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ELVIN JONES
NEA Jazz Master (2003)

Interviewee: Elvin Jones (September 9, 1927 - May 18, 2004)

Interviewer: Anthony Brown with recording engineer Ken Kimery

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Anthony Brown: “Today is June 10th, 2003 and we are sitting in the home of Elvin and Keiko Jones at 415 Central Park West in New York City. I’m sitting with Elvin Jones and his lovely, hospitable wife Keiko Jones. This interview is with Elvin Jones the incomparable jazz drummer, composer, bandleader, and humanitarian extraordinaire. And the proceedings are being recorded by Ken Kimery, my name is Anthony Brown. Present in the room are Keiko Jones and Elvin Jones.

Elvin, if we can begin by you stating your full name and when you were born.

Elvin Jones: My name is Elvin Ray Jones. I was born in Pontiac, Michigan in 1927; as one half of a twin, I was a twin! (chuckles). And my twin brother, we both had whooping cough, and he didn’t survive longer than 6 months. You know, I can remember the funeral and everything. Cause I used to tell my mother, I’d say “That little casket was right there!” and I’d point it out to her and she’d say, “That’s right.” (chuckles).

Anthony Brown: Wow, so you say in about 6 months—he passed at about 6 months old?

Elvin Jones: Right

Anthony Brown: And what was the date of that birth?

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Elvin Jones: September 9th 1927.

Anthony Brown: Okay, great. And could you give us the names of your parents?

Elvin Jones: Uh, my father's name was uh, Henry, Henry Jones Senior. And my mother's name was Olivia. With two v's! O-l-i-v-v-i-a.

Anthony Brown: Great, Great. And where were they originally from?

Elvin Jones: Vicksburg, they're originally from Vicksburg Mississippi.

Anthony Brown: And they came together as a couple to Pontiac?

Elvin Jones: Mhmm. Well they had three—you know Hank was born in Vicksburg mine. And my older sister was born there. And one sister that was just below Hanks age that was born there also. So those three kids also came when they moved to Pontiac.

Anthony Brown: So you said you had a brother Hank, and your sisters' names?

Elvin Jones: Well uh. My older sister her name was Olivvia. Spelled like my mother. And she was a very talented girl, like a savant and she played the classics and I guess when she was about 16 years old in the winter her and her friends used to go out on a lake right where we lived. And they used to try to ice skate and they had a little rope they used to swing out on the ice and then skate back in. She fell through the ice and drowned.

Anthony Brown: That was your sister Olivvia?

Elvin Jones: Yes

Anthony Brown: How many brothers and sisters did you have total?

EJ: Olivvia, Melinda, Anna May, and Edith

AB: So that was four sisters. How many brothers did you have?

EJ: Hank, Henry, and Thaddeus, and Paul, and Tom, and Elvin.

AB: And the brother that passed what was his name?

EJ: His name was Elvin Roy.

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AB: Okay so his name was Elvin Roy, and you're Elvin Ray (chuckles)

EJ: Ha-ha, yes. And he was fat and I was skinny (laughs)

AB: Okay so where are you in the order of your brothers and your sisters?

EJ: I'm the last one.

AB: So you were the youngest?

EJ: Yes.

AB: And how many of your immediate family members are still with us?

EJ: Well only Hank.[he] is the only one that survived out of everybody else. Everyone else gets sick they die, age. They're all gone except Hank and myself.

AB: So you mentioned also that Olivia showed some talent as a musician, that of course Hank and Thad also did. Was there music in the family from either of your parents? Were either of them musically inclined?

EJ: Well not really. My mother taught herself, we had a piano, and she taught herself how to play church song. Old spirituals and things like that. They always sang in senior choir and we all went to Sunday school. We'd always run around to the big event of the week, which was going to church on Sunday, and we'd stay all day long

AB: Was that the only day you went to church? Somebody like Max [Max Roach] talks about going to Wednesday night prayer meeting.

EJ: I didn't go to the prayer meeting. Only older people did that: my father, his buddies, deacons and people like that. He was a deacon.

AB: Your father was a deacon? And which church was that?

EJ: Trinity Baptist Church in Pontiac.

AB: And your fathers occupation?

EJ: He was a lumber inspector for general motors.

AB: Could you describe what he did?

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EJ: (Laughs) Well in the 20's and the early 30's most of the cars and busses and all that, they had wooden framework on the inside of the car. They had upholstery attached to that, and the steel would go over the top. So that was how cars were made .They used a lot of lumber and my Dad he was the one that would select the lumber to go into the cars and the busses. That was his job.

AB: Do you have any idea when they left Vicksburg, Mississippi and came to Pontiac?

EJ: That was um... I know it was um...I guess it was just after World War I, 1918 or something.

AB: Do you remember the street address of the house you grew up in, in Pontiac

EJ: Oh yes! It was 129 Bagley Street. No I'm sorry! The first house, the house I was born in was Orchard Lake. That was the name of the street, Orchard Lake. We moved from there when I was about ten, we moved up into a bigger house up the street from there, about 6 blocks or so. And that was 74 Orchard Lake.

AB: Okay

EJ: We moved from there to another part of town. It was 129 Bagley Street.

AB: And that's the house you remembered?

EJ: Yes

AB: Can you describe what the neighborhood was like, who was living there?

EJ: Oh yes. It was like sort of in the business part of town. My uncle had a drycleaners there and people had stores and it was very industrious. The church was very near there.

AB: And you had other family members living in the area also? You mentioned your uncle.

EJ: My uncle did. He lived right on the corner of Jackson and Bagley Street, two and a half blocks from where we lived. That was... I was planning to learn how to be a dry cleaner. I didn't know how much work that was. (chuckles) We were using this chemical called Carbon Tetrachloride and at the end of the day it had to be boiled so that the dirt would sift out of it to the bottom of the tank. Then I could go in with a bucket and dip this

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mud out of there. And I fell into that tank a couple of times and got a mouth full of that Carbon Tetrachloride! (Laughs)

AB: So I guess that didn't last too long!?! (Laughs)

EJ: I quit that job!

AB: So how old were you then?

EJ: Oh heck, I was only ten, eleven years old

AB: Were you gainfully employed another way around this time?

EJ: Oh I was going to school you know. But I enjoyed going there and sweeping and watching my uncle work. He was a tailor as well, very good tailor. All his machines were fascinating to me. It was like going into a Rube Goldberg cartoon! (Laughs) But it was nice. I learned how to fire up the boilers, and run the machines and all that. So I was the only one. He had other people working for him but I was there to do the dirty work. I didn't mind it thought. I learned how to press and a lot of other things.

AB: Keiko mentioned earlier you're a carpenter. Did you learn those skills at that time or was that something you learned later on?

EJ: I learned that mainly from my father. Cause he was a carpenter and he had all kinds of tools. When we lived on Orchard Lake. The people who lived in that neighborhood had these cross bent saws that they'd cut down trees with. And they'd bring them over to my dad. He'd sharpen the teeth on these blades. That was his job. And I used to see him doing that, and it was just fascinating just to watch someone doing that. He had all kinds of these planes and lay...this and everything. He had rulers and you know T squares and all that so it...yeah.

AB: Can we backtrack and get your uncle's name?

EJ: His name was Joseph E Jones.

AB: Your father's brother?

EJ: Yes.

AB: Older or younger brother?

EJ: He was younger than my Dad.

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AB: Can we talk about your school days? Where you went to school, some of your favorite subjects, whether you were into athletics or not or any other interests?

EJ: When I started school at Bagley Elementary School where we were on Orchard Lake, it was assort of a... the school was sort of situated in apposition where we could walk to school from there. You know it was nice walk but we could walk there you know through a swamp, cross a bridge, but we'd get to school. You know I didn't really want to go. You know my mother had to take me there cause she'd have to drop me off and if she didn't, you know I'd turn around and go right on home (Laughs).

AB: So you weren't a big fan of school growing up

EJ: No I wasn't. Especially because I had never been around kids that young. All the people I knew were older. So that was a little different

AB: So did you have friends in school as well as in the neighborhood?

EJ: Well we had friends in school, and in the neighborhood this guy Mathis, his father had about 18 children, and one boy, and he was the only boy. So he had all these girls! (Laughs) But he was a great athlete and a fantastic swimmer, and he taught me how to swim.

AB: Were there other athletics you were involved with?

EJ: I used to run track, do the high jump and run the 100-yard dash and all that. I could do everything but pole vault! I said "I'm not going up [on that]" I said "I have to let that pass!" (Laughs)

AB: How about baseball football basketball?

EJ: We always played that. Mainly softball, not baseball, softball. We played a lot and a lot of football too. It was pretty rough the way we played it! Just on an open lot. Sometimes people would go out there and drop bottles, throw their empty whiskey bottles out, so we had to watch that glass when we were playing football out there.

AB: Could you describe the neighborhood you grew up in? Was it segregated, was it middle class?

Oh no, this was working class neighborhood. On the corner was a farmer. His name was Mr. Strong and he was from Poland. He had horses and the plows and everything and in the spring my dad would get him to come over with the horses and the plow, and get him
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to plow. We had a couple acres of land where we'd plant our garden so I always enjoyed seeing things like that. My father was so—he knew everybody. He didn't have any bad feelings about him at all. And people do favors for him, he'd do favors for them, it was back and forth. People need a cup of sugar; he needs a cup of salt, go across the street and get it! (Laughs) They'd give it to you gladly, it was neighborhood like that. It was all kinds of people. Maybe 10 different languages.

AB: So all the neighborhood kids, it was a pretty integrated school you went to?

EJ: Oh yes, it was all integrated. Pontiac was too small. You know you go into this one or you don't have any school at all!

AB: So can you talk about your mother? You've talked about your father, but can you talk about your mother? I imagine with that many kids she was a housewife.

EJ: My mother to me she was a saint. I guess she worked herself to death. She used to buy us shoes and clothes and things during the depression. She worked for an office building in downtown Pontiac. So it was dentists and doctors and people like that'd and we'd go down there and help her and she'd clean that *whole* building for \$2 a week! So she had a lot of fortitude. With that \$2 she bought Hank a piano—she knew how to use it!

AB: Sounds like she was very encouraging about music in the household

Nothing would make her happier than to see her kids practicing, singing together. We did a lot of that. We had quartets. We sang negro spirituals

AB: So she would have you sing in the house/

EJ: Oh yeah sure in the house!

AB: As a regular routine activity?

EJ: Except the only place we couldn't sing was at the dinner table. I remember Thad was singing that song called "Steamboat Bill" [Elvin imitates the song and sings the melody] "Steamboat Bill! Du du du da da da! Steamboat Bill" (laughs) and my father said to Thad "Shut up before I hit you in the head with this spoon" – BONG! (Elvin laughs). He rang like a gong! Oh boy.

AB: So was Hank the first one of your brothers and sisters to become involved musically

EJ: Oh no it was Olivvia she was the first, she was so talented that she used to give a girl who lived near us, her name was Pauline McCahon, Olivvia gave her voice lessons and For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



she eventually became a part of the Metropolitan Opera company and her stage name was Carlotta Franzel.

AB: So that was a childhood acquaintance? Oh my god. Wow—So you talked about grammar school, how about junior high school. When do you start to develop your interest in music or other activities?

EJ: Well my interest came when—It wasn't really in school so much but they had in those days a WPA. You know, but they hadn't had a part of it for artists, for musicians and my brother Hank organized a band and my uncle Bill, that's my father's youngest brother, was playing trumpet in this so I'd listen to these guys rehearsing and it was just so fascinating that I said, "God I want to do this one of those days"

AB: Do you recall what kind of music they were playing?

EJ: Well they were playing sheet music. One piece was very popular at that time it was called "White Heat" and it had a lot of intervals. I think it was one of Jimmy Lunceford's arrangements cause it had a lot of riffs in there it was practically all riffs but it sounded good. You would hear trumpets and saxophone and clarinets and piano and drums and bass. There was a bass player who didn't have a contrabass he had a tuba! His name was Lutellis Pynton

AB: Lutellis?

EJ: He would like to—It was a lot of fun watching him play this. The thing was he had a bicycle and when he came to rehearsals at our house you could see him coming down the street with that tuba on this bike. I said "Oh boy". It was funny

AB: Was there a drummer in the band?

EJ: Oh yeah his name was—they call him-- he had a nickname they called him "Juve Baby" I guess because he was light skinned (laughs) you know back then everybody had a nickname. (Laughs) You know at first I didn't know what that meant I said ' what kind of word is that!?"

AB: About how old were you

EJ:I was 10 or 12 I was still in grade school

AB: But obviously this was an experience that left a lasting impression on you

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EJ: You know you gotta' start some place and you know I was helped along and encouraged by watching circuses when they come to town we lived on one side the street and in front of our house were the circus grounds so that was a lot of fun seeing them unload the cars, and to see elephants pushing trucks and stuff like that

AB: You say you were influenced by the music of the circus?

EJ: Oh yeah we went to the show. It was one of the managers—he'd come early in the morning and he'd come and my mom would make a big hot pot of coffee and give it to him.

AB: What was it about the music that was so captivating for you.

EJ: Well mainly it was the drums that captivated me,. To see a parade and the whole, the whole center, the main portion of the parade, was the drum section. Cause everybody was marching and just to listen to that and see the discipline was formed in that way—that was fascinating to me.

AB: So you're saying that the first instrument you were attracted to was the drums even though your brothers played other instruments?

EJ: I didn't want to do anything else

AB: What did you do to get involved as a drummer? Did you start at that point?

EJ: Well I started in high school. We had a music teacher that was he'd just gotten out of the University Of Michigan with his Master's degree and he was the music teacher/ And he was one of the great Michigan University- Michigan University had this tremendous marching band and he was the star. He head his baton and he'd throw it up in the air and it'd go up in the air and he'd catch it behind his back and to all these tricks. So he was the one who got me started, to studying percussion.

AB: And what was his name?

EJ: Fred N. Weist

AB: And this was the gentleman who was the drum major? And he had the Master's degree from the University of Michigan in music? And he was teaching junior high school?

EJ: Yeah, junior high school. He taught the band.

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AB: So he was the band director for Junior high school, someone with a Master's degree teaching music?

EJ: Oh yeah. Listen there were guys who had PhD's who were teaching English it was a job! In 1932 it wasn't that easy to get work up until 1940 or so when the war [WWII] started. The thing is that it was possible, and they had this job. We were so fortunate to have these tremendously educated people teaching us. For me that was motivation to go to school

AB: So you started to study music formally in school? Cause earlier you said your interest in music had started out of school. So you had your brothers working in the bands and you had your formal education, what were you taught in this formal education?

EJ: Well I wanted to play drums and the first thing he taught us, the fledging drummers, us would-be drummers, first thing is that you have to buy this book and a drum pad and a pair of drum sticks—that was a big order! I didn't know where I was going to get the money. My mother was great and she gave it to me. I guess altogether it was about a dollar and a half.

AB: Do you remember what book that was?

EJ: It was Paul Yoder—Drum method. And the day I bought the book and took it home I started reading it and I said “Wow I think I can do this ‘Left Right Left Right’” and there were notations whole note, a half note, quarter note, eighth note, sixteenth note, thirty-second note. It was very simple-- it seemed to me that it was easy to catch onto. It wasn't that complex. I read that book through that night and I went to school the next day and I told Mr. Weist “I can read the book!” and he said “Okay let me see.” And I read it for him and I got taken out of the beginner's band and put in the first band!

AB: In one day!?

EJ: Yeah. (Laughs)

AB: Do you remember what else was in the book? Were there any rudiments?

EJ: Oh yeah the rudiments were there that was one of the main things that-- anybody could learn to read these simple exercises but the rudiments incorporated into the simple exercises that create the complexities. Then it was a challenge that if you learn how to play these rudiments, then you learn to how to play these books, and you learn how to read these books so it was a very good beginning for me.

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AB: Had you not even touched drums before that, having seen your brothers play?

EJ: No, I never had one. All I could do at somebody else's drum cause I didn't have one. (Laughs)

AB: How did your roll sound cause I know you like the double stroke roll.

EJ: Oh yeah. I practiced it until I could do it. I stayed with it. To me it was just a whole new universe that opened up that was unexplored to me. Nobody had to tell me to practice. I couldn't stop.

AB: Do you remember what kind of repertoire your were playing, were they basic marches, were you playing concert music?

EJ: Well in school bands, usually cause we would entertain the crowd at football games so it was mainly marches. Sometimes he would use his baton for band arrangements for orchestral music. So that was interesting as well.

AB: So through this period you were learning your craft as a drummer and you were playing with the school band. Were you starting to work outside of the context of school yet? Or starting to play?

EJ: No I didn't do that so much, cause for one thing my mother didn't want me to go out at night so I didn't go out at night. But you know I know Hank would go out and play with Uncle Bill and Id say, "I like to go over there" but what I am going to do, stand there and look? (Laughs)

AB: So you went from beginner band to the advanced—or intermediate band and your playing in the school concerts, playing for the games. What else was contributing, what other music were listening to other than that which you were playing?

EJ: Well my neighbors they had—they learned how to play alto saxophone and he had uh his father owned a railroad worker so he had—he was rich. He always had good clothes and everything but he had these records. Recordings of duke Ellington's band and he used to sit there in his house and listen to Duke Ellington cause his man was Johnny Hodges so we listened to everything we had on him, so that's when I said I got the disease now. I was – it was almost like having SARS. (Laughs)

AB: So you were hooked huh? So you mentioned earlier that your mother emphasized church music, what other type of music was played in the Jones household

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EJ: Well my sister, she could play classical music she played all kinds of... she didn't even have the sheet music, she just played it. She was that kind of savant

AB: Did either of your parents or your older brother play records in the house, was there any type of record that was always on?

EJ: We didn't have that many records, our neighbors did. Dan Turner, he was the guy who played the saxophone, he had all kinds of records, blues and bands and all. He was a nice guy. I'd come into his house and dragging all that mud and everything into his mothers floor and we'd listen to records! (Laughs) It used to knock me out.

AB: Were there any other drummers, obviously Sonny Greer playing with Duke Ellington that made an impression on you in those early days?

EJ: Well there was a drummer who played in the WPA band with Lutellis who used to play the tuba, and the drummer, after Juve Baby was Walter Tendill and I always thought that he was going to be a good drummer but he just, he didn't want to pursuer it. He could play, he kept good time and he owned a set of drums, he had a bass drum and a snare (laughs) to me that was a whole set of drums! That was a whole set!

AB: When did you get your first instrument?

EJ: I got mine after I had gotten discharged from the air force.

AB: Oh whoa we don't want to get that far ahead!

EJ: I was 21 years old! (laughs heartily)

Lets backtrack a little bit. Lets back up man shoot! Well we should go back to that first year you were playing music. Did you maintain the type of music you were playing in school? Did you start to broaden and play other types?

EJ: Absolutely you know I tried to play any type of music that I could really see. I tried to stick to music that I understood and I understood marches more than anything else. And I saw the sheet music that swing bands hand and I could read that but it didn't really mean anything cause I didn't have any drums anyway so it was sort of abstract to me.

AB: So the only time you had access to drums was actually while you were in school and you would practice at home on the pad. So you were basically developing snare drum technique. Anything else at school? Any bass drum, hi hat, cymbals?

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EJ: I played the bass drum I played the cymbals and the bell lyre, all of the percussion instruments that we had. We didn't have any timpani at that point.

AB: Xylophone, any other mallets, anything else? Were you learning to play melodic instruments at that point?

EJ: Like I said, they had a bell lyre.

AB: Like a glockenspiel?

EJ: Yeah that was the closest thing they had. I really wanted to learn n how to play xylophone but I don't think there was a xylophone in Pontiac, Michigan! (laughs)

AB: About what do you think the population of Pontiac was at that point in time?

EJ: It was about 60,000. It was quite—that's a good number of people. But everybody lived in houses so it looked a lot more dense than it really was cause most people they had some pretty big families. Like I said, the people across the street from me.

AB: Yeah they had 18, right?

EJ: (laughs) Yeah, they had 18.

AB: Were you involved, or were there any activities like boy scouts, or the parade lodges, or any other social activities or dances or things like that?

EJ: Well I joined the scouts, the boy scouts because when we moved from 129 (Elvin's old house) to 74 (Elvin's new house) there a man. He had been in WWI and he volunteered to be a scoutmaster and he knew a lot about – he was a woodsman. So he taught us a lot about discipline and things like that. We didn't have any uniforms. We'd see the other scouts and we'd say, "where did they get those uniforms!?! When are we going to get some!?" (Laughs)

AB: Were any of your other brothers also in the scouts?

EJ: No I think they passed that up for other things. (Chuckles)

AB: So in school you're learning to play the repertoire of the concert band, the marching band, were you actually – did you go out and learn the march, did you learn the choreography?

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EJ: Oh yeah, and not only that I learned how to use the baton and to roll and to lead the band.

AB: Oh okay so you performed as the drum major?

EJ: Yes, I studied and served as the drum major. That was a lot of fun too.

AB: So were you tall? Cause a drum major is usually tall?

EJ: I don't know. You know I felt like I was tall. (Laughs). I think there were so many things to remember and to carry around. For instance if you wanted to do a counter march there were signals to do that and a lot of things. A right turn, a left, that's very complicated for 60 people. But I had—to me it was a wonderful time of my life. To be introduced to so many different things.

AB: Any other memorable moments as far as your early music career at this point? About junior high school years, any bands that you saw or any other people that had an influence on you musically at this point?

