s obvious that I lament it. How would you ask – what’s a better way to ask that question without prejudicing the question?

Hentoff: What do you think of jazz journalism in terms of its effect? How valuable is it to people who want to know more about the music and those who do know a lot, but would like to find out what’s happening in it currently, because they can’t be on the scene?

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Like everything else, it's a mixed situation. There was a time when there were very few people writing about it. I mentioned some of the early ones who were very important, like Charles Edward Smith. In terms of what's happening now, there's one kind that's very important, certainly to musicians, because it helps get them gigs, and that's people who write about "on the scene now," who cover concerts, reviews, etc., which I don't do. I think one of the important people there is Will Friedwald, who writes for a very good newspaper. I think in some ways it's more important than the *New York Times*. It has an arts section that I've never seen before in an American newspaper, every day. It's like the English weekly's I used to read when I had time to read such stuff. It's important that Seth Lipsky, who runs the *Sun* and who knows jazz – he's the one who got me my job many years ago, writing on jazz for the *Wall Street Journal* – Seth is hip enough to make jazz part of this very important arts scene. Will has a wide range of knowledge and a lot of enthusiasm, but not uncurbed enthusiasm. So I think he's an example.

In terms of other writers who are writing now – I'm trying to think. There's nobody like Martin Williams. Now that Whitney [Balliett] is dead, there's nobody like Whitney. He was silenced unjustly at the *New Yorker* for the last few years of his life. I've always been surprised at how few black jazz writers there are. Stanley Crouch is an example of somebody who knows what he's doing. His last book – I forget the title of it . . .

Schoenberg: *Considering Genius*.

Hentoff: Yeah. *Considering Genius*. I think that is one of the most important books on the music. He really gets into the music and the musicians. That's part of the canon of jazz writing. I don't know if Stanley has changed in one regard. I was on a panel with him a couple of years ago. I mentioned the prejudice among writers and musicians to a large, not exclusive extent, about women jazz players. Stanley said something, "If you can show me somebody – some woman who can swing hard enough, I'll go with that." In the audience was Wallace Roney's brother, I think, who said, "Listen. I played with" – I forget her name – "last night, and she swung her ass off." I didn't hear any more from Stanley.

But aside from that, Crouch is – Ralph Ellison, as I mentioned in our earlier interview, was, I think, the best writer on jazz, because of his whole background and range. There was a time when the black – I used to read the black press when I was a teenager, for civil rights reasons, but I was always looking for some stuff on jazz. There wasn't much. Finally there was a competition in New York with the *Amsterdam News*, which was the *New York Times* of black journalism, called "the call," I think. It was run by Adam Clayton Powell. A guy I knew was the editor. He was at the Five Spot and all those places. I said, "Where's the jazz coverage?" "We don't want it to appear . . ." – it was the old thing at the black colleges. It came from a bad background. Even now, I'm surprised there isn't – there aren't more – there are black jazz writers, but – that's something the IAJE might want to think about, the International Association of Jazz Educators.

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Schoenberg: Another aspect of my question would be in terms of the fact that there really is not a high-quality jazz publication with a high level of writing – with an average high level of writing. We may find your column or Gary Giddins’s column or Stanley’s column or something, which are like little mountains, if I may say so, but for the most part the level of the record reviews and the level of a lot of the writing still leaves a lot to be desired, Ted Panken notwithstanding, or the good writers. So I’ll go back to my original pejorative, slanted question: do you lament the fact that what you guys did with your magazine in the late ’50s . . . ?


Hentoff: I was just thinking, with all due immodesty: there’s never been a jazz magazine here – *Jazz hot* I haven’t seen in the last couple of years, but *Jazz hot* used to be a serious magazine in France. There are others. I understand there’s a good one in Poland. In England they have two or three ones, not first class, but pretty good. But there’s never been anything here like the *Jazz Review*, because we weren’t fooling around – we didn’t – of course we went out of business – we didn’t concern ourselves with circulation or advertising. I don’t think we ever had any advertising, come to think of it. But no, there isn’t – I used to berate the high-quality American intellectual magazines – the *Kenyon Review*, the *Partisan Review*. There are a whole lot of them. I’d say, “Where’s the jazz in them?” But at least in what they did, that was quality stuff. It’s ridiculous at this point, that there isn’t a serious – in the sense that we’re talking about – jazz monthly, let’s say, or even a quarterly.

Schoenberg: Terry Teachout is in the commentary. I always think of Woody Allen’s great line, “What would happen if commentary and dissent mixed? You’d have” – whatever. But anyway, there’s Terry in that magazine, and that’s about it.