EJ: The person that really influenced me was Mr. Weist. Because he took an interest in me he said, “you know look if you practice this, and if you do it till your muscles ache just keep practicing till your muscles stop aching and you'll know how to do it! Just don't think about it—hypnotize yourself.”

AB: He sounds like a Zen master! (Laughs)

EJ: He was pretty strict you know he didn't stand for any messing around. He used to talk to the band members and they fidget around and he say “your just like a bunch of flies near a light!”

AB: Yeah, he sounds old school. (Laughs) So then what happened you continued on through this, you went to high school?

EJ: I didn't go to high school. I left school in 10th grade. And the war (WWII) started and I went and got a job in the factory and my aim was to save some money so I could buy a set of drums. And I got to the point that by the time I was 18 years old I said okay I had left home and I ran away – well I didn't run away—I had left home and I got a job, and I was making a decent salary. I just left.

And I went to Boston Massachusetts I got a room in a rooming house and the next day I got a newspaper and about the only thing I knew how to do was dry cleaning. So I got a job pressing and it was very strange so I only stayed there about a week and I went to
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New York and I got a job at a huge laundry company. They had the factory, it was like a factory in Elizabeth, New Jersey—I had to go all the way out there. But it was interesting just to be around and see the mass production of cleaning and pressing.

AB: Can we go back to when you left home? I want to ask how your parents felt about you leaving home and also why you went to Boston?

EJ: I didn't think, I guess it was the only thing I could think of. (Laughs). You know, you hear about things and I said, "I think I'll go to Boston" and got on a bus, at the time it only cost about ten dollars.

AB: Did you know anybody in Boston?

EJ: Not a soul. (Laughs) I thought I was a man or something.

AB: So you just told your parents I'm leaving?

EJ: Right

AB: Did you tell them you were going to Boston?

EJ: I told them after I was gone. Anywhere I got there and stayed in New York for a while. And I was just tired of walking around not really having anything to do. And I said I guess I'll join the Army. So I joined the Army.

AB: So did you join the Army in New York?

EJ: Yep- that's the first place I went, Fort Dix?

AB: So that's where you were first inducted? Fort Dix New Jersey—I know it well.

(AB addresses Ken Kimery. AB asks if there is anything they need to fill in regarding the chronological time line of Elvin's career in Junior High leading to his departure from Pontiac. Tape then begins with Elvin explaining his Junior High experience. Question he is asked is not recorded)

EJ: When I was going to junior high school, a friend of mine who lived right across the street from us his name was Arthur Hoseppian, he was Armenian, his whole family were Armenians, and my uncle used to speak Armenian and Greek. And I was fascinated by the languages, and he (Arthur) had a paper route and I noticed he always seemed to have some money! This was something that was very foreign to me at that point! The most I had ever seen was a quarter. I said, "I would help" I'd go around the route with him. And For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



it came to the point where he was going to quit the paper route and give it to me. So he showed me how to do it and we went down to Pontiac Daily Press and signed up to be the paperboy. I knew the route so I did that for oh, 8 months or more.

The thing is I was kind of depressed because most of the people that I knew that took the paper were on welfare and so they didn't have the money to pay for the paper, for crying out loud. So I'd just leave the paper anyway. And I never collect any money! (Laughs)

Keiko Interjects: Those people were so hungry there were like 8 or 9 or 10 years old during the time when no one locked the door. So Elvin couldn't go into the door. Cause someone would go in the door, see the chicken on the table, then go out. So they could eat.

EJ: Well we did used to steal chickens and things. (Laughs)

AB: So you stayed in touch with Arthur even after the army and everything?

EJ: Oh yeah we are still friends right now. I could call him up this very minute

AB: He's still in Pontiac?

EJ: Oh yeah. He never left?

AB: He never left (laughs) he probably owns that newspaper!

EJ: He was in the army. He had to go over. He was in an invasion in 1944 so he went through that.

AB: But he survived?

EJ: Yeah he survived. Quite a few people I knew did. One fellow went to the army—he had a nervous breakdown on the way to the camp. Cause you know—I shouldn't laugh at this cause it is scary—but he shouldn't have volunteered or anything. My brother was with him and said he kept talking to himself, and all of the sudden he was incoherent and he didn't know where he was. A lot of people did that—he just got sick. Maybe he was to begin with. There are just some things people should never try to do. And you say, “oh we are going to the army and were going over seas and we have to fight this war” and you have a lot of fantasies about that and that was what made him have a nervous break down.

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AB: I know that you enlisted in the Army in 1946 so the war was over and that was not a concern of yours. What went through your mind to decide to enlist in the Army? Was there somebody who recruited you?

EJ: No. I used to see this recruiting station and I said, “well what am I doing I’m tired of working in this laundry [business]”. I said. “Ill join the Army” so that’s what I did.

AB: And what was your expectation?

EJ: I just though that when filled out the applications and everything that I put my—my preference was an army band or a the air core, and so I didn’t want to go to the Navy. I don’t like boats that much anyway. I’d rather stay on land.

AB: What did they assign you? Do you remember what your M.O.S [Military Operations Specialties] was?

EJ:I had a bass drum MOS. To play bass drum.

AB: Okay so you had your basic at Fort Dix, then you had your A.I.T, your Advanced Individual Training, where did you go for that?

EJ: To Fort Lee Virginia.

AB: To the military band school?

EJ: Yes. They had a military band school there. So I was an instructor there for a while after I had finished their basic—to be an instructor there at that school. And the man there who was a director – Captain Soderberg he said, “ El, do you want to go to the Air Core” cause this is his friend Mr. John Bies he was getting musicians from all over the army I mean he had a lot of influences as Chief Warrant Officer. So he had a lot of influences. He taught at Howard University, and a lot of things like that. So he was a god friend of the Secretary of State George Marshall.

AB: As in the famous Marshall Plan? That George Marshall?

EJ: So he’d call him up everyday and they’d talk like old buddies. Anyway he got a lot of things for us that we wouldn’t have gotten through normal channels.

AB: So you went to the military band school, you received your M.O.S as a drummer. What was your first assignment?

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EJ: Well it was to, to transfer to the band in Columbus, Ohio. The 766 Air Core Band, Army Air Core Band.

AB: So you had enlisted in the Army, and then you had a transfer to the Army Air Core Band while you were at Fort Lee?

EJ: Yes, exactly. And the Army Air Core was the same, it wasn't any different at that time. Before I got out they designated it as the Air Force, and they took it out of the Army jurisdiction.

AB: So let me just backtrack, you're at Fort Lee and you say you're instructing at Fort Lee, you were instructing before you got your first assignment. So you were teaching percussion, you were teaching basic military, what were some of the things you were teaching?

EJ: The same thing as everyone. These drummers that come from all over the place. I'd write out drum cadence for them. There were 16 drummers or more. It's hard to get the to coordinate. Some guys are just doing it cause its easy or they think its easy. And I tried to do as much as I could in that respect. I didn't want to be around not doing anything. Cause it's easy to bug off in the army its easy do to that.

AB: How did the Army life suit you?

EJ: It was good. I loved it. I thrived on it I enjoyed my tour in the army.

AB: Do you remember the date you were actually inducted into the military, I know its 1946 but do you remember the date, or maybe even a season?

EJ: Let me see, it was in the spring. Cause it was still rather chilly out and—I guess it was March or February. I don't know exactly but it was in that range.

AB: And given this was 1946, the military was still segregated so were you training and serving in segregated units?

EJ: Yes. But you know the only difference was that in the band training school it wasn't segregated. And this was in Camp Lee! So they had people from all over the Army white black anybody else. So it was just, "You're here to study you learn to march in the Army and how to play these marches". I enjoyed that and it was a relief to not be shouted off by another thing. Cause it took a while. When we were in the Air Core there it finally began the integration in the Air Core

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AB: Up until this time had you experienced any unpleasant experiences because of racism or any kind of prejudice?

EJ: No I didn't. I never saw any.

AB: So when you're assigned to your first duty assignment in Ohio was that also integrated or was that segregated?

EJ: No, it was segregated. It was the 99th Fighter Squad 105th Bomber Squadron. That was the reason for the base, it was a fighter base. SO this great band leader, Mr. John Bryce. He was just a tremendous man he could play all this. He reminded me of Mr. Weist. He had this kind of attitude all the time. He was always figuring out a way to get somebody to practice more. You'd be playing a passage in a piece of music and he'd say, "Wait a minute you see that 4th bar in the 2nd—well now get out your exercise book—and look at the page—Gentleman it's the same goddamn thing!" (Laughs)

AB: So you were very fortunate to have such strong mentors for your education.

EJ: I'd say I was the luckiest guy in the world.

AB: So anymore about your experience about your duty assignment at this air base

EJ: There wasn't really that much to do. Cause Colonel Davis, he was hard on the trumpet players cause they he wanted them to play readily and retreat and all the rest of the Bugle calls. So the trumpet they had a hard time. But other than it was a learning experience and it was a way that I didn't learn in school. What I didn't learn in school I learned in the army. I started to take Marimba lessons from a percussionist in the Columbus Symphony orchestra. Ragland. You ever heard of him?

AB: Oh yeah Bags Ragland.

EJ: Oh yeah he was a fantastic percussionist, and a mallet man. So I studied with him for a while.

AB: I'm sorry which symphony was that again?

EJ: Columbus, Ohio Symphony Orchestra.

AB: What other assignments did you have in the military? You were designated a bass drummer but did you actually play all the other instruments?

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EJ: I played all of the percussion instruments. I played the bass drum because nobody had the will to do it. I was the one that said, “I don’t mind playing the bass drum” because I like to listen to the cadence and the bass drum is essential to the cadence. If you don’t hear that the cadence isn’t being played right and you lose the time, and everyone gets frustrated. So it’s important.

AB: There are some accounts in previous interviews that say you worked in special services as a stagehand rather than as a musician. Did you do that also?

EJ: I did! What eventually happened was the Special Services men came through. Some guy from Washington [D.C.] he came through and he organized a unit that could play at all of the Air Force [Formerly Air Core] bases throughout the United States and in the world and whatever, and create a stage show. He knew Sammy Davis and all these guys. He was very knowledgeable about all these Broadway shows and things like that, so he knew what to get. So our band was chosen to start this. We did it and a lot of material started coming in. Big lights you know we had a stage that was in different pieces and you had to put it together. And I had to do all that cause I was a stagehand and I didn’t play in the band.

AB: So up until this point you had been playing and then when this band was being formed by the special services you...

EJ: You know, this was the jazz band and I wasn’t playing any jazz music then. I was satisfied just playing semi-classical stuff.

AB: Had you actually played a drum set at this point? Had you actually sat down at a drum set?

EJ: Well they had one there. I said, “I don’t want to get started on this because I don’t know anything about it!” (Laughs). So I had to study first. I first heard Dizzy Gillespie and the drummer was Big Sid Catlett and I don’t know who—it was a small group a quartet, a quintet, something like that. And they were playing “Salt Peanuts”. And Big Sid, Sid Catlett plays this introduction to “Salt Peanuts” on brushes—(Elvin imitates the whooshing and galloping sound of brushes). I said, “That’s the prettiest thing I’ve ever heard in my life. (Laughs) I said, “I gotta do that, that’s it!”

AB: So you saw the band (Dizzy’s band) live?

EJ: Oh no! It was just the records. Some of the guys had these records I was just lucky. If I hadn’t heard that I’d probably still be playing the bass drum! (Laughs)

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AB: So this happened while you were in the military, somebody played this recording. So it had probably been the May 1945, the May recording, or even earlier, of “Salt Peanuts” and that was it?

EJ: Then my ears were ready then. I heard Kenny Clarke, Max Roach, and I always liked Buddy Rich and Louie Bellson and these guys. And big dance hall and Sonny Greer and these small groups and the kind of music that was coming out then – I guess Be Bop you can call it or whatever—It was new, it was different, it was interesting, it was compelling.

AB: So you’re still in the Army, your musical horizons have been expanded by hearing this new music. What does that lead to? You had a 3-year stint in the Army. You served all three years at Columbus. You had 1 assignment?

EJ: Well I started organizing this show called Operation Happiness. We took that show to – we had transport planes and we’d load up the planes and go to Texas and go to California and all over the United States and we’d do these shows. I enjoyed that. I listened to—there was this drummer called Perry Reed and you know he could swing and that’s what I liked. He sounded so good when he played the cymbals – it could take you to heaven! He had a bunch of technique. He was from Wichita, Texas. He was a nice guy—Perry Reed and he taught me! Just listening to him I learned how to play. I learned how to play in a big band. I said, “Oh, I know what to do now”. You know he got sick and—or his wife got sick and he went on a furlough so I took his place and I played the show.

AB: What did that feel like?

EJ: There is no way to describe that. It’s just something else, something different. It was more than life; it was more that you can imagine. And it can only be done with an organization that is involved in that; otherwise it would never happen to you. Anyway I thought my time in the Army was well spent. I didn’t miss those three years at all; I learned something.

AB: So you didn’t have a desire to continue on?

EJ: I wanted to get out and play. Yeah I had some money. I got enough to buy a set of drums anyway.

AB: What rank did you have when you left the military?

EJ: I was a T/5.

AB: Okay, Tech Sergeant. Okay sure.

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EJ: We had so many—we had 5 Master Sergeants in the band so nobody could get promoted! It was top heavy! (Laughs)

AB: So you look back on your military experience as a real turning point in your life having sat behind your drum set. So you decided to get out of the army and then what?

EJ: You know I went home. Actually it didn't happen exactly like that. My hitch was up, and it just so happened that before I had another month or so to go. And my father got sick and I got a message from the Red Cross that he was dying and so I got a furlough to go home. I was getting out anyway but that wasn't –that didn't make me feel so good, going home to bury my daddy.

AB: Were you able to see him alive when you got back home?

EJ: Yes, I gave him a bath.

AB: What did he die from?

EJ: He had cancer.

AB: And how old was he when he passed?

EJ: He was 63.

AB: Oh so he was a young man?

EJ: Yeah well, you know, people didn't live long in those days. We don't think anything of it now but I know a guy who—I'd say, "He's 40 years old" and he'd say, "He's 40 years old!?! That's ancient! He's the ancient mariner! (Reference to Samuel Taylor Coleridge's Poem *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*)"

AB: So you're reunited with your family at this point you got to see your brothers all come home, and your sisters, everybody was there?

EJ: Yeah, people came from all over. We had a sister who lived in Gary, Indiana and they all came. The oldest boy was a minister. And I said, "Oh boy I gotta' watch my language!" (Laughs)

AB: Yeah, I'm sure you had that Army vocabulary!

EJ: Yeah! (Laughs)

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AB: So you went home buried your father so you're back in Pontiac at this point. You left the Military a month early did you have to go back?

EJ: I didn't leave a month early I had to go back to get my discharge. So it was another month before I got out.

AB: So then you didn't re-enlist.

EJ: Yeah I said, "I'm going to try this"

AB: So you went back to Pontiac. Did you find your own place at this point?

EJ: No, I stayed at home. We had a great bit house up there. Thad was gone, Hank was gone, and my sister was married. There wasn't nobody there except for my mother. It wasn't like the whole family was—it wasn't crowded or anything like that. I could practice and I made a lot of noise. But I knew what to do. I knew what it was all about.

I was so glad to have an instrument of my own. Finally, you know! I didn't owe anything on it. I said I'm never going to buy anything on credit again! I said, "Shit, I'll pay cash!" I don't want nobody giving me credit.

AB: So can you tell me about your first instrument? What it was, where you purchased it, how much you paid for it?

EJ: Well I paid three hundred and fifty something dollars. I had to borrow thirty dollars from my sister.

AB: And what kind of instrument was it?

EJ: It was a W.F.L, Ludwig's. (W.F.L is the company started by William F Ludwig after the Great Depression in 1937. The company was simply W.F.L Drum Company until 1955 when it became known as Ludwig)

That's what they had. The band we had for Operation Happiness they had Slingerlands Drums, and they were some good drums as well. But Ludwig's were in the range that I could handle, that I could pay as well. And the man who sold me the drums, George Hamilton, he had a drum shop in Detroit. His son runs it now. He played with the Detroit Symphony Orchestra and he was a percussionist, he gave me the cymbals! He said, "That's gratis". So I had everything I needed.

AB: Did you get a 4-piece set? Do you remember what?

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EJ: Oh yeah I had 2 floor tom toms, I had you know—4 it was 5—drums. And 3 cymbals, tempo block. I had a cowbell, lots of things.

AB: I can imagine that first day when you get that set home what was that like? What'd you do?

EJ: Fortunately you know Hank came home from time to time. And he would practice. And he said, "Listen get your brushed and play along with me" So I got a chance to learn how to listen and play at the same time and control dynamics. And hank he helped me do that.

AB: Had you used brushes before that?

EJ: No I didn't know how to use 'em at all. I had just heard em. I didn't know how to use 'em. But I saw—all I had to think about was Sid Catlett. You know when you hear the sound I know exactly what he is doing. But you have to work out the mechanics yourself. Nobody can teach you how to hold a brushes or what you're going to do, you have to do that yourself. So it takes time.

We had Life Magazine and Hank would put an Art Tatum album on our record player he said, "Play along with this." So you know Art Tatum would start off (Elvin imitates a slow plodding bass line) and then all the sudden (Elvin imitates a bass line at double the speed of the previously imitated line). You know so that was—it was a challenge! You have to be able to do that! The more you listen the more you hear and the more you begin to learn to coordinate yourself with the saxophone or with the trumpet or with the piano or whatever. You learn how to listen.

AB: Were you at this point trying to adopt anybody's style? Or were there any other drummers who you felt were more influential in your style?

EJ: I heard Kenny Clarke, I heard Sonny Greer, I heard Buddy Rich. I heard all these guys and (Gene) Krupa and everybody else. It's all very well to say, you know, "That's beautiful" But the point is what can you do! That's the point. I was mainly thinking what can I do? What can I do to make it sound something similar to that? Not to copy but at least to show I am playing this instrument. That's what it's all about. You have to learn how to play.

AB: So at this point were you learning to play with anybody in combos or ensembles or anything like that?

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EJ: Oh no, not yet. I started later on I guess. I started to go to Detroit. Cause there was nothing in Pontiac. Just a lot of drinking! I went to Detroit and I met Art Martigan and Art Martigan was playing with Wardell Gray and he – I'd go back to that club and listen to him. And he played so smoothly. He had a very, very beautiful technique and he looked relaxed he wasn't sweating. He knew how to handle it. It's a matter of learning how to breathe when you play. It's like breathing when you're swimming.

AB: What club was that?

EJ: It was called "Crystal Lounge" It was right on the Grand River where the Red Wings stadium was right on the corner, across the street from that.

AB: And was it a nightclub, was it a dinner club?

EJ: It was a bar you know. They had a little bandstand and Wardell Gray played there. So Art—I sat in a couple of times. And he said, "Listen I got another job. You take this one". So that's how I started to work.

AB: How did you meet Art first? By going to the club?

EJ: Yes by going to the club. I sat down and I didn't know him. I just sat down and listen. I didn't come there to meet anybody I came there to listen to the music. But he was such a gentleman. He'd come to the table and say "Hey, I hadn't seen you sitting here before." So he introduced himself and I introduced myself. And he said "Hey you play drums?" and I said, "Yeah I'm trying!" You know there are always some nice people that you think when nothing is going to ever happen—here it is! They drop it right in your lap.

AB: So you took over his chair at the crystal lounge? So you were playing nightly?

EJ: Yeah 5-6 nights a week?

AB: So your first professional gig was playing with Wardell Gray?

EJ: Yeah, (laughs) with Wardell Gray!

AB: And working regularly!?

EJ: Oh yeah (laughs) I had a job.

AB: And what were you doing before that for income?

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EJ: I wasn't doing anything. I worked in the dry cleaners and did some pressing. And worked at my Uncle's cleaners. One of my sisters' boyfriends had a wash rack for washing cars and he said, "Why don't you take this wash rack? You just have to pay the gas station guy a quarter a car and there are 2 used car lots up the street and that guy wants all those cars washed everyday" and there were probably 100 cars. So I started making some money.

AB: So you could quit all those other jobs?

EJ: Yeah, I didn't worry anymore. I didn't work at the dry cleaners. Cause it's not so easy to wash cars either. It's a back breaker. Especially if someone wants their car simonized. That wax is so hard! It gives you—you rub it all day long and you say, "When am I going to finish!?" but it's a good experience cause you know you're doing something. You better believe it!

AB: Okay so here you are. You've taken over Art Martigan's chair at the Crystal Lounge, you're playing with Wardell Gray and your working—how many nights did you say you were working? What was the work? What was it like? How many nights a week?

EJ: 6 nights a week. We'd start at 9 till about 1. And by 1 we had played the last set so it was three sets or something. And Wardell—they'd just wait there. The place would be full of people even if he played once a night. They'd be there to see him play.

AB: And Crystal Lounge, it was basically a sit down club or was it like a dance club?

EJ: It was a jazz club. They didn't have any other kind of music. That was it. And when Wardell—he got killed in Las Vegas. A piano player named Phillip Hill took this job at the Crystal Lounge so he asked me to play with him. That was one of the biggest mistakes I've made! You know he had this guy that was playing conga, this Cuban guy. We'd call him Cuban Pete. That was all I knew, I didn't know his other name. So it was Cuban Pete, and Beans Richardson playing bass, and Phillip Hill playing the piano.