Hentoff: Terry writes for the *Wall Street Journal* as well. But we’re thinking of, I think, a magazine that would be entirely about the music: where it’s been, where it is now, where it’s going. Lord knows there’s enough to write about.

Schoenberg: As your books came out – *The Jazz Life*, *America*, *Music Is*, and all your other books – did you – how did you feel your involvement in the jazz world, as the ’70s turned into the ’80s turned into the ’90s, and how did your preoccupation shift towards . . . ?

Hentoff: It was entirely a matter of time. I don’t go to clubs very much any more. That’s a big loss. That’s why I wouldn’t even think of writing about the current scene, because unless you hear it live, you haven’t heard it. I will occasionally write about a recording, because I think nobody else is paying attention, like the twenty-year-old jazz violinist Aaron Weinstein, or Catherine Russell, who just made me feel so good I had to write about her. I’m not on the scene any more. What I write about for the *Wall Street Journal* – I guess, in a sense, somebody called me a curator. Like I’m writing now about this

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Ellington package out of Storyville: live recordings, most of them never released before. There's a huge Fats Waller set I'm going to write about. I desperately want to do a piece on Bill Holman, who I think is a much underrated arranger, who's been in the business for many, many years. So my sense – I occasionally will make myself go to a club, even though I have deadlines on civil liberties or politics. If there's a tribute to Clark Terry, it's always rewarding. I leave feeling uplifted. But I'm not that much part of the scene as an active scene, but I try to use my longevity, at least – I could say institutional memory, but you can't talk about jazz as that kind of institution – but I am so much involved in how much it means to me, that I keep writing about it.

Schoenberg: In terms of your long career and your longevity and your being around music now for over 60 years, is there a piece or a topic or an experience that you've just not got around to writing about, that's in the back of your mind that if you ever have the time, you're going to do that one?

Hentoff: I think because of this interview, something I'd like to write about [is] what my life would have been if it hadn't been – I used – I've said before, the music has been an integral part of my life. It's like Merle Haggard – I don't think I've mentioned this before – Merle, who is, I think, the premier country singer and writer told me once that – first of all, he knows an enormous amount about jazz. I was once embarrassed interviewing him. He mentioned some old New Orleans musicians that I never heard of. I had to go home and look them up. But then he told me, "There are days when things are so bad. I go so far down. I can't get out of it, except music. Music will lift me up." I've written about that in terms of jazz. But as we've been talking, I've been thinking what my life would have been like, not only without the music, but without the musicians, knowing them outside the music and therefore inside the music, and what I've learned from them, not only from the music. We've gone into a few of those things in these interviews. It would have been a much more impoverished life if it hadn't been for that.

Schoenberg: You mentioned Merle Haggard. Who are some of the most surprising people that you met in terms of, that they turned out to be well versed or much in love with jazz music, that caught you totally by surprise because of their background or their career?

Hentoff: It happens all the time. There are lawyers, a couple of judges I've known, a bailiff in a Chicago courtroom who was – there are more people to whom jazz is an integral part of their lives than I think most people realize. That's why I wish there were a publication, or even more so, a real solid jazz series on television, that would – because when I see what – in this production called *Reeling in the Years*. That's the name of a record company. They're doing more of this. They're putting out television shows run on state television in Europe – Germany, France, Italy, etc. – over 20, 30, 40 years, when there was no concern about audience ratings. They could go on for an hour, two hours. We've not done that, except for the Ken Burns series. It's a shame, because you think of

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– there are courses in music. But as I talk, one thing gives me some hope. It's not on point here, but in the Sarasota, Florida, school system, there was a woman who used to be a regular at the Savoy Ballroom in New York. Her last name is White. I think it's Lucy White. She later moved to Florida and began teaching about music – teaching music. There's a very active Sarasota jazz society. She got them and the school system together. All the fifth-grade kids in Sarasota's public school system are learning American history at the same time as they're learning the history of jazz. They hear the music. They learn about the move from the South up to the North, the great migration, the changing civil rights periods and how jazz – how they interrelated. Occasionally musicians come and talk to them and play for them. Some of the fifth-grade kids have their own jazz bands. But to interrelate our history with that history, which is that history, is – I wish there were more of that. Under the No Child Left Behind Act, when you're teaching to the test so you're not a failing school, there's no room for music, let alone history, let alone history of the Constitution, let alone history of jazz, and all three of them are part of who we are.

Schoenberg: Let's talk about women in jazz. You mentioned the comment of Stanley at that panel discussion. Let's go back to your life story. Who were the first women in the jazz world, whether it could have been Lorraine Gordon or it could have been someone in Boston – not necessarily just Mary Lou Williams or Marian McPartland?

Hentoff: There was a trumpet player named Billie Rogers. When I was in high school we used to go hear the big bands at the movie theaters. We heard that Woody Herman was coming to town with a chick playing trumpet. Can you imagine that? We were all ready to snicker. We came. We saw her. She was up to that band. Later I found out, from Gene Lees I guess, who is the historian of the Woody Herman band, among others, that she had more stamina than they. When they had to play three [or] four shows a night, she was the one who kept her vigor up to the very end. So that was a lesson.

Then I heard some of the early recordings that were not available then – they're not available now much, I think – of the International Sweethearts of Rhythm. There were people like Vi Burnside. It was a revelation to me. Then, in New York, the name who comes to mind happens to be an Israeli, who's been playing here for a long time. That's Anat Cohen. She fits into any kind of first-class jazz situation.

Billy Taylor's been trying to raise consciousness about women in jazz. To me, one of the most exciting big bands in the business is Diva. The writing, the playing, and the enthusiasm, it belies the whole – actually the thing that most strikes me about that: there was a demonstration outside Jazz at Lincoln Center about three or four years ago. Wynton Marsalis – I've asked him about this. I never got an answer. There has been no full-time woman player in the Jazz at Lincoln Center orchestra. Some of the women players got together, and they had a demonstration, which is the American way under the first amendment, even though Lincoln Center is not part of the State, although it has that

effect on jazz. One of them was holding up a sign saying, “Testosterone is not a musical instrument.” I thought that was a very important statement.

Schoenberg: Tell us about Mary Lou Williams, in terms of your knowledge of jazz musicians and their political awareness, and them as these people that you knew. Did Mary Lou fit into the pantheon of people that you . . .?

Hentoff: Oh, yeah. Even as a teenager and the like I would listen to her whenever I could on records. Andy Kirk and his Clouds of Joy, and Mary Lou as the pianist – that was important. So were her arrangements and her compositions: *What’s your story, morning glory?*

I got to know Mary Lou in New York. She was a very thoughtful – in fact, very religious person. She was one of the few people who’d keep saying, “I’m going to convert you to the church.” Hasn’t succeeded.

She was a very impressive person. Despite all of the – see, the bias against women in jazz did not extend to pianists or to vocalists, but it pretty much stopped there. But nonetheless, she was not taken, I think, as seriously, certainly as a composer and an arranger, as she would have been had she been a man. But that never stopped her. That never stops – it’s like anybody in jazz. Nothing ever stops you if you have to do what you do.


But I think this is beginning to somewhat change, the sense that women don’t have the chops. Chicks don’t have the chops.

Schoenberg: If you were to have a desert-island list – if the building were burning, however you want to phrase it – what records – what albums would you like to have with you.

Hentoff: In view of advancing technology, of which I’m usually very ignorant, I would take a high-definition television set and bring with me *The Sound of Jazz*. Otherwise, the usual choices: Kansas City Six or anything by Lester [Young], Basie, Ellington – especially Fargo – the Fargo, North Dakota, date – some of Coltrane. All kinds of things. I couldn’t – if I had to limit myself, I would consider that a violation of the Eighth Amendment, cruel and unusual punishment. There’s so much.

Schoenberg: What books would you take?

Hentoff: Let me think now. *Jazzmen* by Charles Edward Smith. Whitney [Balliett]’s books – all of them. Gunther [Schuller]’s books. He has a history of the early – of the ’30s, etc. – that is really phenomenally important. He’s now writing what may be a six- or seven-hundred page autobiography that will include not only his classical experience,

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which is also very deep, but also jazz. I'd certainly take Sidney Bechet's *Treat it Gentle*, which tells you so much about himself, and through him, what it was like, not only being in New Orleans, but having memories through your own relatives, or forebearers, of what it had been like in Africa concerning music. I would take John Levy's memoir, because that was the first honest story of the business of jazz told by the first black person who became a major-league manager. Partly Quincy Jones's book. I think Quincy has more to write about than he did in that book. And there are others, but *Treat it Gentle* really stays in my mind as a book that everybody should read.


Schoenberg: Let's go beyond the jazz bookshelf. What other books would you grab?

Hentoff: There's a book called *The Patriots* written by Langueth – L-a-n-g-u-u-t-h. [He] used to be on the *New York Times*. Now he's a professor. It's about – it's like writing about jazz and not knowing who personally Ellington and Louis was, etc. This is about the period of our time before the revolution: Samuel Adams, John Adams, Paul Revere. He brings these people to life. For example, when the Boston Massacre occurred, and Crispus Attucks, who was a black patriot, and others were mowed down by the British, who was the person who became the defense attorney for the British soldiers who were taking orders?: a young lawyer named John Adams, which scandalized a lot of people at the time.