And one thing that ticked me off one night. You know it was payday and I was waiting around and it was snowing. And I was waiting around for him to come over and hand me my check. I looked around and everybody was gone. And I asked the owner and I said, "Where's Phil?" and he said, "He's gone. He just left." So I went out the door and saw these footprints in the snow. And then I followed them 2 blocks. And I said, "Oh boy."

AB: So he took the receipts for how many weeks? For how long?

EJ: Well no for that week!

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AB: Oh so you didn't get paid for the whole week? Wow. So that was the end of that gig?

EJ: That was the end of the gig as far as I was concerned. But Edward Bertrand who owned the club, he said, "Charlie Parker is coming in here for two weeks and I want you to organize a group to back him up." So I said, "Okay." and I had heard every record that Charlie Parker had ever made! He came in and I got Barry Harris to play the piano. And we played with-- we called him Mule. I knew his name I just can't think right now. He played with Oscar Peterson in Canada. He was a bass player, a very good bass player.

AB: Well we'll come back.

EJ: I'll think of it.

AB: So you put together a trio. Barry, yourself, and a bass player, and you backed Charlie Parker?

EJ: We backed Charlie Parker for two weeks. It was like everybody was walking on air. It was a tremendous thing. I had never seen anybody up to that point, even Wardell that had so much control over an instrument. Just amazing. You almost forgot what you were doing listening to him. So it was intensity. He was a really—he was not even—he didn't even think. He was more than human or less than something. He was unbelievable—unbelievable.

AB: What was it like when you first met him? What did you do to prepare to play the music? Did he rehearse you?

EJ: He didn't say anything. Everybody knew the tunes he was playing currently. So it was just a matter of playing with him. It wasn't a matter of the music. And it was so easy to do it was just effortless. It was the easiest job I've ever had in my life. Cause everything I seemed to do seem correct.

AB: Was he playing like Max (Roach) would say, like he'd come in with a killer like "Coco" or something.

EJ: Oh yeah he'd do that but it was like it was easy to do. Fast paces are not so difficult to play it's just a matter of how consistent is your rhythm. And he would never complain. He'd say—when he got through he'd turn around and nod his head and that means it's okay. He was a beautiful guy.

AB: Do you remember what date that was? What year?

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EJ: I know that after that two weeks he went back to New York and committed suicide.

AB: So this was about 1955 then...

EJ: Mhmm

AB: Cause that was when he died in March of '55. So this is just before he died and you say he was at the top of his game?

EJ: Yeah, we were playing together at the Crystal Lounge.

AB: So he seemed to be at the presence of mind, health, he seemed to all be there?

EJ: I heard a lot – everybody hears these rumors, I heard these rumors. I just said, “He’s a great musician I know that’s all. He can do whatever he wants as far as I’m concerned.” He was the first guy—he was there before me every night! You know he wore a new shirt every night. He was clean got his clothes pressed, looking like a champion.

AB: So it sounds like a big gap you got out of the Army in 1949 and you’re playing with Charlie Parker in 1955. So about how long had you been at the club by the time Charlie Parker came through?

EJ: I had just been there the few weeks that I worked with Wardell Gary and the one week that Phil Hill had the band and he ran off with the pay roll!

AB: So there seems to be a period of time from '49 when you were discharged from the military up until when you say you bought your first drum set at the age of 21, or after you got out of the military so that would have been about '49. And then you were working odd jobs but playing your drum set and getting your early training with Hank. Had you been training or performing up until this point yet with your brothers professionally or in public?

EJ: Not really. Thad was, he was in Oklahoma in that period of time. He came back to Michigan later on that year. And I no longer worked at the Crystal Lounge I started working with Billy Mitchell at the Bluebird Inn.

AB: Was this shortly after you worked with Charlie Parker?

EJ: Yes.

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AB: So that's '55 that would have been early '55 so you made the transition from the Crystal Lounge to working at the Bluebird Inn with Billy Mitchell. Where was that located?

EJ: It was on Tireman and Beachwood in Detroit, the Westside of Detroit.

AB: And was that also a jazz club?

EJ: It was owned by a family and they lived right there. Basically it was just a neighborhood bar, basically. But they liked to have music so he got a piano and they got this idea of having a music thing. So Billy Mitchell, I guess he talked 'em into it. I guess he was pretty good at that. But I was—I thought it was great and I worked there for over three years.

AB: Three years?

EJ: Yes.

AB: When I look at your discography the Thad Jones/Billy Mitchell Quintet it lists at 1953 is that accurate? I haven't been able to actually find the record.

EJ: I don't think so. You know maybe it was. I don't know whether that's correct. You know the Bluebird is still there! I could call 'em up and ask them to look it up in the book! (Laughs)

AB: But was that your first recording with Thad Jones and Billy Mitchell?

EJ: Yeah with Thad and Big Billy Mitchell, yeah.

AB: What was that like making your first recording?

EJ: It was like nothing you ever saw in your life! (Laughs).

AB: Could you please describe what that means? (Laughs)

EJ: I don't know what the engineer was doing! (Laughs) That was some funny stuff.

AB: So how did it come about that there was that recording? Did somebody come along and say, "Hey I want to record you guys or was there..."

EJ: No, you know there was this guy and his name was David Usher. And he had a—he was a good friend of Dizzy. And as a matter of fact Dizzy had a label called D.G. For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Remember that yellow label? He wanted to record Billy and our band out there on that label. That's what happened.

AB: So you went into the recording studio, of course you had to bring your drums. How was the recording studio? Was it a makeshift studio or was it a bona fide studio?

EJ: It looked more like this room than anything else. (Laughs). It was on the 2nd story of this building and it was right next to this fire-dock where the cars were going (imitates loud car's growling) and you could hear it!

AB: Do you remember the session going smoothly?

EJ: Yeah we just played what we would play at the club. Sometimes—it's different because recording, you're not playing for anybody particularly. It's just like a performance for the air. I think that's kind of scary. I couldn't understand what they were going to do. I said, "What are you going to do with this?" Cause it didn't sound right to me. I wasn't comfortable but you learn. That was the first recording I ever tried so I learned a log.

AB: Do you remember what it was like hearing yourself on the playback and what did you think?

EJ: Well you know I couldn't hear it that very well. It wasn't mixed. It was bad reception. I didn't think it was recorded so good. The record is out someplace and somebody's got it. I'd like to have a copy of it myself.

AB: So I think what I'll do is go to the Institute of Jazz Studies at Rutgers and I'll see if I can get a copy I'll get you a copy.

EJ: Oh, okay yeah. That'd be great.

AB: Yeah cause you should have that.

EJ: Thank you.

AB: Sure. Let's take a break.

EJ: Sure.

(Anthony Brown, Ken Kimery, Elvin Jones, and Keiko take a break. The question asked, which Elvin is heard responding to, is not recorded)

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EJ: '52- '56?

AB: Miles.

EJ: Yeah that was Miles. Cause I started playing at the Bluebird in 1951 or something. Miles used to come there the same as Charlie Parker did at the Crystal Lounge. So he came to Detroit without a band at the Bluebird. Sonny Stitt would come in, a lot of guys.

Ken Kimery: Miles would stay there for months on end right?

EJ: He stayed there for almost-- He would stay for months on end. I played with him for 6 months when I was playing with him. He got himself together in Detroit. Cause he wasn't in very good shape. But he got himself together.

AB: (addressing Keiko) So Keiko you're saying that Miles stayed at your house?

EJ: Yeah. You know when they came in town they didn't have—they came to my house. And I said, "Okay you know...well here it is!"

Keiko: (inaudible)

AB: Along with what Keiko is saying she used to let you host jam sessions or let musicians come by your house?

EJ: Oh yeah every Monday we had a thing in Detroit when every Monday guys would come out in Detroit and we'd just have a picnic! A jazz picnic!

AB: So she enjoyed the music and enjoyed the musicians?

EJ: She'd sit up in a chair like this and the next thing you know she'd be snoring!

AB: and you guys are burning!

EJ: She's just happy. I don't know she's just relaxed like that. It's hard. I used to have a cat that he would like to watch me practice. And he'd lay right in front of the bass drum and go to sleep! (Laughs)

AB: What was that cat's name do you remember?

EJ: He was called "black night". I couldn't take him. He was cold black! I'd come home at night, and we had an oak tree, and he'd be in that tree when I came up the steps he'd
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leap on my shoulder. WHAM! I said, “What is this cat!” He’d just wait for me to come home you know

AB: Well lets go over this chronology here because I want to make sure that the dates are correct. So you worked at the Crystal Lounge first and then you were hired—you replaced Art Martigan at the Crystal Lounge. So that period—what year was the Crystal Lounge period? Because this sounds like the first professional period you had playing drums so this is a very important date or year.

EJ: Yes, certainly it was. I wish I could tell you the date. I can’t right now. I know it wasn’t long after that that Charlie Parker came in so it was maybe three weeks or so before that, before Charlie Parker.

Keiko: (addressing Elvin) Do you remember if there was snow? Because Charlie Parker...

EJ: Oh there was snow, it was winter. It was snowing. Cause you know sometimes the winters start late in Michigan and the next thing you know it’s a blizzard and your standing right in the middle of it. You’re standing in snow 6 feet deep.

AB: So do you think it’s accurate, this date for this recording with Thad Jones and Billy Mitchell? I’ll double check that too cause that’s been listed as ’53.

EJ: If you can pick up the record I’m sure the date would be on that recording but I don’t know. I never had one. Cause Terry Pollard was playing piano on that recording.

AB: And Miles, when did Miles come through on that 6-month stint? Was that before or after Charlie Parker?

EJ: After.

AB: So ’55...

EJ: Yeah cause Miles came back and it was summer when he came to Detroit cause it was warm and nobody was wearing coats or anything.

AB: So then you did this 6-month gig with Miles. Anything memorable from that 6 months? (Laughs) Other than Miles got himself together? That was important!

EJ: The most memorable to me. It was how good he could play. People say a lot of things about Miles, but he could play. He could play that instrument. And he had a

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concept about composition that was unique, and I'd listen to that every night. I learned a great deal from that.

AB: Is there anything in particular or anything technical that you could describe about Miles' playing or Miles' concept at that point?

EJ: Well you know he had already recorded those pieces with Jerry Mulligan and all that. He did that before he came to Detroit. So he did all that—those were his latest recordings sessions that anybody heard before he came to Detroit. And everybody had everything else he's ever recorded. Everybody would say "You got the latest Miles record!?" You know Blue Note. I really liked the—he was a beautiful guy. Great musician. That's all I can tell you. He was one of the greatest guys I've ever met.

AB: So did you get along well with him?

EJ: Oh yeah.

AB: Staying at your house, playing with you at night on the bandstand. Did he have the same persona with you on the bandstand as off the bandstand? Or did he formulate his stage persona at this point?

EJ: Oh you know he was—he was the same way. If you see him sitting out in a booth, or at a bar, and then he comes on stage, he was the same way. You know he didn't change he just had a horn then. That was the only difference. And he's always impeccably dressed.

AB: You say he got himself together there. What were the circumstances for him getting himself together there?

EJ: He had a drug problem just like a lot of other people. He came Detroit because he wanted to rejuvenate himself and get away from whatever that influence was. And he did. He met some good people. He was very stubborn. Cause he had something on his larynx or vocal chord. And he had an operation in Detroit. The doctors told him they said, "Don't drink anything" (Elvin pauses and laughs). And Miles he had a voice, he sounded just like a girl! (Laughs) And then he started drinking all this Whiskey and stuff and he sounded (Elvin lets out a low pitched breathy growl) and that's how he lost his voice!

AB: And you were there? Eyewitness.

EJ: I say the doctor should have told him the exact opposite he should have said, "Drink all you want!" And then he wouldn't have!

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AB: I read some accounts where they told him that Miles wasn't supposed to yell or scream. So this sounds more reasonable that they told him not to drink rather not to yell or scream. Cause his voice was already quite high pitched it didn't see like that was the type of person that would be yelling or screaming.

EJ: But he lost his voice altogether. You know he never did get it back.

AB: So then that takes you through your tenure at the Bluebird. If you were there with Miles up until 1955 that takes you up to end of '55 early '56. We know something big is coming in '56 so if you kind of bring us along through working with Miles maybe a few weeks or months working at the Bluebird before making a life changing decision.

AB: This is June 10th 2003, we are in the home of Elvin Jones. And we've just been talking about your tenure at the Bluebird Inn and having worked a 6-month stint with Miles Davis. So this brings us up to late 1955. Perhaps there are some more folks that have come through but we are coming up to a major life decision for you. If you could talk about what happens prior to your decision to go to New York.

EJ: The way it came about is that Benny Goodman made this "Benny Goodman Story" so I guess it was made in the late 40's but they wanted to—during I guess about 1955—they wanted to take it on a world tour to sort of uh--promotional tour for Benny's band. You know he's always organizing new bands. And Hank he was working, he was playing piano with Benny Goodman. So he told Benny Goodman he had a drummer that played the drums! (Laughs)

I was working at the Rouge Lounge with Kenny Burrell and Barry Harris and what's his name – Carmen McRae. So we get a phone call—Ed Sarkesian, he was the owner, a Benn Goodman fan, he gets this phone call and he said, he could hardly talk he said, "Elvin, you know! Benny Goodman is on the phone" I said, "Okay what does he want?!" (Laughs) He was so excited he didn't know what to do! Hank really explained it to me he said, "Hey, you know we want you to come to New York and take an audition, and fit into this, and go on a world tour" And so I did they sent me a ticket. I really hated to leave that job but I said, "Well okay I'll go to New York" I really wanted so see if I could do it.

The audition was they first gave me a book about this thick. They gave me "Sing, Sing, Sing" and it was Gene Krupa's part! I had to read that whole thing! I could barely turn the pages. I said, "I don't know what the hell he's doing!" So it got to the point when it started with a whole big band and after two or three hours later and it was just 4 guys: Hank, me, and Al Cohn. But we had—it was funny. I said. "Well I guess I didn't make it". Then they told me "you know Shadow Wilson was here yesterday and he didn't make it either!" (Laughs) So I didn't feel so bad when I heard about that.

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AB: Do you remember what date that was?

EJ: Oh god I don't know the date. Well let's see. It wouldn't be so difficult to find out the date from—The Detroit Free Press could give you the date of Carmen McRae playing at the Rouge Lounge its you know, its documented all over Detroit. It shouldn't be difficult you could get from the newspaper.

AB: Well we know its spring of '56 so we can research that date. We talked about leaving the Rouge Lounge but last we talked you were working at the Bluebird Inn so lets talk about that transition from the Bluebird Inn to the Rouge Lounge and where was that?

EJ: Well uh the Rouge Lounge was—what it is a bowling alley. And these two brothers Ed, and his brother—the Sarkesian brothers. They were nice people. And they had this music that was just part of the general entertainment of that area. Cause it was the only entertainment out there. You know River Rouge looks like a graveyard or something.

AB: Where was it located?

EJ: It's out—it's—let me see. (Looks at a map) well the Rouge is... it should be somewhere here... A lot of people were more sophisticated than the Bluebird Inn, it was bigger and the place sat about 4 or 500 people. They always had acts, people like Art Tatum and Teddy Wilson, bands like that. So I was surprised that Kenny Burrell got the job cause he usually had bands from out of town so that was a good job for us and Barry Harris was playing piano and Carmen was singing. She could sing too you know. Beautiful voice.

AB: Was this before Carmen McRae married Kenny Clarke?

EJ: This is after. She married Kenny Clarke and they lived in Pittsburgh. I mean that was his first wife.

AB: So looking back now at your return from the Army back to the Detroit area, you worked at the Crystal Lounge then you're at the Bluebird Inn, and now the Rouge Lounge.

EJ: Yes and you know this was just a gig. It wasn't anything permanent about it. Cause the longest any engagement would be is two weeks. So it was two weeks and then they had to get another drummer cause I flew out to New York to play this—have this audition. I loved Gene Krupa but I don't know—I can't even start listening to “Sing, Sing, Sing”. Of all the tunes—anything but that! (Laughs)

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AB: So you had this audition and it didn't work?

EJ: It didn't work! I was staying in Hank's room at the President Hotel. He kept a room there and I stayed there. I get a phone call and its Kenny Clarke. He says he's with Philly Joe Jones and says come over to his hotel. And its on 48th street so I said, "Okay its only a block away." I walked over there and Kenny was having—at that point Kenny was working on his textbook that eventually he published. And he had all of the notation, huge practice pad and he had all these notations on the rubber of the pad. He said, "well take a look at that!" Eventually there was some good stuff in there. It brought out what Kenny, what his ideas were. I thought that book that he finally did publish was very good; it was well done.

AB: So he invited you over to his place to look at it? Had you met Kenny before that?

EJ: No I hadn't. I hadn't met Philly Joe either! (Laughs) Kenny just said, "Come on over!"

AB: So Philly was there too?

EJ: Yeah two fantastic drummers. And again I was always- I used to tell everybody that I knew that the best drummer that I ever heard, as far as this whole kind of idea of music, is Kenny Clarke. He's the granddaddy of all this music. And you know, he played decent piano as well.

AB: What about his style do you think was so different or so innovative?

EJ: Well he always played-- he was never flamboyant. Everything that he did was classic. It had class. He wasn't trying to overwhelm anybody; he played with a lot of pianists, trios, small groups, big bands, and everything else and it sounds just (imitates solid ride swing pattern). If you listen to it now it sounds just as good as it did then. He was that kind of a guy. He was quiet and a very intelligent man.

AB: What were your impressions of Philly Joe, upon meeting him for the first time?

EJ: I had seen him a couple of times but we hadn't really met. He was playing with Miles. He used to do this imitation of Boris Cardiff. (Laughs)

AB: Oh uh "Blues for Dracula"?

EJ: Yeah! Right!

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AB: Oh Bella Lugosi? (Laughs)

EJ: Ha yeah that was it!

AB: (Imitating Bella Lugosi) Bite your mother on the neck goodbye.

EJ: He was funny boy! He was a comedian. But he was a great drummer. Joe played things on his instrument that were just phenomenal. Joe was flamboyant. He used to show guys how to play with your fingers. You think he's doing it with his wrist but he's doing it with his fingers. (Elvin imitates sound of fast single strokes of a drum being played by one hand). He had many tricks like that. He's such a good musician and when he played he always—it seems like everything he did was thought out, like it had already been through his mind. He played with tremendous skill and the dynamics were always unbelievable. It was just enjoyable to listen to a man like that. And he was with a good band like Miles Davis. He couldn't be in a better position.

AB: Were there other drummers that you met or that inspired you at this point when you were coming into New York?

EJ: Well I hadn't really met many drummers. I knew Art Martigan, and I met Kenny then. Then a little later I met Dannie Richmond who used to play with Mingus. Anybody that could play with Mingus' music them—I tip my hat off to them. Cause he got sick and Mingus called me to play. He was playing at the Village Vanguard and he said to come up to some room he had up on Broadway around 103rd street, in that area. And I went up there and he was playing his bass and the saxophone player was there and he watched me through the whole book. When I left there I knew it. So that night I started and played the whole book. I played all his tunes.

AB: So you remained in New York after the auditions. You met Kenny Clarke and Philly Joe and you were still in New York and that's when you got a call from Mingus and this was about a week's span, a day's span?

EJ: Yeah the next day (after the audition) I got a call from Mingus. First Miles called me and he wanted me to go out with him and I said, "No man, play with Joe. What are you talking about are you going to go out with two drummers?" And then the sort of Sauter-Finegan (Orchestra)'s manager called me to do a rehearsal with the Sauter Finegan band. And I had to pass on that one. And then Mingus called me and he said, "We're going out" and it was J.R. Montrose, Teddy Charles and Mingus and myself. So that's that quartet, and Teddy's playing vibes. It was kind of a unique sound.

AB: So you're getting these calls. Was it cause of Hank's connections or did you have a reputation already in New York?

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EJ: I think that when people came to New York then everybody would do whatever they could to make them feel comfortable: offer them jobs. You know it was like that. Nothing seemed permanent or at least it seemed like that. I thought it was a nice gesture for somebody to offer you job. They'd say "Come on" and they'd give you a chance. That made me feel very good.

AB: So you're working with Mingus at the Village Vanguard. How long was that engagement?

EJ: That was after that...when he had Dannie Richmond playing with him. At this time he was just playing with trios. He didn't have his organized band like it is now or like it was later.

AB: So he hired you in his quartet and how long were you with that group and where did you work?

EJ: Well it didn't last very long cause Mingus, he had such a temper. We played at the Music Inn in the Berkshire Mountains. We played up there it was a wonderful place, he got cottages where the band can stay and it was just very nice. And from there we went to a place in Washington D.C. called Olivia's.

AB: Your mother's name!

EJ: Yeah, and all this time, every time we get in the car, Mingus and Teddy Charles are at each other like two wild dogs! (Laughs) We're sitting in the backseat with J.R. and I say "I just want him to keep his hands on the wheel! I don't care what he says." That was funny

And we went to the Rhode Island—Newport Festival. We went to that. And that while there all we did was—they had composers' workshop. So they had all these guys Mal Waldron, Mingus, Dave Brubeck and all these guys. And I wasn't a composer so I said, "I don't know what I'm doing here." But it was wonderful to play with all of them once.

That was my first appearance at the Newport Festival, with Mingus, and Teddy Charles, and J.R. Montrose.

AB: Were you starting to get reviews at this point?

EJ: I don't know probably I'm not so sure about that. I think that waiting for anybody with a new face, a new name that's what it was all about. It wasn't a mater of not being

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able to do anything. It was more a matter of *what* you were going to do. I think that was the issue more than anything else.