There's a book called *Three Men of Boston*. I forget his name now, but he did the same thing. What counted for me was knowing that there was a man named James Otis who argued for four hours before the King's Court against what was then the thing that most irritated Bostonians and helped create the committees of correspondence by which, before television, people told other people all along the Atlantic seaboard about the abuses of the British of their rights as Englishmen. Otis was arguing against continuing the general search warrant, by which the British customs people and the troops would write their own search warrants and come into your homes and offices looking for contraband. We have that now under the Patriot Act and under the various other executive orders that the Bush Administrations have come about. In telling the story about James Otis, there was a young lawyer in the audience – same lawyer, John Adams – who was so struck by the passion and power of argument about the right of privacy of British citizens, becoming soon American citizens, that he wrote in his diary at home, "on this day, the child Independence was born." That's the kind of book I wish more people – especially students – had a chance to read.

Schoenberg: Beyond your books – you're much too modest to rec[ommend] – I assume to – but beyond your books that deal with the Constitution and First Amendment things, what books stand out on that topic?

Hentoff: There are so many of them currently. There's a book now about James Madison had to fight to get the Bill of Rights. He had to fight Patrick Henry, for example. There's

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a book – let me think – oh, yes. There’s a – he died recently – a professor named Levy – L-e-v-y – who wrote a series of books, including *The Origins of the Bill of Rights*. Then another one on the origin of the establishment clause. Anything by him is vital to understanding who we are as Americans.

Schoenberg: Are there any films that dealt with jazz in a way that didn’t disgust you? Popular films?

Hentoff: Certainly not *Lady Sings the Blues*.

Schoenberg: Which you wrote about.

Hentoff: One of the films that did a disservice unintentionally was a film version of a novel called *Young Man with a Horn*, which propagated the view that all a jazz person had to do was get up and blow his horn. There was no history, no background, no training, nothing like that.

I saw the film – what was it? – *Round about Midnight*, which is okay, but . . .

Schoenberg: It’s still kind of corny, isn’t it, in a way?

Hentoff: Pardon me?

Schoenberg: I thought it was still corny, in a way. That’s my opinion, not yours.

Hentoff: Yeah, that’s it. I haven’t – it’s amazing. There are so many writers who have been moved by jazz, and people in the film industry, there must be some among them. But we’ve not had a novel – film, or even a novel about jazz, let alone a film, that tells the story. It’s something you might consider.


Schoenberg: No, I’m not a novelist. That’s not me.

How about people outside of family, again. Just to think about it in terms of a desert island. You’re going to be on a desert island, and you can bring a handful of people with you from the jazz world. Who would they be? With no instruments.

Hentoff: Living or dead, right?

Schoenberg: Just in your life-span. Who would you like to actually spend that amount of time with, as human beings.

Hentoff: Dannie Barker would be one, from New Orleans. He knew so much, and he was so wise. He later went on to be in the [Cab] Calloway band with Dizzy. He was a very observant person about American life and culture.

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Ellington, of course. I remember him telling me about black Ph.d.'s in the post office. When he started talking about black history, which ramified in *Black, Brown and Beige*, which he was rightly very proud of – the history of blacks in America . . .

Oh Lord. There's Rex Stewart, Clark Terry, Dizzy. First of all, Dizzy would make me feel good. He was a pleasure to be around. Oh my. It's hard to even – Paul Desmond, one of the wittiest people I've ever known. And of course, for a continuous challenge, Charles Mingus. That's the beginning.


Schoenberg: How does it feel to be – this is a question that is asked, I believe, of all the NEA Jazz Masters, correct? Ken, it's a standard question. How does it feel to be an NEA Jazz Master?

Hentoff: When I got the call from Dana Gioia, I was stunned. I felt I was being a pretender. I don't play anything. But when he explained that what he wanted to do, as he put it, was to make that award as important as the Pulitzers for journalists – it was part of his mission. He really sees it as a mission, to make Americans much more aware of what this music is, has been, culturally around the world – then I figured, okay. He said he wanted to recognize people who were not players, but had done something to make the music better known, better understood. Then I accepted it and the \$25,000. It was this – I've got an honorary – a couple of honorary degrees and all that, but I must say that's the one I most am stunned by, still. When I go to these Jazz Masters luncheons, it's more like a fan than one of their peers. It was a great – of course I liked how he introduced it. He said, "This is Dana Gioia, National Endowment for the Arts, and I'm going to give you the best message you ever got from your government."