AB: Were you sitting in with any other people in New York or were you doing what most musicians do which is hang out and just get on the hang, get on the circuit?

EJ: Well I didn't hang out that much, I didn't go out. I knew a lot of guys that went out to Mitten's and there were a lot of guys in the Village where you could go. But I didn't want to play for nothing. (Laughs) I said, "You know I'm in the Union!"

AB: Were you in the union?

EJ: Yes!

AB: Had you been in the union before?

EJ: Yeah, sure in Detroit. I just got transferred.

AB: Was there any problem transferring?

EJ: Not at all.

AB: Talking with Steve Lacey about you, I asked him about having seen you since you had worked together on his recording, "Reflections". And he said, "Oh I remember when he (Elvin) first came to New York because he was a friend of Cecil Taylor's, every time Cecil Taylor would get on the band stand all the musicians would leave but Elvin would get on the band stand because he wanted to play with him". Is that an accurate recollection of his?

EJ: Yeah that's accurate. Cecil used to tell that story too. He's going to play with me next week over at Blue Note.

AB: Can you remember or discuss that early meeting with Cecil, and what it was like to meet Cecil? And what did you think of his music?

EJ: I just thought it was a chance to—he sounded so much different. He was so far ahead of everybody else that it was sort of like meeting another person all the time. We played with him 3 times a night that's 3 people we played with! Sometimes all at once! (Laughs) We had fun. That's what it's all about. You gotta' enjoy yourself. People get to serious sometimes.

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AB: Steve Lacey also said that when he first heard you play all the musicians in the audience were trying to figure out what you were doing. I guess back in those days as you said when a musician came to town they would try and make him feel at home. I guess all the musicians would come out and check out the new person in town.

EJ: To see if they could beat ‘ya! (Laughs)

AB: So did you get any comments or feedback from any of the other musicians or any of the other drummers as to what you were doing about your music?

EJ: I had met Roy Haynes earlier when I was living in Pontiac. Hank came, he was friend of Ella Fitzgerald you know Ray Brown and Roy Haynes, and they had the Michigan State fair in Detroit. It was a fair ground near 8-mile road. So Hank calls me and says—you know I was like his butler. He says, “Go pick up Roy Haynes at the train station and bring him out to the fair!” I said, “Okay!” So I went down, it was the first time. And I had my car and it was very hot it must have been 198 degrees in the shade! It was very hot and I pick him up, put the drums in the trunk, and before I left Pontiac and I bought a pint of white lightening (reference to moonshine). I said maybe he might like some. I had it in the glove compartment and it was so hot it was almost boiling and I said “Oh man, its so hot I can’t drink this stuff.” (Laughs) That’s how we met.

AB: And what was it like hearing him play that night?

EJ: I didn’t stick around cause I was running errands for Hank that night.

AB: So did you hook back up with Roy Haynes when you got to New York?

EJ: I didn’t see him cause I don’t know who he was working with, but he was working out there on 52nd street someplace. Cause a lot of guys—there must have been 10-15 clubs out on 52nd street. I’d see him at Birdland now and again.

I only went there cause Mingus would get a Monday night there sometime and he ‘d call up people he knew. He’d call Thad and he’d call me and we’d go play the Monday night thing at Birdland. That was a lot of fun too.

AB: So after Mingus, who’d you work with after the Mingus engagement.

EJ: Well that’s when Teddy—we both worked with Teddy Charles. Then we went to Toronto and we played there for a week. And Mingus said, “C’mon Elvin” and the weeks almost over and he says, “C’mon Elvin we’re going to play with Bud Powell.”

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So left Teddy Charles in Toronto and we went to Cleveland to go play with Bud Powell. He's impulsive! (Laughs)

AB: And you went with him? Sounds like you're pretty impulsive too!

EJ: Ha-ha yes! He wanted to play with Bud. Bud was such a nice guy, a fantastic player, and such a sweet heart. He was so kind and gentle and that's the way he played. He wouldn't talk very much. He'd sit down at the piano he'd think about what he want to do for a few minutes and then he'd play. All you had to do was keep up with him, if you can do that!

AB: Sounds like you had good training playing with those old Art Tatum records?

EJ: (Laughs) Oh yeah I was ready!

AB: So that must have been a really great experience playing with Bud Powell? How long did that last? You said you were in Cleveland right?

EJ: It lasted a few months. Because Bud wasn't all that consistent. So we played Cleveland and went to play in Detroit so that was a month already so it was 2 weeks and Cleveland and 2 weeks in Detroit and then we went to Birdland. When we went to Birdland he was to record and his recording drummer was Arthur Taylor. Arthur, we were good friends. I which I could have had an opportunity to record with him but I never did, it was just one of those things.

AB: So you were making some records at this point do you remember any of the recordings that you made at this point?

EJ: so I made an appointment with Lee Konitz it was just a trio: Lee, Sonny Dallas and myself at a studio on 7th Avenue or something. It wasn't one of the regular studios. We just started playing.

AB: So this is pretty interesting, you're playing in a piano-less trio?

EJ: That's right! That's the first time I did that. The next time was with Sonny Rollins. And that was a lot of fun.

AB: There's some contrast there! Were there any challenges to playing without a piano?

EJ: No. The bass player is there, you got the root to the chords so you don't have to worry about that. It isn't as if its blank, it be hard without a bass. The style used to be like

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Fats Waller (imitates a rag time, chordal progression) he used to play chords all the time. They don't do that anymore. It's a little different and all

AB: I have a recording here, it was made in January 1957, its called "Mad Thad". And it's a pretty large ensemble with Frank Foster, Frank Wess, Henry Coker, Tommy Flangan, Eddie Jones and Elvin Jones. Do you remember this date?

EJ: Yeah I do.

AB: Was this the first—no you had already recorded with Thad because of 1953 with Billy Mitchell.

EJ: But then, I was a little more sophisticated then. I wasn't afraid of the microphones then!

AB: When I listen to the recordings, there is a piece on here called "Bird Song" and its Thad's piece but it sounds like a little bit like Charlie Parker's kinds of tunes. But it's a really good example, since this is January 1957, of your style. Cause its very clear, the recording was very good and you can hear a lot of what your doing with your style. So it's very clear in January of 1957 that you're starting to fill in a lot of the space in the timekeeping. There aren't very many solos so we don't really have an early example of your solo style but already your accompaniment is starting to be very dense. Were you consciously formulating a style? Was there a particular style you heard in your head that you were trying to go for?

EJ: No. I was just trying to play as well as I could with who was there. It depends on who's there and you can modify whatever you do because you had to compliment the soloist and if you can't do that you might as well get a drum machine! And it's really important to listen to what the rest of the group is doing. It's a niche and you have to find, and get into that groove or niche. Then it's fun.

AB: you also worked with J. J. Johnson?

EJ: Yes before I worked with J.J. I worked with Tyree Glen ad the round table on 52nd street and Lexington, The Embers was around the corner, all of these clubs. That was educational for me cause--

AB: Trombone *and* vibes right?

EJ: Yeah trombone and vibes cause the first night I started Hank was playing the piano and the next night somebody else was there! And he's playing all these tunes and I said

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“I’ll just play with Tyree I don’t know what these guys are doing” Then Tommy Flanagan and it started to get a little tighter and Tommy Potter was playing bass.

AB: And how long did that engagement last?

EJ: Oh I’d say almost a year. It was a long time. And I left to go with J.J. in the latter part of 1957 in the summers. We went to Sweden and we went to Denmark- we were in Scandinavia. We made a record recording—before we went we made these records at Columbia Studios 32nd street: “J is for Jazz” and another album. It was really fun a lot of nice tunes on there and J.J., with his beautiful arrangements, he was a genius

AB: So JJ called you to do a recording before your European tour? And this is your first trip overseas correct? Was that something special for you?

EJ: We went over on a boat you know--

AB: Oh you don’t like boats!

EJ: We went over on the S.S Stockholm. That was great trip. I never saw so much food in my life. You know if you’re going to Europe, get on a boat! That is the way to go. You don’t have to worry about this other bullshit! (Laughs) It’s sad that they don’t have steam ships anymore cause it’s the best way to go, and economical too!

AB: So how was the tour? The audiences, do you remember anything about that tour? How you were received?

EJ: Well it started in Copenhagen. We played at this place called “The Three Crowns Hotel Auditorium”. We were there for a couple of days and we went to Stockholm. There we played in the Kungsträdgården and there were over 50,000 people there!

AB: Was it a festival?

EJ: No! Just J.J.!

AB: Just J.J.! That must have been an exhilarating experience going out there in front of 50,000 people.

EJ: You go out there and you think, “You better not drop a stick tonight!” (Laughs)

AB: Who else was in that group?

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EJ: Tommy Flanagan, Wilbur Little, and Bobby Jaspar. You know a Belgian saxophonist, and of course J.J

AB: So you went all throughout Scandinavia?

EJ: We mostly stayed in Sweden. Have you heard of the folk parks they have there? In every little village or town there is a—its sort of what they would call in England, the commons- so they have all the entertainment there. We played a concert there and then a dance and mosquitoes were all over me! I said, “I got to get some oil!” That was a riot. But we were there for three months. We went all the way from Kiruna up in the Lapland to Gothenburg.

AB: Wow, a three-month tour? Then you went to back to the states after that?

EJ: Yeah.

AB: Cause this is bringing us to the close of '57 when we have another landmark recording coming up.

EJ: Yeah that's right. I didn't make anymore recordings with J.J. Cause you know I took that job cause—he told me in front he had promised this job to Albert “Tootie” Heath so I said, “Okay we can go whenever you want” and I played a couple of jobs around Philadelphia and Red Hill Inn. And that's when my tenure was over with J.J.

That night when I got back to New York, my brother Tom was in town and he said, “You look funny! Lets go out and get drunk” so we start walking around going to these bars and we got up to 7th avenue and there's Wilbur Ware, I didn't even know what it was and I didn't even know what it was and it was the Village Vanguard. And Wilbur says “Where have you been, Sonny has been looking for you all night!” and I said, “Wilbur, please don't tell him. You know I don't believe this. Sonny ain't looking for nobody.” And he says, “C'mon down I'll prove it” and you know Sonny Rollins is getting ready to go back on. And Pete LaRoca was playing drums with him. The bass player's name was Donald Bailey. He (Sonny Rollins) said “Why don't you play this one set with me?” So I say, “Okay” We started playing the set and I finally came to my senses and I see there's Frank Wolff and the Blue Note Executives, they were recording! And I didn't know this was a recording and Sonny said, “Oh man thank you” and I said, “Oh man shit!” That was my reward.

AB: Was that good pay back then?

EJ: Man are you kidding? That was nothing!

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AB: That is because it was a recording as well as the gig?

EJ: Yeah.

AB: So you're saying you've been out drinking all night and--

EJ: Well not all night, I just went to a couple of places. My brother, he didn't drink that much actually but he liked beer. And I didn't too. J.J., that job was over. That was the end of that one.

AB: So that's the story of "Live at the Village Vanguard" Elvin Jones playing with Sonny Rollins. Coming in on those tunes

EJ: Well I was afraid to play cause I hate playing on somebody else's drums. Cause I am prone to put a hole through somebody's bass drum. (Laughs) I had to go out and buy a bass drum head for somebody! I don't like to do that! It didn't happen fortunately, this time.

AB: So the liner notes for this recording don't explain what you just said to us.

EJ: Oh yeah

AB: You see, we have Donald Bailey and Pete LaRoca and the evening concerts with Wilbur Ware. And there was no explanation as to why, but now you've filled in all the gaps about that. (Laughs) So was it one night or two nights?

EJ: Oh it was just that one night cause I had just gotten fired from J.J.'s band cause we had a little argument in Philadelphia. I said, "Well I better get away from here cause I don't want to get excited." Cause I used to carry a pistol all the time and I said, "Shit I don't want to be bothered with this motherfucker." (Laughs)

AB: Who had the pistol? You or J.J.?

EJ: Me!

AB: Yeah you wouldn't want to get excited if you had the pistol! (Laughs) I also heard that Sam Woodyard used to keep a hammer and a gun on the bandstand. Is that pretty common?

EJ: Well I know why he had the hammer cause the drums, he'd have to nail 'em down sometimes. The drums, they'd be bouncing all over the place. But I don't know if the gun is for himself! (Laughs) Sam is crazy!

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AB: Again so you have—was that common for some musicians, or for people to have a gun? Why did you have to carry a gun?

EJ: Cause I didn't like to carry a knife. (Laughs) I said I ain't going to never get that close to nobody.

AB: Let me back up and ask you how long had you been carrying a gun with you at this point?

EJ: Oh shit, I had a pistol when I was 17. When I put on my clothes I put my pistol in my pocket. My father told me about that. When he was in Mississippi he said all the boys used to carry pistols and I said, "I guess I gotta get me one." You know, it was just a matter of having it. I never had any reason to use it.

AB: Was it pretty common for other folks to have one?

EJ: Oh, everybody I knew.

AB: Had a piece?

EJ: Everybody I knew had one.

AB: So it was you had a pistol or a knife? Or both?

EJ: That's why I don't like to play on New Years Eve. As soon as it turns midnight everybody starts shooting. I said, "I am going to get out of here!"

AB: Do you remember what the disagreement with J.J. was?

EJ: I think he just had to have an excuse cause he said that "You're not keeping the time" and I said, "Well you play the drums" (laughs) "here are the sticks" I went back to the hotel. Its like, "Fuck you."

AB: So you went on a three-month tour with him and you get back to the states and then he is complaining about the way you play?

EJ: Yeah! All of the sudden.

AB: So you suspect there was something else at work here?

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EJ: Oh yeah, I don't know what it was or nothing. A lot of people just can't be straight, they have to go through some convoluted path.

AB: Okay so that takes up through that very historical recording, Live Village Vanguard. That brings us to November 1957. I know that date, that's up here. Elvin Jones Sonny Rollins Live at Village Vanguard November 1957. What happens after that? Cause I have the Jones—"Keeping up with the Joneses" and this is not long after, this is March of '58. As a matter of fact I bought it March 24th of this year. So did you make any other recordings other than the Vanguard recording, which you didn't know was going to be a recording when you were up there, and up until this one? Was there a period when you were playing with other folks?

EJ: Well I don't recall doing any. I know I played with other people cause Pepper Adams was in town, Donald Byrd and all these guys. They'd get a gig and call me up. It was like that.

AB: So the folks from Detroit, you guys kept in touch?

EJ: Yeah, right.

AB: Well you made a recording with Kenny Burrell so that would have been a little earlier. You also made a recording with Pepper Adams too, so it was about this time I guess.

AB: Today is June 11th 2003; this is part two of the Smithsonian Institution's Oral History interview with Elvin Jones in his apartment in New York City. Good afternoon Mr. Jones we are back at the set.

EJ: Yes, thank you.

AB: I just wanted to begin by reviewing some literature in interviews with you. There was an episode we didn't cover yesterday when you were discussing your work in Pontiac and Detroit. After that piano player ran out with the money, you followed his footsteps in the snow, he ran off with the money there during the holiday season. You had another job immediately after that which you didn't discuss.

EJ: I took a job with this friend of ours his name is Jo Jo McKinney beautiful voice he is a very good singer. He got this job and he said "we need a drummer" cause they had an exotic dancer and I said "I know how to do that." This lady who was the girlfriend of the guy who owned this club, she was the star the singer. The first night really didn't last that very long. I played the downtown bistro, for the exotic dancer. We had played our little tune and then came out this lady singer. And I really didn't know what she was singing For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



but her voice was terrible. She just didn't have any pitch. She was very bad. I don't sing and I'm probably, really very reluctant of anybody singing because I know I can't sing; I don't even try. She got very angry at all of us and she told her boyfriend about it and said "we weren't playing her music" and I said "she didn't have any music! She didn't have any arrangements" I don't know what she was talking about she just wanted to get rid of us I guess. So that's how that happened.

AB: Okay we got that cleared up couple of other gaps or discrepancies I hope you can clear up. There was one account that said you played not only with Operation Happiness. Did you also play with any other bands in the military? Maybe some dance bands or some thrown together bands.

EJ: No I never did cause the guys they had these small groups. And I really wasn't interested in that at that point. We played the NCO Club, t Officers' Club to make some extra money and stuff like that. But I never got interested in that.

AB: So then what you recounted as far as the only time you were playing the drum set at that point, was when you were subbing for the drummer in "Operation Happiness".

EJ: Yes, because I was at all the rehearsal. My job as the stagehand was the electrician. So I had to set up all the microphones and do the clege lights and stuff like that. And the stage—put the stage together. It was a big job. It wasn't very difficult cause I enjoyed what I was doing. I enjoyed watching. There was a lot of talent at that airbase from the WHAC and from some of the different soldiers from the mechanics and from people...you know they just wanted to do something. A lot of the auditions were lengthy and they got it together. I was happy to be doing what I was doing and no one bothered me. It just so happened that I kept listening to the band, and they rehearsed all the time, and they did a lot of rehearsing for the show. And I realized all of the sudden that I knew it. I knew everything they were going to do! All of the sequences! A couple of times I said "I want to see how these drummers..." I sat down at this huge drum set... I think it was a 28-inch bass drum. You know, he wanted to duplicate the drum set Gene Krupa had—Slingerlands. It was a good set of drums. I used to fool around with them just to see if I could work up some coordination cause I know it takes a long time to learn how to play the drums.

AB:I didn't review tapes from yesterday, what was the name of the drummer?

EJ: His name was Perry Reed.

AB: R-e-e-d or R-e-i-d?

EJ: R-e-e-d

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AB: And you said you left the military early—you went home father was ill correct?

EJ: Yes well I got a compassionate furlough from the Red Cross. I didn't now my father was ill it was just one of my brothers or my sisters must have called my base or the Red Cross. Next thing I know they're saying, "You gotta go home. Your father is sick" so that's how that came about.

AB: And then the last thing was that when you went home in 1945 you stayed in Pontiac, you stayed in your mothers house

EJ: I was only there about a week and a half. After he died there was no reason for me to stay. I wasn't going to re-enlist and I had to go back to the air base before I got discharged. So that is what took up a lot of the time. The travel between Columbus and Pontiac was by Greyhound bus. (Laughs) It was not the fastest way to get around. If I had been smart, there is a fighter base in Pontiac, and I could have hitched a ride there. That would have been smart, but I wasn't thinking. (Laughs)

AB: How was your mother's help after your father died?

EJ: What?

AB: Your mother's health?

EJ: She had a bad—she had a lot of – she had heart disease. She just gradually got more and more feeble and she wasn't able to get around as much. But she never stopped cleaning the house and she was up and down the stairs, she cooked all the time. One day I wasn't staying home, I was in Detroit, I was staying at my brother Paul's house there; renting some space from him. It was thanksgiving I recall, I remember. The phone rang, and you know sometimes when something happens like that you know that it's tragic. It's just in the air. And they said that mamma had had a heart attack and died on the stairs. It's sad

AB: So that was in November of what year?

EJ: Oh I don't know. It was three years after my father—exactly three years after my father. So I don't know 1952 I guess.

AB: Okay. Okay, so where we left yesterday we got up to 1958.

EJ: Yes, my bad. (Laughs)

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AB: And we were talking about, of course your back in the Detroit area—well no you're now in New York and you made the recording with your brothers: Thad and Hank, the Jones brothers. Was this the first time the three of you had actually recorded together?

EJ: Oh yes it was. I had that brief recording with—Thad was on that one in Detroit. That was really the first experience I had with a recording studio. Tony Scott, he played clarinet, he set up a recording date cause his wife took all the pictures. So those pictures—that's why those pictures are taken by Ms. Scott. I don't know how many wives he had...but one of 'em.

AB: So you talked about earlier, and again I'm sorry I'm backtracking one more time, that there is this common misconception that Elvin, Hank Thad, they're all musicians so they must have grown up playing together. But yesterday you cleared that up and said it was Hank you played a little bit with but he made you listen to Art Tatum and play with Art Tatum. So when you were coming up did you not play with Thad at all?

EJ: We worked together at the Bluebird. It was almost two years we stayed together, six nights a week. I had one hell of an experience with Thad.

AB: So as an adult, already as a professional, but not when you were coming up, so no performance with him then?

EJ: Okay

AB: So now we can clear up the record on that. So now we are back in New York, '58, I believe Pepper Adams, some folks you were working with post-Sonny at Village Vanguard, sitting in. I believe that is going to be a revelation for some folks that that performance, you were sitting in with Sonny Rollins. That's going to help clear the record there. So Pepper Adams, you were working with some of the folks in '58, can you go ahead and give us the chronology at that point? You have the Jones brothers then you have Pepper Adams there are some other folks you're working with at that point. You mentioned Tyree Glen, Pepper Adams also in '58. Any other significant recordings or other engagements at that time?

EJ: Well the only significant engagement was at The Roundtable with Tyree Glen. It was a quartet. You know Joe Jones--Poppa Joe Jones had this job and you know he was so flighty; he was doing things all over the place. So he told Tyree to call on me so I could take his place at The Roundtable and he's off somewhere else doing...anyway Joe was like that so I learned a lot with Tyre. I didn't realize that the trombone was so beautiful, that the sound was so beautiful. And he was, of course, a master at his instrument. And I guess we played Dixieland or whatever you want to call it.

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People would make requests and they'd say "Oh lets hear 'When the Saints Come Marching In'" that was one of the favorite requests. We had a lot of fun. You people would get excited and tip a lot. I didn't ask for tips or anything like that, they would just do it. I remember one time a guy—maybe he was drunk or something, I really don't know—he just started laying \$100 bills on my tom-tom. We counted and it was over \$600 or something, maybe \$680. He said, "I wish I had some more!" People like that came into the club. So that was a great, great experience for me.

Sometimes Tyree would take a night off and Buck Clayton would come in and play the gig. And nothing changed! I enjoyed that.

AB: Did Tyree play vibes at all?

EJ: Sure he played the vibes. The vibes were set up. He could play vibes. You know, Tyree is a very talented guy. He played all these years with Duke Ellington so he knew everybody that ever touched a horn. He knew a lot of people; a lot of people liked him. He had a great personality. People would come in just to hear him talk.

AB: Who was in that band?

EJ: Well Tommy Flanagan was playing piano for quite a while. Tommy Potter was the bass player. And Tyree and myself.

AB: Did the band every record that you remember?

EJ: No, I don't know. I don't think so. We never did. Tyree, you know, he had this job where he'd start at 5am at CBS, and he was a staff musician at CBS. He did a morning show. He was on call all the time. He stayed at a hotel in New York he didn't go back home all the time. Cause he lived in—(Elvin addresses question to Keiko) where do we go all the time in New Jersey to the hospital? (Keiko answers) Inglewood. He lived in Inglewood.

AB: And how long did that job last with Tyree?

EJ: Oh it lasted a year or more.

AB: And were you playing primarily exclusively with him or did you do any other side jobs?

EJ: I did one side job. And one morning, it was a Friday morning or a Saturday morning. Sonny Rollins knocks on my door, you know I didn't know it was him, but I opened my door and there he was. He said, you know he was just passing this information. He said, For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



“You know Monk is downstairs and he wants you do go to Montreal with him today”
(Elvin laughs)

AB: Sonny Rollins comes upstairs to tell you Monk is downstairs? (Laughs)

EJ: Right

AB: That’s definitely a different time!

EJ: And I said, “You know I’d definitely like to do that but I have to call Tyree and get somebody to sub for me.” And I had never done that before. I only knew one drummer that we were on that kind of terms. I called him and said, you know, “take my place” and I had confidence that he would do a good job as a substitute. So his name was Kenny Dennis, was the drummer’s name. Shortly after that he married Nancy Wilson and they rode into the sunset! (Laughs)

AB: He didn’t have to play drums anymore did he?

EJ: I had the call and Kenny said “yeah I could do it” and then I called Tyree and I said, “Tyree you know I gotta take a job. Monk wants me to go to Montreal with him tonight.” This was Friday night. He said, “Well if you have to go with him then...” and he just said, “well who’s going to play the drums?” (Laughs) and I said “Well Kenny Dennis is coming down; he is going to take my place for tonight.” And he said “Okay.” And then at nine o’clock—this in-between 7am and 9am—I pack a bag and go to Grand Central Station to catch a train. And I was there, I caught it. Monk was already there, and the bass player—well Roy Haynes was playing with Monk then and he just didn’t want to go to Montreal, he didn’t want to go out of town. So that’s why Sonny came to wake me up. And uh, the bass player was Abdul Malik, missed the train. I don’t know whether it was deliberate or not. So we were on the train it was Monk, Nelly, Charlie Ross and myself. That was it. And I thought, “Well, I know a bass player in Montreal that’s competent” But this kid, when I got there I called him up and he came to the theatre. Then he just caved in, he just got so frightened he couldn’t play anymore, he couldn’t play. He got so nervous and frightened he couldn’t play.

AB: So what happened then?

EJ: We played the concert without a bass player, bass player-less.

AB: Had you met Monk before this?

EJ: Oh yeah I used to go by the 5 spot where he played there for a long time. When Wilbur Ware and Shadow Wilson were playing with him I used to go by there and talk
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with Shadow during the intermissions. And Wilbur, I knew him very well from Chicago. It was just—I lived only two blocks away so I would walk over there every night. I'd get a seat, buy a bottle of beer, and listen to the music.

AB: So you already knew—you were familiar with his music so you didn't have any apprehensions about playing Monk's music?

EJ: No. I mean Coltrane was working with him during that period. So that was the first time I heard Coltrane play.

AB: With Monk?

EJ: Mhmm.

AB: What date, or a bout what time period was the time you went to Montreal with Monk?

EJ: Let me see... I'm terrible with dates.

AB: Well we'll research that.

EJ: It must have been after '58 cause '58, that was the year that I worked at The Roundtable with Tyree.

AB: So did you return to work with Tyree after this performance?

EJ: Oh yeah, I didn't quit my job!

AB: So how much longer after this did you remain with Tyree?

EJ: Oh about another...I was with him altogether over a year. It wasn't very long after that cause I got a call from J.J. cause he wanted to record, and do all these recordings. In addition to that he wanted to do a European tour; it turned out to be a Scandinavian tour, to promote the albums for Columbia. So I talked Tommy Flanagan into coming along with me. Then Tyree was stuck! He had to get a piano and a drummer. I'm sure he didn't have any problem with that. Joe Jones would come in anytime and help Tyree out.

It must have been that year going into '59.

AB: So then you were working with J.J.? Cause we were talking about J.J. yesterday...

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EJ: It was 1957. It wasn't '59. It was '57. With Sweets. That was more like '59. My mind is backwards here. (Laughs) You're getting me to think about things I haven't thought about in 30 years.

AB: So after Tyree Glenn, then Henry Sweets Edison seems significant.

EJ: Oh yeah, Henry would come in and sub for Tyree and that's how I got to know him. We got this job—that's how he knew about me. When he was out on the road he'd always call. If I was available I got the job, if not he got someone else. That was 1957 with J.J. then we toured and went to Sweden from Kiruna to Gothenburg

AB: Yeah we got that part. So who was in the Harry Sweets Edison band with you?

EJ: Tommy Potter initially, Jimmy Forrest, Tommy Flanagan and myself.

AB: And where were you performing with Sweets?

EJ: We were on the road most of the time. We played Birdland a couple of times but we were mostly out of town

AB: Did you go west or did you stay mostly on the eastern seaboard? Did you go all across the country with Sweets?

EJ: We didn't go to the west coast at all we went as far in as Cleveland probably and as far south as Kansas City, and St. Louis. Cause they had clubs that everybody was familiar with. It was part of a circuit basically.

AB: How long did you work with Sweets and how was it touring with him? Did he live up to his nickname "Sweets"? (Laughs)

EJ: Sweets has so many lady friends, he was such a handsome man. He had all these girls all over him all the time, that's why they called him Sweets.

AB: How was he to work for? How was he as a bandleader?

EJ: Oh he was phenomenal. He could play anything he had such a beautiful tone for a trumpet. It sounded—no other trumpet player had that sound, which was exclusively Sweets Edison. If you were blindfolded you could tell who it was. It was that distinctive.

AB: And so how long were you with him?

EJ: Up until '59. About a year and some months

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AB: And why did you leave that band?

EJ: Well we came back to New York off a road trip. And there was a—he didn't have anything booked for several weeks or so. And we were just going through the routine of being back home. I'd walk over to the 5 Spot and go listen to some music. I got a call from Coltrane. He called a friend of mine. I don't think I had a phone then. So he called, and he came over and got me to go to his (Elvin's friend's) house and return the call. Just prior to that, the day before, I had gone to Burbank to see Dizzy Gillespie's band and Charlie Persip, he was one of my favorites and he was working with Dizzy. I just liked to go over there and listen to that beautiful music. And Dizzy said that Charlie was about to leave and go on and do something and Dizzy asked me and he said, "Hey man, I'm forming another band. Would you be available?" and at that point I was. I didn't know anything about Coltrane's phone call so I had accepted the job from Dizzy before I got the call from Coltrane. When I did, I did recall when I subbed for Philly Joe Jones at one point with Miles band and Coltrane asked me if I would join him if he formed a group. So I had promised him that I would. So now I had to uh—you know I told John--just from a phone call, he was in San Francisco I guess. And he said, "Well I'm coming to New York." And I said, "Well I just told Dizzy last night that I am going to play in his new group and so I have to go and see him." And he said "Well I'll come with you." So he flew in from San Francisco and walked and we went to see Dizzy together and I got permission, I got a release from that. I couldn't just—I at least had to leave on good terms with people otherwise I couldn't jump up and go someplace and not even tell people what I was doing just because I wanted to do it. I couldn't work like that; I never worked like that.

AB: Why did you choose to go to John Coltrane as opposed to Dizzy Gillespie?

EJ: I guess its because I had heard him, I heard—when I played with him—the time I used to listen to him playing with Thelonious Monk and Wilbur Ware and those guys, its something in your head that just won't go away until its been resolved. I wanted so desperately to play with him, cause he was playing what I thought was the perfect balance for he way I played at that time. I could always hear myself improving, I could take chances with Coltrane and it wouldn't even be noticed. So that's one reason but he was just a nice guy. I don't know anybody nicer than that.

AB: So you've gone over, you've talked to 'Diz and you've got your release. Then what happened?

EJ: Well Coltrane, the next gig he had in Denver, Colorado. I said, "Wow." So that night I go to Denver to meet the band from California. And Billy...

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AB: Higgins?

EJ: Higgins, yes. He was working with Coltrane. I sat down and he played the first set and it was a lesson for me to learn how to listen to the songs that they were playing and one of them was “My Favorite Things” and I said, “I could play that”. From there on it was just a lot of fun.

AB: Who else was in that band?

EJ: Let’s see: McCoy, then McCoy’s brother in law Steve Davis, and that was it.

AB: Yes, it was a quartet. So Billy Higgins played the first set, did you play that same night?

EJ: Yeah I played the second set. From then on, Billy was on his way back to Los Angeles. But he was very night. Nobody could be more of a gentleman than Billy Higgins.

AB: Did he talk to you at all about—in preparation to take his chair in that band.

EJ: Well id didn’t really ask him. The thing is that he was so gracious. He wasn’t upset about getting another job or whatever, cause I think then he was teaching someplace at UCLA or something. Anyway he is great drummer, he is a great drummer.

AB: Do you remember where that engagement was in Denver?

EJ: Well it was at some club at what they call three points. It was sort of the mostly black neighborhood conjoined with other parts of the city and, you know, its sort of –homey.

AB: Was the group received well?

EJ: Well it wasn’t very much of an audience! People didn’t come out cause they didn’t have the money or what ever it was. There were a lot of empty seats in that club. You know, that’s just the way things were. I met some very nice people there; a pianist who was talking to my brother ant Thad and we had a long conversation about that. He said, “If you ever need anything just give me a call.” You know, just friendly.

AB: Do you remember anything about the music from that night? What was your feeling that night playing?

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EJ: Well I remember we played “My Favorite Things” because when we got back and went to New York after that and into the studio to record it; and all the rest of the stuff that we recorded that day: “Mr. Day” and “Mr. Night” and all those tunes.

AB: Do you recall Trane of McCoy saying anything to you at that gig or after the gig? How was your feeling after playing that gig?

EJ: I felt good. You know no one talked to me and I didn’t talk to anybody. We were like the Budapest String Quartet! (Laughs)

AB: Does that mean that you all play music but you don’t talk together?

EJ: Well you know the Budapest String Quartet these guys hated each other! When they weren’t playing together they didn’t even speak! So that’s what we were.

AB: So you did the one engagement in Denver then you came back to New York?

EJ: Yes. I could have met him in California, but I said, “Where is he going to be next?” So I went to Denver and met him there.

AB: And then you came back to New York, and shortly there after made the “My Favorite Things Session”. And what was your next prolonged engagement in New York?

EJ: What did we play? I don’t know. I don’t know that we played in New York. Maybe it was Birdland; it might have been Birdland. I’m not so sure about that. Things get a little hazy to me I haven’t thought about this stuff in years.

AB: How about the Trane, the Ballads LP? You say that “My Favorite Things” was the first thing you made with Coltrane rather than the Ballads?

EJ: Yes, the Ballads, we didn’t record that until the next year.

AB: Maybe I’m confusing that with the blues, with “Coltrane Plays the Blues”?

EJ: That was, we played my tune on the first recording, “Blues to Elvin”. I used to play that on guitar.

AB: So tell us about how you picked up guitar and who was the person that taught you?

EJ: I just liked the sound. When I used to work a lot at my uncle’s cleaners and when I got off I used to pass a place where they sold bootleg beer and whiskey. I’d drop in to listen to Red, the guy who ran the place, play his guitar. That’s the only reason I went in
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there. He would just play all night, cause he loved to play guitar. All these different songs that he could play, and he was real, he sort of sounded like Lightning Hopkins. He taught me, he had two guitars and showed me how to finger it.

AB: And so that's what you recalled and that's what you remembered playing yourself, what he had taught you?

EJ: Yeah.

AB: So that's the one documentation of you playing guitar, or some instrument other than the drums?

EJ: Well I never tried to play anything else, and I didn't even try to play guitar all that much. I just liked playing it for myself. I did get talked into playing on a recording with Bob Thiele and on "Heavy Sounds", that was it and that was all. And Frank Foster

AB: So that early period with Trane, he switched bass players several times.

EJ: Well Steve Davis, I don't know—to me it was easy. I always liked the way he played, perfect pitch all the time, he was always in tune and he always had this warm sound. He picked up Reggie Warren; he played with us and made some of the recordings I think. I can't recall them right now, it's a document and it's already—I think I've got some of those records. Anyway, so after Reggie he had Art Davis and they used to play a two bass thing and I'd tell him, "What tune are we going to play?" and he said "(scats music)" and I'd say, "When Reggie and Art Davis play together it sounds like somebody knocked over a hornets nest!" (Laughs)

AB: Okay (Laughs) so I presume that didn't last too long and then you got Jimmy.

EJ: You know I said that just trying to be funny but in a lot of ways, in a club for instance, they'd both be using bows and I'd say, "There it is again!" (Laughs)

AB: Did they say anything like that to you?

EJ: No! They didn't say anything.

AB: So Trane finally brought Jimmy Garrison into the band...

EJ: Oh yeah Jimmy Garrison!

AB: Do you remember Jimmy coming into the band?

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EJ: Oh yeah Jimmy came in shortly afterwards and I thought that's when we really started to come together, the rapport was there.

AB: Keiko mentioned you were influential in bringing Jimmy Garrison. Could you talk about that please?

EJ: Well Coltrane knew Jimmy Garrison from Philadelphia. They all knew each other. So when I mentioned his name—I played a concert with Wilbur Ware and Sonny Rollins in Philadelphia so before Sonny was giving all his interviews with all these bass players I said, “What the heck what's a matter with him?” and he's having all these auditions and I said “Man, you've got to be nuts.” There was one guy who played with the Philadelphia Symphony Orchestra and I thought he was pretty good. Then Jimmy Garrison came in and we were just playing a tune. And I couldn't hear what Garrison was playing, but I could see what he was doing and that's what convinced me. I said, “Get Jimmy Garrison”

AB: So now the classic quartet is formed and '60, '61, '62 a very prolific period, a lot of recordings, Impulse. And then '61 you do your first date as a leader for Riverside. Do you want to talk about that date and how that came about?

EJ: Yeah I guess Riverside was a sort of a good label, at least they were giving a lot of musician's opportunities that other companies didn't. I didn't think much about that. They just asked me if I wanted to make a dual recording and I said, “Sure.” So it happened to be that album, “Elvin”, it happened to be they sent a photographer to the studio and he took everybody's picture but mine! So we are looking through the photographs and he said, “Where's your picture?” and I said, “Well he didn't take it I guess!” So I went to see Roy DeCarava and he let me have one of his portraits. That's the one.

AB: Mhmm. That's the cover. And do you recall any highlights, any of the session?

EJ: Well, quite a few. For one thing it was Thad, and Hank, and Frank West and Frank Foster. All these guys came, you know, Eddie Jones and everybody came over there to help me out. I had a lot of expert help on that. I had never saw that before, I was pretty ignorant at that time. They walked me through that maze.

AB: And were you happy with the results of that session?

EJ: Oh yeah sure, I thought it was one of the best ones I ever did because of the quality of the rest of the group. I don't think anyone could get a good a group together better than that. I was pretty lucky.

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AB: Did the idea of being a bandleader ever occur to you before, did you ever envision yourself as being a bandleader before that stage?

EJ: not really I didn't think about that. I didn't want to be a bandleader per-se. I was trying to learn something, I didn't know what it was, but I wanted to—that's why I stayed with Coltrane for so long cause what I wanted to do, I was doing then. I didn't think any other, if I had a group of my own, I didn't know anyone who could play a horn like that. It just wouldn't work. So that was one of my reluctant reasons for not wanting to be a bandleader.

AB: Now Coltrane, as a bandleader, began inviting other folks into the band to perform or record. Probably one of the earliest ones, and the most memorable, is Eric Dolphy coming in and playing. Can you describe that experience?

EJ: Yes cause I knew Eric Dolphy, I saw him when he played with Charlie Mingus in that group. Mingus had some very unusual arrangements, and it took people with the skill of people like Eric Dolphy to play Mingus' music. Nobody else could do it, because he had such a command over his instrument that he could play just about anything he wanted.

AB: How was Eric as a person?

EJ: He was a wonderful guy, just a sweetheart. He and John got together and they were like two peas in a pod. Eric was coming with all this health stuff and I see Eric get a jar of honey and eat that. And I say, "What are you eating all that honey for? That's not healthy." And he said, "Oh yes it is!" (Laughs) I'm sure he would have sugar diabetes and wouldn't even know it. It was always fun, he was good person, a very nice person, a gentleman.

AB: And then it seems as if the next time you went to Europe was with Coltrane. You went earlier with J.J. Johnson, but is this the second time you went to Europe, with Trane?

EJ: With Coltrane yes.

AB: Do you want to talk about that tour, that first one?

EJ: I don't really remember much about it. The only thing that sticks with me is when we go on the stage and play. The rest of it I don't pay that much attention to. I know I didn't have a suitcase. I had this beat up tuxedo and these shirts. All of them were dirty. I couldn't find a place to get my shirts cleaned so I washed them myself. And I didn't have a suitcase, I picked up a shopping bag and I put my stuff in there. Well we got in the train
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station, getting ready to take a train, sitting down waiting for the time to go. And when its time to board and I get up and start boarding the train. And John is right behind me and he says, “Oh you forgot your luggage!” (Laughs)

AB: The reason why I ask about your recollections of the tour is because when you were talking about the J.J. Johnson tour, about playing in front of 50,000 people and receiving a very warm welcome from the audience, did you experience that same kind of reception and warmth when you were playing with Coltrane in Europe?

EJ: No I never saw that many. But we went to Scandinavia. We played in Norway and Finland and so there were tremendous audiences. But it never came to the...but I never saw anybody more than when I was with J.J. and I think that's because the King's Garden was a very special place for people to go. And it being a concert there, and it being a weekend, people were free to congregate. That's why so many people were there. I'm sure they came to listen to the music but other reasons were it was a beautiful place. That many people were there and nobody was crowded or jostled. It was a well-mannered crowd of people. It never happened again, I never saw that many people even at Newport

AB: And I presume you're playing mostly concerts rather than clubs in Europe?

EJ: Yeah, mostly concerts because clubs in Europe look like clubs in the United States. A club to them is a place where you can get maybe 400 people in. And they get subsidy from the city. I think it's a wonderful system because they support culture and they don't ignore it. They support it wholeheartedly.

AB: And you felt you were treated well?

EJ: Oh absolutely.

AB: There was a marked difference from how you were treated in Europe as opposed to the states?

EJ: No I don't think it was different it was just that being treated nice in Europe is different from being treated nice in the states. Cause they'll say, “Oh we're going to invite the rest of the band to the best restaurant in town” and we'll eat steaks or whatever it is and drink champagne and things like that. They don't do that here! I haven't seen it recently. (Laughs)

AB: It seems to be a higher level of nice over there. (Laughs)

EJ: Oh boy. You know I played at the Lincoln Center one time. After the concert some friends were together and we went across the street and there was this place that sold
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pizza. We ordered a pizza and they came back with something that looks like a flapjack with some cheese over it and I said, “What the hell is this!”

AB: Okay so we obviously have a problem with the food, there were some food differences but the people seem to be good. What about when you were travelling overseas, did they let you bring your own drums or did they provide drums.

EJ: I brought my own drums.

AB: You brought your own drums.

EJ: Yeah cause I have never had any luck using somebody else’s instrument. I’d go to sit in with a band and the first thing I know I put a hole through the bass drum, broke the sticks, and did everything else. I’m just not lucky like that. I said, “I’ll use my drums cause I don’t care what happens to them.”

AB: There are several stories from Roy Haynes and Jack DeJohnette about subbing for you with Trane. Do you want to talk about some of the reasons why, or what were some of the circumstances you were unable to make dates with Trane?

EJ: Well the reason why I wasn’t there was cause I was in Louisville, Kentucky being treated as an addict. So I stayed there for...the thing is it wasn’t a prison but it was a prison in a way, it was federal facility. I was wondering, I didn’t see any medication or anything like that. They just had good food and you go to bed early and you learn to regulate your life in a way. That’s why I wasn’t with Coltrane for those days. And Roy Haynes I think played some of the jobs.

AB: And Jack DeJohnette talks about how he had to play one set, I think you weren’t there, and then you came back and he was completely let down. He talks about that all the time, his experience with Trane. And so again Trane starts to bring more and more folks into the band, your working with this quartet and its becoming a significant force, an influential force, not only jazz but music. When did it occur to you that you were playing music that was, at that point, timeless. When we look back in history and we look at what you were doing with John Coltrane now, that obviously is music that was performed and transcended many, many of the qualities of music that we know today. When did you, as a participant in it, realize that this was far beyond anything else that was being played?