Schoenberg: In the course of the several hours that you've given us over the last two days, are there any topics or things that weren't touched upon, or thoughts, or people, or at this point, anything that we – that you'd like to mention, or that . . .?

Hentoff: You do what I do at the end of all my interviews. Years ago, Mike Wallace told me the same thing. I always say, when we're about to wrap it up and the person is about to leave, "Anything I haven't asked that you think pertinent?" Then sometimes I get some very good stuff. But you've been such a thorough interviewer. Let me think if there is anything else.

I do wish that with all of the emphasis now on education, where there are thousands of people involved in the International Association of Jazz Educators, there'd be much more emphasis on getting people into the schools, starting with elementary schools, because I've played jazz music for fourth graders, starting with New Orleans marching bands. The teachers have – the kids have started to dance, and the teachers have. I think they probably wanted to hear more.


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More to the point, players like Clark Terry, like Jimmy Heath, people who used to teach young musicians, because the bands then would have both – a range of players. As Phil Woods used to say, on the bus you'd learn so much from the older players just talking to them. I don't know whether the Berklee School of Music and some of these other places – there are ones that have really full-fledged disciplinary courses – disciplines in jazz, not disciplinary – whether they do enough of that. I know Clark Terry is a presence at the William Patterson School. That's important. You can't just learn from records or from even younger players – middle-aged younger players even, who teach there now, and a lot of them do, like Wycliffe Gordon is a teacher. But bringing in the whole range of players who are still here. It's like, if you were teaching cantatas, you'd really want – if Johann Sebastian [Bach] was still around – to have him come to the class.

I'd like to see more of that, and also, ideally, more of that on television. They have a few documentaries now, but they don't have the equivalent of what's apparently a very successful merchandising operation called "Great Courses." You get these recordings of really important scholars in the field who can teach – not all scholars can do that. I know my wife Margot – she got turned on to classical music through that. Now pretty much all day long I hear opera and Beethoven, etc. If that were possible, either on – for that matter, "Great Courses in Jazz," but especially on television, where you could have an hour. Ken Burns showed how it could be done, but then it stopped. I'd like to see more of that.

Schoenberg: At the end of the day, what does jazz represent to you?

Hentoff: What Ornette said he wanted to put in his music: the human voice. It started with field hollers, with black slaves who couldn't say what they were feeling, or they'd be beaten or killed, so they did it through the human voice, which became the early blues, pre-blues, the early – in the nineteenth century or even before that, the first instrumentalists – the ones who – many of whom got their instruments out of pawn shops, some of whom came out of bands in the civil war. The people in the South called these instrumentalists "songsters." So it's – jazz is the human voice. It's not only – initially it was the human American black voice. Then it became all kinds of Americans' voices. Now it's all kinds of players. I heard once a Siberian jazz combo. They were pretty hot. So that's what jazz is. It is a way to get – other musics do that too, but not, I think, by and large. I'll grant you exceptions. The immediacy of the feeling that comes in to the singing and playing of jazz goes back to that Charlie Parker thing. What you play comes out of your whole life. And Jo Jones used to tell me, what you play at night comes out of what happened to you that afternoon, if you had an argument with a woman you're living with. It then comes out of what happened to you as a child. It all comes out that music, instantly. That's what jazz is.

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Schoenberg: Do you think in America we'll ever get rid of the hyphens – African-American? Chinese-American? As I understand it, if you live in Columbia, in South America, if you're from Norway, if you're there for two years, you're considered Columbian, or you call yourself Columbian. How important are the hyphens in America?

Hentoff: One of the heartening things is that at the last census, more people are refusing to fill in the square, "what's your race?," and there is so much intermarriage, inter- – I guess the word used to be called "miscegenation" – going on. There's still a lot of identity politics involving race as well as other things. That's going to be with us for some time to come. But I think if we have generations who are free to be themselves and we have an evolving consciousness of the fact that we – actually, apparently from the anthropologists, we all come out of some – a couple of people in Africa, anyway – there'll be less and less of the hyphenated. But what bothers me is, with nuclear proliferation being so easy now, with the world in the state that it is now, where you have religions killing each other wantonly, I'm just hoping we survive as a people in this country with the right to express ourselves in music and other ways. That's our primary concern now. If that happens, I think the hyphenations will dissolve.

Schoenberg: Ken, is there anything that you'd like to ask to . . .? Then I guess all I can say is two words, which is, thank you.

Hentoff: Thank you for giving me the opportunity to express myself.

(transcribed and edited by Barry Kernfeld)