EJ: Well I always thought so cause I heard him play when they were playing with Monk. I don’t think anybody could duplicate that. And he just got better; it just expanded from that point at that little club on the Bowery. So I just thought it was a continuation of that development.

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AB: When one listens to the music the quartet was performing it sounds, at many times, like its equal participation. Of course there is a definite dialogue between you and Trane. So how did Trane as the bandleader, say if he introduced a new song, how would the band deal with that, negotiate the new song? How was that introduced?

EJ: Well he was always bringing up new tunes. First of all you have to listen till you can hear it and then you have to play until you can play it. It's as simple as that.

AB: So when you say listen, so Trane would come in and play it first and then play it for the other band members

EJ: Yeah and then you begin to understand, and feel what the music is all about. Cause there is no title, there isn't—the only time I saw a name for tunes was on the record jacket

AB: So no charts?

EJ: Yes

AB: Did he ever come in with anything written?

EJ: No

AB: Not even for McCoy or Jimmy?

EJ: I supposed he talk to them. He had conversations with McCoy at different times. I'm sure he must have mentioned to them what he wanted. It was always more or less very personal.

AB: Did you also make suggestions in the process? Did the other member make suggestions or was it more musical rather than verbal?

EJ: I never made any suggestions. I would change a rhythm sometimes and it would fit with what that melodic line was at that moment. So having the freedom to do that is an accomplishment in itself. Most bands don't have that type of confidence that they can just play freely but that's the way we did it.

AB: Did you as the rhythm section, you, McCoy, and Jimmy, did you ever talk about what you were doing or what you would be doing?

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EJ: No. I just tried to hear 'em. When they were playing I would listen very closely to what they were doing and try to enhance it. If not I'd leave it alone.

AB: Of course one of the landmark recordings is the "Live at the Village Vanguard" and of course "Chasin' the Trane" is one of those seminal works. Was that something that you and Trane engaged in frequently, or even before the documentation of the song, becoming a duet?

EJ: Oh yeah, he did that. The first time he did it was in Gothenburg, Sweden and we played this concert hall. The acoustics were so vivid, it was such a live place we didn't need a microphone. If I would have hit the snare drum I could hear it vibrate all over the place, immediately I would hear it. He started to play and he'd ask Jimmy to drop out and we'd just see him activate. And he would play for an hour like that.

AB: And so did you!

EJ: I didn't dare stop! (Laughs)

AB: How are we doing on time? Where are you? Okay let's take a break we've gone for well over an hour.

(Elvin answering a question that is not heard)

EJ: It's just happy. You know when someone is happy, you can feel it, and you can hear it in what he is doing.

AB: There is documentation, at the "Sun Ship" recording you hear Trane say, "Just keep a thing going."

EJ: Yeah

AB: I presume he is talking to you.

EJ: Oh yes!

AB: "Just keep a thing going", so that's about the kind of direction he would give?

EJ: Well you know that was a rare incident. Cause most of the time he had his mouthpiece in his mouth and he wasn't talking at all! He would talk through the bell of the horn; that was his language.

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AB: So John Coltrane, we can see his influence reflected in many of the titles he gave the compositions like “India”, “Africa”. So he was very much broadening his musical and spiritual influences. Was this something he brought into the band either directly or indirectly?

EJ: Well indirectly. He knew Ravi Shankar; they were good friends. He got interested in that kind of, that mode of music. When he got interested in something he studied it and John was very thorough about that. He would try and go back to the origins of what ever it is and follow that. He was a very astute investigator in that way. Once after a tour we made in Europe he didn’t come back home. He went to Africa, he and his wife; they wanted to go to Africa so they went to Africa.

AB: Do you know when that was?

EJ: 1960... 1962 or something; 1962 or 63. He started...cause when Ravi Shankar came into the United States he made a splash; he was a big guy. I guess I never could understand what the sitar was but I knew what Tablas were. I knew that the Tabla, when you make a sound with the Tabla, it’s related to what is done on the sitar. When Indians... I guess they have to learn that when they’re-a-year-and-a-half old. They learn it, they grew up on that stuff.

AB: Did you ever learn how to play Tabla?

EJ: No. Charlie Persip had a pair and he could play ‘em. I said, “How’d you do it?” and he’s slide his thumb across it and do all this and I said, “How do you do this!” I couldn’t even—I didn’t even know where to put ‘em! I said, “You put this in-between your knees or what?” (Laughs) It was out of my league.

AB: So you’d not seen Ravi Shankar perform? Ali Rakha would have been the Tabla player.

EJ: I had never seen any of those guys perform. They come into watch us and listen to us. I never had the chance to go to one of their concerts cause I never knew when it was going to be. Sometimes it was like they only told special people where they were going to have a concert.

AB: And also there was a relationship between Trane and Babatunde, Babatunde Olatunji.

EJ: Oh yeah I liked him, I thought he was a nice guy. Michael Olatunji, Nigeria. You know he was a general in the Nigerian Army, did you know that?

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AB: No I didn't know that!

EJ: He came here and he defected, that's why he stayed in the United States. I don't blame him!

AB: Do you remember when you first met him, the first time you heard him play?

EJ: Yeah I remember. He had his first United States engagement at the Village Gate. And we were there, we were playing there. He was opposite to us and I had a chance to listen to all this beautiful music.

AB: Did you have any desire to go to Africa when Trane went?

EJ: No, cause I didn't think—I wasn't prepared to go to Africa. So I think when people go to places like that they should have preparation intellectually or emotionally otherwise you won't learn anything, you won't be able to communicate. So that's why I was reluctant to go. I've been to Africa now we went to Guinea and Senegal. They had this sort of a gathering of all the master drummers in Africa came to Guinea to play together. And I discovered that everything they do, they play about two hours and they're dancing, but what they're doing is playing compositions. Everything they do is composition, that's what they do. It's beautiful to hear.

AB: So it's clear that Trane was listening to music other than in the idiom that he was playing, and the people he was playing with. What about you Elvin? What other kinds of music were you listening to? I know very early on you wanted to be a marching band drummer then you wanted to be a concert band drummer. What other kinds of music were you listening to, whether the music you were performing or the musicians you performed with

EJ: You know Bobby played with Art Blakey; the piano player.

AB: Timmons? Bobby Timmons?

EJ: Yeah, Timmons. Well he lives right there on East 6th street, and he lived right across the street from me. So he came over to my house once and he had this record and he said, "What are they doing?" You know it was a song, and he said, "When did they come to the end of it? What's the phrasing?" I tried to listen to it. What I thought was that's just a story and when he finished that's the end of it. You can put any rhythm you want to it, it doesn't really matter.

AB: What kind of music was that?

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EJ: At that point it was some recordings of Pigmies.

AB: So that caught your ear? That was something that interested you?

EJ: Yes absolutely. I never ever heard sweeter voices than that. That is just something.

AB: And when we came in today you were playing some classical music, so do you also like the classical we talked about?

EJ: Oh sure, “Rites Of Spring”, I can listen to that any day. I’ve got a lot of stuff in the cabinet there, most of my classical music. I’ve got some very rare recordings of Pablo Casals. I’ve always liked the way he played Bach and Mozart. It’s essential to know a little about most of the things that are available in the world; otherwise your education is incomplete. It doesn’t matter what instrument you play. It’s helpful to learn as much as one can just by listening. You learn a lot. Listen to the London Philharmonic and you learn quite a bit. I like that

AB: John Coltrane also, other than his musical influences, his music was also influenced by the events and the culture of this country, for example “Alabama”.

EJ: Well he wrote that after those kids got bombed in that church, that’s why he wrote that. The next day he was playing it. I said, “Oh boy” I just had tears running down my face.

AB: It was a hard time in this country. It was a difficult time. Thank goodness you were able to express it in the music so that you could help other people feel that, and try to come to understand how tragic that was.

EJ: Yeah, that was a real tragedy.

AB: In 1964, of course December is the landmark recording. That for me... that’s what I play for my children. “You want to know about jazz? Here.” “A Love Supreme” So John is really going for a strong spiritual statement, it’s very direct. We can hear the spirituality in his music. “Spiritual” obviously, he’s already naming his pieces to commemorate his own spiritual vision. But now he has written, and wants record “A Love Supreme” can you perhaps share with us how he introduced this piece for the quartet?

EJ: When we were to record, the only time I sort of knew that what we were going to record was...when we recorded “My Favorite Things” because, I don’t know why I had and I hadn’t seen it since in the studio, he had parts written out. For the bass and the
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piano, but not for me, I was reading the bass part. Very soon as we played that day, that was the only time I really knew what he was going to do cause he would just go to the studio and when he got his fingers loose he'd start playing and it was up to the engineer to catch it cause here it goes! He's off! (Laughs)

AB: Did you have a sense about the importance of that recording also? Obviously it was important to Trane himself.

EJ: Oh yes I thought so. He put a lot of emotion in that and all of those other short pieces that we did. It's sort of playful, its fun. Cause anybody can do that, now its possible that if you want to learn how to play it you can listen to that record and learn how to play it, its not that complex. That's what I like about that, but it never happened again. (Laughs)

AB: I didn't mean to skip over this so I'm going to come back; "Crescent" is also a landmark recording. And then you have one of the more famous solos in this music, and the drum thing: Elvin Jones plus 7 minutes, Elvin Jones. How did that come about?

EJ: I don't know. It came to the point where he said, "Now you play one" I don't know what it is and I just play something (Laughs) so I did.

AB: Yeah you sure did, you *really did!* (Laughs) So can you recall being in the studio? Did they play it back for you after you recorded it?

EJ: Yeah I think they did, I'm sure they did. I didn't pay too much attention to that because I thought that I've played more coherent drum solos than this one. I didn't want to listen to it actually

AB: But let's talk about your soloing style. You say "more coherent", what are the some of things that go on in your mind when you approach your drum solo, or when you know you're about to take a drum solo? Is there a particular process that you go through?

EJ: Not really, it's just that I certainly have to feel that you can control what it is that you're doing. That's the thought process...that's what I understand best. Because if you're not in control of it, it wont work. It won't come out right. You start dropping sticks and going through all types of convoluted series

AB: How about when you're soloing in the context of a tune?

EJ: Well that's pretty simple because you simply make a...you sort of embellish the melodic line. That's the tune. It's the beginning, bridge, the end--that's it. Put that in the context of the drums you're using and you can find that you hear what it is that you're

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doing and you hear what you want to do or what you should do. It plays itself in that sense.

AB: I can see you telling that to a young student. (Laughs) Well in that regard, let's talk about something, "A Different Drummer". This is something that Ken Kimery and I were talking about when we knew we were going to do this interview. You're the most articulate drummer, if not the first drummer I heard, in describing the drums in terms of color. And then I read again a recent interview, which you start taking about that. You are the only drummer I know of that has spoken about that so eloquently. Could you share that with us for the historical record? How your approach, and how you came up with this approach?

EJ: You have an array of cymbals that you use. It can be 3 or 5 or whatever. Each cymbal has its own range of sound, of tone. When you play for a while and you begin to understand that instead of playing this one, you play this one. But why do you do that? Because you like that sound and it goes with what this music is right now. So you can put that in the context of "oh it's got the color that fits this composition"

AB: Do you envision music visually at all?

EJ: Well yes you can visualize it. Sometimes I can close my eyes and see rainbows. That's what it is. It's a rainbow and all that sound and that phenomenon is built into all the cymbals. There is no such thing as a bad cymbal. It might not work with you at that point but if its there somebody made it and the sound, you're supposed to be able to how to get the sound out of the cymbal and not beat one in.

AB: Well what about the drums? You've talked about the cymbals, and the coloration of the cymbals but what about the drums?

EJ: You know, I learned that in kindergarten. People would talk about sounds in terms of animals, or crayons. You know, we'd go get a box of crayons of all different color. So that's what the drums are. You can identify what you want because you understand what the color is going to be and it's consistent. So when you tune up, you tune up to that level.

AB: Is this a concept that you share with the people you perform with? Either the people in your band or when you're a side person with other folks. Is this an approach that you discuss or share with other musicians?

EJ: Well nobody, they don't—drummers are reluctant to come and ask things like that. I had that one opportunity, when we made that film, I had that boy that was there—Tony. And that different drummer! No, no I am talking about the kid! First he wanted me to
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give him a drum set, but he went to a private school. And I said, “What’s the matter don’t they have a music department in your school?” He said, “No.” and I said, “Why don’t you get one!” And so he bugged the principals and he got a musical department in place in his school. He did that himself! (Laughs)

AB: Because you told him! Because you suggest he should do that! (Laughs)

EJ: I said, “Tell them that’s what you want! You’re paying for it”

AB: Well, maybe we can flesh out the discussion. How did that film come about? I know we are out of chronological sequence but since we’re on the topic of the film, maybe you could talk about how that came about?

EJ: What’s Ed’s last name?

AB: It’ll be on the credits.

EJ: He was going to Columbia, going to teaching and studying film. So he had an idea that he wanted to make a documentary of what I did so I said, “okay.” We started to do it and it took five years. He said, “I know how to get grants but sometimes it takes a little time.” And it did, it took five years and he still didn’t have enough money! I said, “I’ll have to chop that off! We have to be satisfied with 40 minutes in instead of an hour and a half.” Yeah, he was funny. He did that and I thought he was brilliant. He had a lot of his colleagues and friends; they helped him. Cause he came in here once with like 20 people, his crew. And we went to Pontiac with it, with all these people!

AB: Well no wonder he had to raise a lot of money huh?

EJ: Well you get grants, you get 25 thousand dollars a crack and how long is that going to last? You have to buy the film and its color, and it’s the camera, and rent those little editing machines. That’s very expensive.

AB: So the film is finally edited and released in 1979 according to historical record. Were you satisfied or happy with the end result?

EJ: Oh yeah. It said what it should have said. It fulfilled its mission, that’s what I thought. It was very well done. There are always things you can think of that you could have done or said when it’s all over with. (Laughs)

Keiko: Inaudible

AB: Ed Gray?

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EJ: Ed Gray.

AB: Mhmm.

EJ: He was kind of sickly too. He was at the Vanguard every night.

AB: Can't get enough of Elvin huh?

EJ: Right.

AB: There is another segment of that film that is very important. Another thing we were talking about is how you explained "Three Card Molly". And Ken and I, when we were preparing for this interview we were listening to the recording at the Village Vanguard, thinking, "Where does Elvin create that style that we know, that signature style?" And at the beginning of a tune, I think it was "Get Happy"? At the beginning of one of the tunes you play the intro for "Three Card Molly", or at least a portion of it. So this is an idea that you had back in '57 that then became a song later. I mean, this is one of your signatures, so do you remember this? '57, you're already playing this idea, you're sitting in with Sonny Rollins and you've already got this idea, you're already expressed this idea. Is there something you recall, at least in retrospect now, something that you were developing?

EJ: It's just part of what I... you know when you develop something it's always possible to reach back and use it when you need to. It is as simple as that. It's something that develops, sometimes it can be subconscious, most of the time it is. It's something that you can remember and recall, and apply in different times. So I like that.

AB: Now, every drummer that has heard you play can identify, some cannot describe but they can identify, that's Elvin Jones. There is a particular and signature style that is you and you alone that you developed that is definitely evident by the time you record "My Favorite Things." We were trying to track how early we heard that triplet, consistent fore grounded, variation pattern, that spreads over the drums and the entire drum is creating a mosaic. We hear hints of it, it's episodic when you sat down and sat in with Sonny, but it wasn't completely formed and crystallized then. Was there, in your memory, a time, you were saying as you were saying yesterday, "I was trying to create my own sound." Obviously this is something that you arrived at because this becomes your signature sound. Is there a time in your development where you realized this is what you were going for, and is there a time that you felt you achieved it?

EJ: There's always—I never really tried to do that in any consistent way. Ideas don't come that fast. Also, any form that one can imagine and make reality, you have to learn
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it. It takes sometimes years and so I think I've learned a few things in the 63 years I've been playing the drums. So I learned a little bit

AB: So in retrospect you don't recall a time you heard a playback from a recording and said, "Oh okay, now that's what I've been going for! I finally think I got it!" Did that happen?

EJ: Oh sure. It happened very rarely, it's not something that happens every time you go out. It's very elusive to make a perfect pattern and for it to come out correctly, or the way you imagined that it would when you were supporting other components of the orchestra. That's why it's very elusive in that way. When it happens you feel very good about it because you know that that is something you've been working on for years. It takes 10-15 years to work that out, and then wait till you get an opportunity to apply it where it makes sense. You just can't do it any time; everything has its time and place.

AB: When you record, do you make it a practice to listen to the playback after you've done a take, or maybe at the session, to hear how you've been documented or maybe to hear the recording itself?

EJ: Sometimes I like to do that. One reason that you do that, it isn't because it's something that you want to do or that you didn't do at that point, it's a way to balance the sound. So if you listen to it you can see where if it's balanced or if it isn't balanced. Sometimes I had to change the pitch on my bass drum because it didn't balance, it was out of sync.

AB: Did the members of the quartet, particularly yourself during a play back of the session if you felt, "I didn't feel like I made the contribution I wanted", did you have the liberty to be able to ask John to go back and re-record that? In other words, did the rest of the quartet have some say in the final documentation of the music?

EJ: Well no I never did that cause I wouldn't know where to start. Things happen spontaneously, and one part isn't more significant than another. If the whole thing isn't right, if it doesn't feel right or sound right, then you have to do it again.

AB: So that would be a group decision or would John say, "Okay let's go back in and do that again"? If McCoy said...

EJ: No, cause it's the leader's decision, not the group. Because everybody is playing as well as they can but it's something that you say, "Well okay if we do it again we know it better now, and if we do it again it will be more complete."

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AB: So you mentioned earlier that John was constantly studying and bringing in more and more things. Obviously, the documentation from 1960 up through 1965, you can hear this progression. We already talked about “My Favorite Things”, December of ’64. So ’65 things start to become even more expansive in the quartet. Can you talk about that period, and how that dynamic was going on in the group?

EJ: Well you asked me about “A Love Supreme” and what I think is that it began to materialize when he started having children.

AB: So you’re saying his personal life started having a more profound influence on his musical vision?

EJ: Oh yes, it had everything to do with the spirituality that was there and how he think he’s thanking God for this gift.

AB: Trane, as we well know, was married to Naima and then ultimately ended up with Alice Coltrane, and now you’re talking about children, of course this is in ’64. What about your personal life in this regard? Had you married at this time? Or children?

EJ: I didn’t see my life in that context. I tried to be as articulate as possible musically. I tried not to make mistakes, and sometimes you make them anyway. It’s just that one has to be aware, constantly aware, because things don’t happen by themselves. Your intellect is guiding everything. Your experience with your instrument gives you the wear-with-all, the confidence to know that you can play any pattern that you wish because you’ve worked on it for 15 or 20 years. You should feel confident in yourself in that way, I know I do. It never bothers me. If you want to play, play! I try to do the best I can.

AB: So in ’64 the music is expanding and becoming even more, and more free in some senses and in other ways it’s growing in other directions. Can you talk about that period as a Coltrane collaborator?

EJ: There were a little different forms during that period. John was studying a lot of religious philosophy of different parts of the world and he was also interested in the Japanese books. He had a Shakuhachi and he used to, when h was driving along, he’d have it in his mouth he’d have one hand on the wheel and the other on the Shakuhachi. It kept me awake! He didn’t rush into things; he was enthusiastic but not hasty. He liked to see what his ideas become realities in its own way, the way it should have been developed. I’m sure that he had different prides, Pharaoh Sanders and Archie Shepp used to come around and I’m sure they enhanced what he was thinking at that point. “Sun Ship” was quite an array of different kinds of musicians. That was a lot of fun.

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AB: But then he starts to hear other things in his sound. Of course there is an issue of not only bringing in more saxophone players, but he also starts to bring in more rhythm section players.

EJ: Oh yeah of course, Ali, what's his name?

AB: Rashied Ali.

EJ: Oh yeah, and there was a conga drummer out in Los Angeles that he liked. I forgot his name but he was a short guy, and a good drummer. He had all kinds of drums so I guess he was...and John liked that. He was on one of those recordings that we made. It seemed like he was trying to cram things into a period that he didn't think he wanted to complete something, some ideas he may have had. In some ways he was over anxious to do that.

AB: When did you leave John Coltrane?

EJ: 1966. I didn't get along with Rashied that well. First thing, I don't know what he was thinking about, but we were playing at The Village Gate and I always went early to get set up so I knew everything. When I went out and came back, when it's almost time to start, he's moved my drums and put his all over. I said, "What are you doing here?" We had that going. I said, "Well if we are going to play together we have to be coordinated. Otherwise it's going to sound like it's just a mess."

AB: Worse than that hornets' nest. (Laughs)

EJ: Yeah, right. A beehive! (Laughs) A killer beehive! But we finally got to understand each other.

AB: So did you actually tell Trane that you were leaving?

EJ: Yeah, I did. We were at a Jazz workshop in San Francisco. I got a headache so I left and I packed my stuff and I left.

AB: Was it actually on the gig?

EJ: Yeah.

AB: And so you went up and said "John, I got a headache." And how did he take it? What did he say?

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EJ: Well he didn't say anything. Cause I told him, I said, "If I ever feel like I'm not making a contribution to what we do, I'm leaving."

AB: You told him that?

EJ: Oh yeah.

AB: Prior to him...

EJ: Yes.

AB: Why would you say that to him? Was there any doubt that you would continue with him?

EJ: No it wasn't that cause we had a long partnership; we were together for almost 6 years. Even before that he's always been my hero. I don't care what happens, he will always be that. We didn't have any words to each other. Mine was just that I thought it was getting sort of hectic on the stage so I said, "Well I'm going. I think they can do that better by themselves." So I just quit.

AB: You left San Francisco?

EJ: And then I got a phone call from Stevie James, Duke Ellington's nephew. And he said, "Duke was looking for you he wants you to come to Spain right away!" So I left there and I joined Duke Ellington's band.

AB: This is tape four of the Smithsonian Institution Oral History interview with Elvin Jones. Today's date is June 11th, 2003. We are in the apartment of Elvin and Keiko Jones at 415 Central Park West in New York City. Engineered by Ken Kimery, interviewed by Anthony Brown. When we last left off we were talking about that ground breaking phone call you received from Steve James to come join the Ellington Orchestra. But before we discuss that landmark event I'd like to backtrack and cover a few things we covered in the last portion of the interview, just to add some clarification. One of them was when you were recommended by Poppa Joe when he wanted to leave Tyree Glenn. Do you know why he recommended you for that?

EJ: He knew me, Joe knew me. He was probably one of the first people, barring Kenny Clarke, Philly Joe, and Art Blakey, he was about the...cause I used to go to the drum shop on 8th avenue, Frank Ippolito's place. Joe used to hang out there a lot. It's just one of those things, when you know somebody and something comes up that you can have some control over, well you talk about the people you know. And that's why it happened

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that way. That's the only reason I can think cause he knew I had never played music like that before.

AB: So you think he thought it might be good for you?

EJ: Sure!

AB: As well as good for Tyree?

EJ: It was good for me.

AB: When we were talking about the other projects and other collaborations you were doing in '59 we didn't mention a couple of landmark recordings, one being "Sketches Of Spain." How did that come about, your participation in "Sketches of Spain"?

EJ: I was very close with Gil Evans. I would see him almost everyday.

AB: Where? Where did you see him?

EJ: For one thing he said, "Well can you come up to NOLA's studios with me?" He rented some timpanis and he said, "Well I want to see how that sounds. You're going to play 7 timpanis." It was like a concert, the whole suite. So we used to do that. I'd fool around just for fun. He got this recording...he did most of Miles Davis' orchestration. He wrote a lot of pieces, and arranged most of them. So anyway this date came up when Miles was to do "Sketches of Spain." So Gil being such a—he's a thorough man, he had written out this piece. What's his name? its really a classical guitar solo, Spanish. It's been played by symphony orchestras and things like that. He transcribed all of that. He did it for the reeds, for the brass, for the percussion. He wrote out for the...Miles had to study the theme. I heard John Williams play that. To compare it with Miles it was exactly the same. The same intimation, the same. It was a beautiful piece. I think it was one of the highlights of Miles career to do that. And for Gil as well, he got a lot of recognition for that. You know Gil used to be; he was the arranger for...What's his name?

AB: Claude Thornhill?

EJ: Claude Thornhill. (Laughs) You know this guy used to sound like he had a hot potato in his mouth. (Laughs)

AB: So how did you come to participate in the "Sketches of Spain" recording session?

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EJ: Because of our association with each other we'd go up and practice things together. He said, "I'm doing this 'Sketches of Spain.'" He said, "I want you to begin with castanets." I said, "Okay." And I had a set of castanets, I never learned how to play 'em but I had 'em. And I went to a club where there was a flamenco dancer on 8th avenue and I asked her, I said, "Can you show me how to play the castanets?" Cause she was dancing, and that's what its all about. She showed me how to do it and I practiced and I learned how to do it. So that was the introduction to "Sketches of Spain", it was me learning how to pay the castanets. (Laughs)

AB: You also recorded with Gil on his dates.

EJ: Oh yeah, "Out of the Cool" and you know, Charlie Persip was one of his main drummers too. He played in a lot of Gil's record sessions. One that I was there, and all I could do was rattle the tambourine. It was just a lot of fun; that was the thing about Gil Evans, he had a sense of humor.

AB: Was the dynamic like between Gil and Miles when you observed them in a studio and performance?

EJ: Well Miles wouldn't even hear of another arranger other than Gil Evans. They were very close; they were close personal friends. You know, Miles would get in trouble or something and he'd call up Gil and Gil would talk to him like a father. And he was like that, Gil was so serene and he kept his life that way. I never heard him raise his voice and he was a genius as an arranger. There was nobody any better than that.

AB: Okay, well let's go back to our timeline. You're in '66 you've just departed the John Coltrane Quartet, or the John Coltrane Ensemble, because we don't know how many people were actually in it at that point.

EJ: It was an ensemble alright! (Laughs)

AB: So you get a call from Steve James who works with Duke Ellington. He tells you, he says what?

EJ: He said that Duke wanted me to come to Spain to join the band. I said, "Well, you know, Spain. I'm not going to Spain myself." I just didn't know what to say. I said, "Where is he going to be? Where is the next engagement?" and it was Frankfurt, Germany. And I said, "Okay, I'll meet him in Frankfurt" and Norman Grantz was managing the tour because Ella Fitzgerald was there, and it just happened that way. He already had a drummer and I was asked, "So what am I supposed to do? I just came out of a situation with two drummers!" (Laughs) "What are you trying to do to me!?" (Laughs)

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AB: Who was the other drummer?

EJ: You I never knew the guy's name cause he wasn't very friendly. He was a fellow from Philadelphia. He was a good drummer though. He was playing drums with Duke like Lionel Hampton's drummer would play. You know, the heavy back beat. And I said, "That's terrible." I don't know why he didn't have any better of a...he couldn't assimilate or interpret a composition better than that. Cause Duke, the music didn't call for that.

AB: So you got to Frankfurt, Germany and you saw the Duke Ellington Orchestra playing with this other drummer? Or were you asked to come up on the bandstand?

EJ: They didn't ask me to play until we went to Paris. We went to Milan. And in Milan, it was when I was called to play.

AB: So you were essentially accompanying the band, not as a performer at this point, but as an observer?

EJ: Yeah, you know there are two drummers and I was one of them. I was right near the bass player, and Duke was right in front of me so it was very comfortable for me. And I knew most of the men in the band. Paul Gonzalez is a good friend, Cootie Williams, all them guys. It was a great experience; I enjoyed that.

AB: What month was that? And how long were you with that tour?

EJ: Oh, it was no longer than three weeks and the tour was over. Duke, he paid me for six weeks. I said, "Well why are you giving me all this money?"

AB: So were you hired just for the tour?

EJ: Just for that, yeah.

AB: Did you depart? Or was that just the end of that engagement or did you leave?

EJ: I didn't have a clear understanding of that. Cause, you know, Sam Woodyard was still around. I know that if he had his druthers, if he would rather had Sam Woodyard thank anyone else in the world, and so would I! I thought he was a great drummer! (Laughs) Anyway, that's the way it was. We're friends from then on. Duke would come to see me at a jazz workshop in Boston. One part of it was one club and the jazz workshop was the other. So his band, half of them would be over there when I was engaged at the workshop. So all these guys would come over, they'd get an intermission

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and come over to where I was! (Laughs) It's a good feeling when people can come around and support that kind of support, moral support in that sense.

AB: When did you first meet Duke Ellington?

EJ: Well that's when I first met him. Well, when we made this yeah right, I made this record with John Coltrane.

AB: So you, this is the first time you met Duke Ellington during the John Coltrane, the Duke Ellington and John Coltrane collaboration.

EJ: Yeah that was one of them. He was doing that. He did one with Mingus; he did one with Max Roach.

AB: Yeah, "Money Jungle", right. Then also the one with Coleman Hawkins.

EJ: Yes.

AB: Can you recall what happened in the session, in the Duke Ellington John Coltrane session? How that came about and your recollections about it?

EJ: He just got into the studio and Duke, he's a very...he's a warrior in that sense. He sat at the piano, he did a couple things, and Coltrane was warming up. The next thing we do is we're playing this (Elvin scats a melody) that was his little ditty. And I thought it was a lot of fun. I was on, let's see, two tracks or three.

AB: Four. And Sam was on the others. Was that the first time you met Sam Woodyard too?

EJ: Oh no, I knew Sam.

AB: You knew Sam. Okay.

EJ: Cause he was a...he used to teach Charlie Persip. And Charlie Persip, we used to hang out a lot together, and he'd always talking about Sam.

AB: What did like particularly about Sam Woodyard's playing?

EJ: Well, his energy. He played with a lot of passion. Duke's Orchestra could have been twice the size it was and Sam could have overpowered everything there. (Laughs) He was a strong drummer.

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AB: He used two bass drums, was that anything you thought about doing?

EJ: I have enough trouble with one. (Laughs) One is enough for me. (Laughs)

AB: When you speak of passion and intensity I think of Art Blakey also. You talked about Art Blakey as one of earlier drummers you met when you came to New York, can you talk about Bu.

EJ: Yeah, Buhaina. He was a guy that, I don't know I always like the way...He was probably one of the best drummers that ever made a recording with Thelonious Monk, Art Blakey was. He seemed to understand everything that Monk was doing, anticipate it. He filled in; it was perfect. I never heard anybody else play that close with Monk. Shadow Wilson was good, but Shadow was sort of a like a... he's big band drummer basically. So was Art Blakey, he wasn't timid, and he would hit 'em! (Laughs) He was a lot of fun and he could play, he was a natural. He had a press roll that nobody in the world could do but him. I said, "How the hell did he do that?!" I tried, I got the same snare drum and I said, "Why won't this work!" I don't know how he did it. I guess it's the way you have to grit your teeth. But he was a phenomenal musician, Art Blakey, and a good person. I remember just before he died, I was walking down at this club where we worked on 7th Avenue, Sweet Basils. Art, he was playing and he saw me and he said, "Come and sit in." And I said, "Okay." I said, "What's the matter?" He said, "I'm in pain, I can't hardly..." He was in pain; he was really hurting. I took his place and he went home. I played the whole night. Wallace Rooney was playing with him and what's this boy? Benny?

AB: Green, Benny Green?

EJ: Yeah Benny Green, he was playing.

AB: You brought up Thelonious Monk again, I wanted to ask you, and I neglected to ask you, what was it like when you played that time in Montreal? I know you didn't have the bass player. But do you remember that gig and how that felt for you?

EJ: I thought it was...I was so happy I didn't know what to do. I couldn't believe it was me sitting there with Thelonious Monk and Charlie Rouse! Cause I thought Charlie Rouse was, next to Coltrane he was one of the great saxophonists.

AB: Do you remember any of the tunes you performed there?

EJ: You know, I can't recall any of the names but I knew we played "Misterioso" (Scats the melody) (Laughs) I love that piece. It was quite a time you know. He was such a

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beautiful man; he's just a great person. He just exudes that, it comes off of him like it's reflected from the sun.

AB: Okay, well let's try to get back where we were. You had just left the Duke Ellington Orchestra now.

EJ: Right.

AB: Well, I think I heard Keiko mention earlier that was in March of 1966. What happened after that?

EJ: Well, when that tour was over I came back to New York. We talked about...I said, "I should get a group of my own, I'm tired of playing with everybody else." Anyway, I found that. I called up Jimmy Garrison, I called up Joe Farrell, and I knew him very well so we got a trio together and I got a trio.

AB: So that's in '67.

EJ: And we did that first piece, "Putting It Together".

AB: Yeah, I have that recording here. Let me just backtrack a little bit, you mentioned Jimmy Garrison, he had already left 'Trane too. Let's talk about, when you left 'Trane, McCoy Tyner had also left. Was that something that you and he discussed?

EJ: I don't know. I didn't discuss my business with anybody. I don't know...cause first of all Alice wanted to play, so that might have been good reason for McCoy to leave. She was, after all, closer to him than McCoy (Laughs). She'd say, "Honey, I want to play tomorrow." (Laughs)

AB: Reminds me of that Pontiac gig you had with the club owner!

EJ: (Elvin imitating club owner's girlfriend) "See they're not just playing my music." (Laughs)

AB: Did you talk to McCoy after he left; I mean immediately after he left.

EJ: Oh no, I didn't see him for months. Cause I went right from San Francisco to New York, and picked up a set of drums at the Gretsch factory, and went straight to Europe.

AB: Okay so we'll try and figure out what else happens in '66. But '67, Elvin gets his idea, crystallizes it, and puts it into his own group. And the first thing you do is put together a trio! Why?

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EJ: Piano-less. (Laughs) People ask me, they say, “Why do you play without a piano.” I say, “Well all the piano players have good jobs. They’re just not available. I’d love to have a piano player, but where is he?”

AB: So what criteria, what were you looking for, what qualities were you looking for? Obviously you had Jimmy; he was a known collaborator.

EJ: Well Jimmy was doing a lot of composing during that period. He had... Yeah that’s right. Before all that happened I worked at a place right across the street, right on Hudson street across from the Half Note, it’s a place called Pookie’s pub. I went in there. First Tony Scott used to work there, then Mingus used to work there. I said, “The guy must be pretty good! Mingus and Tony Scott!” I walked in and the guy, Tony Scott was leaving to go to Italy and I said, “Let me have this job.” He said, “Okay you start tomorrow.” That’s’ how I started there. At a matter of fact, one or two nights I looked up and Coltrane was sitting in the audience. Whenever he saw him he’d, “Do you need anything?” And I’d say “No I’m okay.”

AB: So how long were you at Pookie’s pub?

(Keiko interjects. Her speech is inaudible)

EJ: How many months? (Addressing Keiko) Seven, seven months.

AB: Are we in ’66 or?

EJ: ’67, yeah ’67. We went in the Vanguard for a while.

(Keiko interjects. Her speech is inaudible)

AB: Well, Keiko you’re contributing a lot now. Maybe we should go back and talk about how you two met, and where and the circumstances of your meeting?

EJ: She don’t want to talk about that.

AB: Okay, you don’t want to talk about that.

EJ: Well I do. (Laughs)

AB: Okay, go ahead.

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EJ: Pardon, me. Well we met in... the first time I saw here was 1962. And she had just come from Japan with her father. We were working a Birdland. And she had wanted to come down to the...she came down. Her father is waiting outside. She came with this bouquet of flowers and she wanted to give it to me, and get an autograph and all that. And she had on this beautiful kimono. And I just said, "Come here baby." I was crazy! (Laughs) And she ran out of there and I didn't see her for another four years.

(Keiko interjects. Her speech is inaudible)

AB: Did you get his autograph? (Laughs)

EJ: She's got it now! (Laughs)

(Keiko interjects. Her speech is inaudible)

AB: So you met him again, four years later, how did that happen?

EJ: Well when we went to Japan on one of George Wein's tours. This was supposed to be like the drum battle so it was Art Blakey, Tony Williams and myself. Oh yeah Wayne Shorter, Ben Tucker. Who was playing piano? I forgot. McCoy! Yeah, and the next time her father sponsored one of the...when we went to Nagasaki he was one of the sponsors.

(Keiko interjects. Her speech is inaudible)

AB: When, Keiko, when you were first in the country and you were with your father, what was your father's job?

Keiko Jones: My father, long story but short he wants to sell the public... (Inaudible)

AB: In Nanping?

(Keiko inaudible)

AB: So you were in the states in 1962 and then you went back to Japan? And when did you get back from Japan, cause you meet Elvin in '66?

Keiko: We were staying in the America for the only six days. New York for two days because I wanted to hear the jazz but I missed the opportunity.

EJ: (Laughs)

AB: (Laughs) That's a very aggressive drummer in that situation.

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(Keiko inaudible)

AB: So you met again in Nagasaki? So you went to Nagasaki to perform during this drum battle tour?

EJ: Yes, right.

AB: How long was that tour?

(Keiko inaudible)

AB: he what?

EJ: He (Tony Williams) was a drug user cause he got caught with, he had some marijuana. I said, "What are you doing?" Cause he's out there smoking it on the train and everything. I said, I told him, I said, "You know what you better do is flush it down the toilet. That's the best thing to do cause you're going to get caught."

(Keiko inaudible)

AB: So what happened was that Tony Williams was arrested.

EJ: Yeah.

AB: And you were trying to bargain to keep him here one more day, and deport him the next day to finish one more concert?

EJ: Yeah. He told the policemen I was his partner or something. And so he--

(Keiko inaudible)

AB: Ah, one more name.

EJ: And so he gave him mine. So they just arrested me too. Way up north.

AB: Like Hokkaido?

EJ: Yes. It was a long ways.

Keiko: He left I went to the Tokyo to meet him at the airplane. He was handcuffed up and I died.

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AB: This is the second time you him?

Keiko: Yes. And I saw him and I said, “How dare!” So I hate Tony Williams from that moment, forever, until he die. Never! How could he do such a thing!

AB: Did you ever talk to Tony, why he did that?

Keiko: No.

EJ: I think what he did was just that he was young guy, and he was scared shitless, so he did whatever the detective told him to do. He became an auxiliary policeman. (Laughs)

AB: What was your relationship with Tony Williams up until this point? (Laughs) We can imagine what it was like afterwards?

EJ: We were just playing the drums! He was a good drummer, he is. He is a fantastic drummer. I thought he was going to go places when I saw him with Miles cause he was fabulous, like magic, the way he played.

AB: That’s tragic. I had never heard this before. So then what happens now? Keiko comes to see you and you’re handcuffed at the airport?

(Keiko inaudible)

AB: So they have you handcuffed, and what do they put you in Japanese prison? So what the rest of the tour goes back to the states?

Keiko: Yes! He did this for the hearing for the not guilty. He didn’t! So I was in another city and I don’t know nothing about what is going on. I was contact promoter’s assistant. His name Akamica and he say, “You gotta’ come up” and it was December and I was so busy with my father so I have excuse. Ask my father, “I have to ride in to Tokyo.” I saw him and he didn’t see me cause after that, thank god he say, “That’s number 11C, Mr. Jones.” That’s the first time I’ve ever been to jail anyways (inaudible) then I spoke to the promoter and I say, “Listen, I’m sorry Elvin is lost” so (inaudible) I almost scream at this promoter. (Inaudible) Once you get deported you can never come back! Elvin got deported February 7th, 1967. (Inaudible) So I went to Tokyo to see the ambassador. American Consult to tell to these guys (Inaudible).

AB: So, thank you so much. So she sees you, so how long were you detained in Japan.

Keiko: October 31 to February 7th.

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EJ: Yeah.

AB: You were in a Japanese jail that long?

EJ: Well first I was in... I went to prison to wait for the trial and after the trial I was deported. So I went to the immigration people.

AB: Still under Japanese authority or were you placed under American authority?

EJ: Oh no, I was under Japanese authority. That was Japan.

AB: Okay.

EJ: One of the guards he wanted me to get some exercise. And he let me out of the cell and he said, "I'm going to show you how to play Karate." And he was giving me Karate lessons.

Keiko: After the trial he has to stay in the jail, I say, "No way." So we, I and the promoter, work together and to get release for him. So then he's got a free, and he stay, and we at hotel. And then that's the reason why he works with Japanese musicians (Inaudible).

AB: They found him guilty again, so the appeal was guilty again?

Keiko: Then I was in Japan and I was in Nagasaki and they say, "he's gotta deport" and I say, "When?" and they say "tomorrow."

EJ: Well I lost a good set of drums; I know that, I don't know what happened to them. Somebody stole them.

Keiko: (Inaudible)

EJ: That's Art Blakey with his lying ass! (Laughs)

AB: (Laughs) Okay well that fills in a lot of gaps for '67.

Keiko: (Inaudible)

AB: So 11 years?

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EJ: We had the chief of the USSIS and his wife as our guests and the ambassador wrote a beautiful introduction of our program and it came out very well.

Keiko: That's the only way I take him to Japan. From that moment every year I took him to clear up his name. From next year we have hard time cause we have to stay at hotel in airport.

AB: Narita Airport?

Keiko: Yes. I don't mind and I explain to Elvin everything and 5 to 6 years later he is the only one who was deported to Japan and come back. He was the only one left free.

AB: What happened to Tony? Was he let free because... Was he let free because he put him in?

EJ: Sure.

AB: So he went back with the rest of the tour, and you're the only one who had to stay behind?

EJ: Well he didn't go back with the tour, he was deported, cause the rest of the tour was going on. You know, Kenny Clarke had to take his place, to fill in. And he stayed about three days and he said, "Let me get out of here!" (Laughs)

Keiko: (Inaudible)

AB: There is a similar story between Bud Powell and Monk, with the whole possession thing.

EJ: Oh really?

AB: They found something and unfortunately they ended up implicating Monk so he is the one who ended up serving time. It seems like an unfortunately reoccurring tragedy that happens. But this might lead us to this whole discussion when earlier we were talking about Alabama the music reflects what life is like in this culture. With Keiko talking about how the whole racism and the suppression of people of color, particularly black people, in this country were something she was not aware of even though she knew jazz. What are your thoughts about racism?

Keiko: (Inaudible)

AB: Even though you had the black G.I.'s after the war? A lot of black G.I.'s there. For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Keiko: No it's not. No sir.

AB: Maybe not in Nagasaki but in Tokyo, I know.

EJ: She was in Fukuoka they had an air base down there and the Korean war was on and they were sending people back and forth from Korea.

AB: Well most of the black units that were sent, and that's the way, I don't know if we want to talk about this, that the United States government has always used black troops to police other people of color. Right after the Civil War they were sent out to police the Indians. Then the Spanish-American War they were sent to go kill the Philippines and the Cubans. Then after WWII, send the black troops to Japan. That's how my father got there.

Keiko: (inaudible)

EJ: Yes, part of the occupation force.

AB: And then they were shipped out, as my father was shipped out, to Korea to go fight the war. So as soon as the war hit they sent the black troops out. So probably by the time you see it, yeah no more black troops, cause they were all sent to war to fight! So anyway did you want to talk about the race issue in America or your thoughts or your reflections on having grown up in this country?

EJ: I'll tell you what my father did when they tried to draft him in World War I. So he got this notice in Vicksburg so he walked from Vicksburg to Jackson. That's 60 miles, went to the Draft Board, handed them the letter back and said, "I ain't going" and he walked back to Vicksburg (Laughs). He didn't give a damn. He said, "I ain't going nowhere, I ain't going." That sort of sums it up for me.

AB: Okay back to the chronology. We are back at the end of '67. You've put your group together; you've got your trio. I believe we talked about "Putting It Together" .So this is the first date as a leader on Blue Note.

EJ: Yes.

AB: And you, in a recent interview, singled this out as one of your favorites.

EJ: It is, absolutely.

AB: Would you like to talk about why?

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EJ: Why? Because you only have to listen to it. Jimmy Garrison's compositions and Joe Farrell who's like a wizard with his reed. He could play any kind of reed instrument, double reed, whatever. They were just great musicians and it was fun to play together. We had a lot of fun and we enjoyed each other. That's the way it was. That's where I played the "Keiko's Birthday March" the cadence in front is a long 2-4 that we used to play in the marching band.

AB: So what date was that?

Keiko: April 8th, 1968

AB: What were you looking for when you select—well I'll ask you that a little bit later. So for your first recording as a leader, your own band, a band that you put together, was this album helpful in securing work for that band

EJ: Oh yeah. We went on a lot of tours in Europe, all over the place.

AB: With this group? Three months? What were the dates that he was at the Vanguard with this group?

Keiko: From March to May of '68? So as soon as this recording was finished?

EJ: Cause Max was, we could go into the Village Vanguard anytime we wanted to/.

Keiko: (inaudible)

AB: Max Gordon, you were talking about Max Gordon.

EJ: Yeah that was a successful trio there. Yeah I still don't know what its all about. I could never figure out billboard. (Laughs)

AB: Billy Taylor wrote the liner notes for this album. How did that come about?

EJ: I suppose they just asked him. Well, Billy is a very articulate guy and he would just do it. It added more prestige to the album in genera;. He had all kinds of positions in New York. He was on the board of this and that. He did a good job I thought.

AB: Did you have a personal rapport?

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EJ: Oh yes, I knew him personally. I would see Billy more; they had in New York what they call a jazz mobile. You would get on the back of a truck and this is all true. You go up in Harlem and we'd stop in 113th street and we'd stop and we'd have a jazz concert right there. On the truck! I thought it was a wonderful program cause they'd do that all over the city.

AB: So after this album and with the success, I'm sure you were very inspired to do another recording and follow up on that one. And I'm not sure what the next title was but

Keiko: (inaudible)

EJ: Well "Heavy Sounds" was a Paramount.

AB: And also I have "Dear John C." 1965. So you are still with "Trane and what was the inspiration to do this C.D. and that title – the title cut "Dear John C."

EJ: Well that was, I don't know because I thought that Charlie... the alto player's, his record date.

AB: Yeah the alto player, Charlie Mariano he was on it.

EJ: Yeah Charlie Mariano, it was more his date than anybody else.

AB: Oh really? Okay (Laughs)

EJ: He's got one of those golden sounds that's very hard to get. Alto is not an easy instrument to play.

AB: So that explains that this was not his first date as a leader, because you were playing with the Coltrane Quartet. That explains, you just said you thought it was Charlie's date but that's why we're putting it together. That's your musical vision, that's your choice as a musician, that's the material you want to play, that's why that's significant. So this is the music that ultimately becomes Elvin Jones: Jazz Machine, but it's Elvin Jones now as a leader, fronting his own group, playing the music he wants to play, and selecting the musicians he wants to play with him. So you had Joe Farrell, you had...

EJ: Jimmy Garrison.

AB: Yes, Jimmy Garrison. When did it become necessary? Why did you have to place those individuals? Who was the first to leave and why?

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EJ: We had broke up somehow. Jimmy was having problems with his wife. I told him I said, “This is not going to work Jimmy.” Because he said he had this girlfriend he said that his wife consented for him to be with her, at least twice a week. (Laughs) And so when the girl was over at Jimmy’s apartment, he calls her Roberta, and hits her in the mouth with...you know the...just all that... had Jimmy put into jail. We had to get him out of jail. We had to do all that shit! (Laughs)

AB: Danny Glover even talked about that recently so things haven’t changed too much! (Laughs)

Keiko: (inaudible) I was soaking wet, and everything. I cry. We could not get a taxi.

EJ: It was raining cats and dogs and we couldn’t get a taxi! But there’s good people everywhere, you run into them from time to time.

Keiko: (inaudible)

AB: So I’m holding the “Heavy Sounds” C.D. The date for this recording, as you said earlier, June 19, June 20 1967, so this one was with Richard Davis. Was this put together just for this?

EJ: Yeah just for that one. It was originally supposed to be for Larry Coryell, Richard Davis, and a trio. You know, and Larry didn’t show up. For whatever reason he had. Richard and I were just in the studio and he started fooling around playing with his bow and everything. I said, “What are you playing?” and he said, “Oh ‘Summertime’” So he played it through and Bob Theil was in the recording booth, and he said, “Do that again we are going to record it.” So that’s how that piece got recorded.

AB: Okay so let’s go back to, again, Jimmy Garrison is having some personal problems, which preclude him from continuing on in the Elvin Jones Trio. Who did you get to replace him?

EJ: Gene Clark, and after that Joe was, he was a little bit... He was doing a lot of record dates and all that so I got Steve Grossman and David Liebman, and Gene Perla. I still didn’t have a pianist (Laughs).

AB: I’m holding in my hand a copy of “Poly Curtains” and this date is September 26th, a little after your birthday of that year in 1969 and this one has a composition entitled “Mr. Jones” this one has Joe Farrell and also George Coleman and Wilbur Little on bass and Conditá on congas. This happened to be a particular favorite of mine. I just wanted to ask Keiko about “Mr. Jones” since that happen to be one of my favorites.

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Keiko: Yeah. Before that I wrote a tune “Shinjitsu” Truth. Because when I come to start a living over there with that man, a shock. Culture shock. So I wanted to give him, because it was during a time when I trust everyone. For example everyone say, “I call you Keiko” because I don’t know how to do the booking business, I have no friends. Then people say “Oh okay I have a job I call you” and I am excited. So I wait 24 hours. Elvin say, “Go out. Are you crazy?” I say, “No I cannot go out because they are going to call” I wait week after to week, month after month. I grow up because of that. You have to remember I love the music, I was just singing. Elvin say, “I that’s a beautiful melody, who wrote it?” and I was so shy. I just did it because I use Haiku, a poetic. I do that tremendously. Elvin says, “Let’s do it!” So I do it because we don’t have piano at that time and he did the music then Jimmy started playing bass in our apartment. So then it was no matter what during our relationship I will never lie to Elvin. That’s was because we did Elvin’s record and I was so shy I said, “I am writing music!” Everyone called him Elvin. I call him Mr. Jones to pay respect to Mr. Jones.

EJ: That was quite an album cover, you know Georgia. That’s probably current. The “Mr. Jones” album, it’s like silhouette of a Dandy with a tuxedo on.

Keiko: During that time we have great relationship with Francis Wolff.

AB: CEO of Blue Note Records, yes.

Keiko: That was the happiest time in my life.

AB: You mentioned you are married, what is the date of your wedding anniversary?

Keiko: February 16th.

AB: Okay now we are almost getting into 1970! (Laughs) And of course your recording career is maintaining this momentum; you’re putting out albums consistently. 1970 something happens in your career, you appear in a feature film. How did that come about as one of your starring roles as “Zachariah”?

EJ: Yeah right! (Laughs) Well it was... did you ever know Albert Goldman? He’s a writer and he used write articles for the Times and for the New Yorker. He was a good friend. He wrote an article for Life Magazine and it had a small picture of me. And some producer from Hollywood was on his way back from Europe and he picked up this magazine and he said, “That’s the face we want!” Anyways, he got in touch with Albert Goldman, he called me and he said, “In about two minutes a guy from Hollywood is going to call you about a movie.” I said, “Okay.” And sure enough like a clock I got the phone call and we start talking “Hey do you want to make this movie?” and he starts to explain the whole story about Zachariah and what he’s doing and it’s a cowboy movie. For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



You know what could be better than that? Six guns blazing! (Laughs) That was just a lot of fun, and we made a deal. I had to take horseback riding lessons at the Claremont Riding Academy down the street here. Every morning at 7-o'clock I had to go and get on that horse. I started getting saddle sores. I had these jeans on and they'd have these two bloody blood spots right on the ass! (Laughs) She'd say "Its okay, that's alright." She'd pull my pants down and put some Mentholatum on there. We had a time doing that. It was a lot of things that happened. The location was in Mexico, so we had to go to Mexicali, Mexico. You know, you go to Yuma, Arizona then cross the border. So that's where we started and I had gotten all my costumes made and everything. And I had a double that I didn't know about. (Laughs) I was sitting down in the shade and that guy was walking around cause he had to ride some horse up the steps and Keiko thought it was me. She calling, she starts calling the guy and he didn't answer and she says, "What's a matter with you!" She thought it was me! You know he couldn't speak English! It was funny.

Keiko: (inaudible)

EJ: When we went to Acapulco and blew it! (Laughs)

AB: How long was the shoot for "Zachariah"?

EJ: Oh it was about three week's altogether.

AB: Uh huh.

EJ: Cause I was in the latter part of it and they had done most of the shooting before they hired me. We just had to fill in the spots.

Keiko: (inaudible)

AB: So that's 1970, and now that Keiko has mentioned Ginger Baker, I was living in Europe and I remember reading Melody Maker and seeing "Drum Battle: Ginger Baker v. Elvin Jones" Talk about that! That was quite something.

EJ: That happened from one of Albert's articles in Life or maybe in Melody Maker. He wrote this article and he had asked me over to his apartment and he was making all these recordings and he was saying, "What do you think of this guy, what do you think of that guy?" And so I just said, "Well he's a good drummer" and that was Mitch Mitchell. And then he played Ginger Baker playing a solo and I said, "Well I don't know who that is but you should make him an astronaut and loose his ass!" (Laughs)

AB: I remember reading that article! (Laughs)

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EJ: Then we had this thing going in the Melody Maker. So he set up a concert in the Lyceum Theatre in London and that's where that drum battle or whatever it was. It wasn't a battle for me! I just sat there and it was pretty noisy.

AB: Was it unaccompanied drumming? Did you have any accompanied musicians?

EJ: Well it was Ginger's band.

AB: Oh it was his band?

EJ: Air Force.

AB: Oh Ginger Baker's Air Force. I saw that band.

EJ: It was a good band but it was loud.

AB: So he set up both of you with the band?

EJ: Ginger was in front of me with his drum set and I was sort of in back of him to his right. And the band was right of the middle of it. In the first place, I didn't know what they were playing (Laughs) I had no idea.

AB: Was there a rehearsal?

EJ: No this was the concert!

AB: Oh you went straight to the concert?

EJ: It was something!

AB: So he would solo and then?

EJ: We'd trade and go back and forth like that. Then we went to another place, and where was that? Yeah he went on a tour after that and we went along with him. It was a lot of fun and it sort of resolved the argument in the Melody Maker. They built that up pretty good. There wasn't an empty seat in that place, it was packed.

AB: I remember waiting to see what the results were. I could probably find the article if I went digging it up. But I remember the accounts. The reporter said. "Well it looked like it was an even battle pretty much but when Elvin would play the audience didn't really understand what he was doing, and when Ginger would play, they knew him so they'd all
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clap.” But I guess the reviewer favored what you were doing because maybe he was a little more intelligent than some of the audience members. He said that what you were doing was way beyond the comprehension of the audience and therefore if one had to judge it on the applause then Ginger would have won cause they favored him. But this reporter understood that what you were doing was well beyond what they could even begin to comprehend. So I don’t know if you had a feeling from the audience about your participation in that?

EJ: Well, I tell you it was hard to hear anything. I tell you, it’s loud. I don’t see how they could do it. I said, “Oh God, I couldn’t do that everyday.” I’d have to wear earplugs or something.

AB: You mentioned Mitch Mitchell and I want to bring something up that I haven’t seen documented very well. That is the fact that Mitch Mitchell, his big claim to fame in England was he could play, he was the first drummer they said, the first British drummer that could sound like Elvin Jones. From my experience, when I first started playing music, I would listen primarily to Jimmy Hendrix. I would listen to Mitch Mitchell and then I would read all the articles I could, “Well how does he play the way he plays? And why does he play this way?” And all he kept saying was, “I listen to Elvin Jones.” So that’s how I first go into jazz because I said, “Okay I better go listen to Elvin Jones.” I’m sure that your, because of Mitch Mitchell’s popularity with Jimmy Hendrix, that thousands, if not millions of people have been inspired by your drumming second-hand as portrayed by Mitch Mitchell. But in my estimation as an ethnomusicologist, as a scholar of music, I can see that Elvin Jones’ music, through the expression of Jimmy Hendrix has reached millions and millions of people around the globe and most people don’t understand that Mitch Mitchell was trying to sound like you! Most people don’t understand that was his vision: “If I can sound like Elvin Jones” and that’s what he attempted to do. Did you meet Mitch Mitchell back when he was with Hendrix?

EJ: Well, he came here once and he brought that—he had a wooden—he carved my name in wood: “Elvin”.

AB: Do you remember what year was this?

Keiko: That was 1973.

AB: Okay so that was after Hendrix had already died. So he never got to meet you while he was playing all this music?

Keiko: (Inaudible)

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EJ: He didn't want to come in; he just wanted to give that gift, that carving of my name. Its around here somewhere.

AB: So he seemed like a very respectable person. All he wanted to do was to give that to you. So did he stay very long?

Keiko: Very shy.

AB: Well that's cause he knew how great you were. (Laughs) You were his hero! So when

EJ: Yeah well

AB: Well, we talked about Mitch Mitchell, obviously because of his performing with Hendrix and because of Hendrix's, in the rock world, phenomenal innovator, and great musician. But then behind Mitch Mitchell, there was also another drummer, John Bonham for Led Zeppelin. He definitely took your broke into (scats) and created his style after that. So between those two, Elvin Jones has permeated the entire rock drumming, rock music, from even before Mitch Mitchell, but definitely by the time Mitch Mitchell starts recording in 1967 when John Bonham is playing Led Zeppelin everyone is playing Elvin Jones' rhythm, Elvin Jones' concept of time. Most people don't understand that you've been filtered into these people, into the entire rock world! Most people who say, "I want to sound like Mitch Mitchell, I want to sound like John Bonham!" are really saying, "I want to sound like Elvin Jones" as far as I'm concerned. Has anyone talked to you about this experience, about how widespread your influence was in popular music, in rock music, not just jazz?

EJ: Well, you're the first that I've talked to in that way. It's just that people don't talk about things like that. For some reason they don't. If you know... I'm not acquainted with many drummers. They know me but I've never met 'em so I can't say I know the person. But if that...if it is rather... its flattering in a way and in a way its true, at least I hope so. If anybody can learn anything from what I do they're welcome to it. (Laughs)

AB: When was the first time, do remember the first time that you played in London so that these British musicians could have actually seen you perform?

EJ: Well the first I played in London I played at this place that Ronnie Scott used to have. What's the name of that street? The place they had before that? Anyway I'd go there, if we had a day off we'd go down there cause they stayed open all night. I met a lot of guys there. Tubby Hayes and all those guys.

Keiko: (Inaudible)

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AB: '68, okay. But before that he had not played London? Okay so they go their style from you by listening to records. Because Mitch Mitchell in 1967 is already playing your style, he hadn't seen you he just picked it up through his ears. One thing I wanted to check back with you on is 1967, the death of John Coltrane. Where were you, and how did you find out about it?

EJ: Well I was in my room in the Chelsea Hotel. Bob Theil called and he was crying and he said, "John Coltrane just died." And he was broken up and he just had to... you know what are you going to do? There's no way to comfort anyone like that and it didn't start to affect me until several hours later. I started thinking about all the things we had done and what a great person he was, and what a great musician, and how he had inspired so many people. That's what, its something that could create grief. When you put all those things together and you know they're not going to happen anymore it creates grief.

Keiko: I was in Japan. I cannot catch him, Elvin, several days later. Then about several years later people told me about Elvin because I wanted to know what happened to Elvin. They said he was like a ghost. I would call him morning to night, 24 hours a day because I heard the news that Coltrane passed away. Somehow I knew, but I was not sure, Coltrane passed away. But just before he passed away, he come down to see Elvin to (inaudible) he was kind of sick.

AB: So you knew he was sick before?

EJ: Yeah, he was sick then.

AB: You could tell by the way he looked?

EJ: Yeah.

Keiko: So then we were talking about the band. Elvin say, "I'm ready." Coltrane gives me the sixth telephone number. He says, "Whatever you need, just call me collect." That was not easy then. So then back to 1967, July 17, Coltrane die. (inaudible)

EJ: Yeah, he always, he always... whenever we would meet at various times he would ask me, "Do you need anything?" Cause he had a lot of money and thought that maybe he could share it, and he wanted to give it to me. I couldn't accept it like that.

AB: Even though it seems as if you had some pretty hard times...

EJ: Oh yeah.

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AB: ...during that period at the Chelsea Hotel you had some hard times.

EJ: Yeah we were just making union scale and we survived on that. I made the guy... we jacked him up. I said, "You gotta pay! We're not playing here for nothing!" So we took him down to the union one-day and they got down on him! (Laughs) He said, "I'll pay ya'!" (Laughs)

Keiko: (inaudible)

AB: So of course Eric went in '64 but then Jimmy.

EJ: Jimmy came here. He called up Keiko and asked, this is just before he died, he said, "I need \$150." So she wrote a check and we said we'd leave it with the doorman. So he says, "Okay." I know the check was gone and I didn't see Jimmy again. Somebody picked it up. That's strange because his wife, Roberta, her father was one of the wealthiest doctors in San Francisco, I mean rich! She had stocks, and bonds, and all kinds of stuff. (Laughs) And she had him put in jail for child support! That's mean, that's cruel. (Laughs) She came to the funeral with some red slacks. It was sort of disgraceful in some sort of way, everyone else was trying to pay their respects. You know I'll tell you a story that happened to us with Joe Farrell and Jimmy went on one of our European trips. And this was in Vienna. So the guy says, "You know we want you, and your trio to come", it was Johann Strauss' birthday or death, or something "So we want you to go to the statue and play the national anthem." (Laughs) So I go to Jimmy and I say, "You know the national anthem don't you?" (Laughs) He said, "No!" and neither did Joe. So we started playing it and Joe said (Elvin scats a melody vaguely resembling of the national anthem) (Laughs). That was funny, that day.

AB: So that was a very special group for you then.

EJ: Oh yeah, never a dull moment.

AB: Let me just take a break here.

EJ: (Elvin responds to a question. The question is not heard) Miles came up to me in the Vanguard. He wanted to get David to play in his band. So he asked me, he said, "How much should I pay him?" I said, "You pay him a thousand dollars a week you cheap ass mother!" I was just trying to sulk him.

AB: So can one say that you remained a good relationship with Miles?

EJ: Oh yeah! (Laughs) We're best friends!

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AB: Okay

EJ: I said, “Don’t say nothing to me and I won’t say nothing to you!” (Laughs)

AB: Maybe talk about recording. You’ve done so much recording. What, for you, makes the recording session a success?

EJ: It’s something that happens to everybody in the studio. At one point it happens that everybody, they become committed. Once that commitment is made, then the music sounds completely different all the way. That’s what occurs and you have to be able to bring that out. I think it takes time and that’s all. Sometimes an hour, sometimes ten-minutes, but when that happens you don’t have any problems.

AB: It seems like it’s easier to do that on the bandstand than it is in the recording studio. Is that?

EJ: Well on the bandstand you’ve got an audience to play for. In the studio you’re simply making a record and it’s impersonal. That’s the difference. There is nobody there but yourself actually. That’s what makes the difference. Once you make that commitment, then the music is together. Then the rapport is possible. Everything else...you’re ready to play the music.

AB: So what do you look for, what are the criteria; what are the qualities in a musician you look for, to bring them into the Elvin Jones Ensemble? What are the things you’re looking for in a musician?

EJ: Well, first they have to be, they have to be, a certain amount of maturity has to be there within whoever the guy is. They understand what the command of the instrument is all about. A lot of people want jobs but they’re not prepared. You know, they haven’t studied enough, they haven’t...they don’t know the scales. And if you don’t know the scales then you’re not ready to play with anybody. That’s important that they know, that they know about to do and they’ve prepared themselves for that. Same if you’ve made an audition for the Philharmonic. What’s the difference?

AB: There is the issue of technical facility but what about a particular artistic vision? Particularly in jazz, you have to be able to improvise so you have to make a statement as well as being able to play somebody else’s music. So, how do you play...how do you judge somebody’s solo or improvisational ability?

EJ: Well if you hear ‘em play that should tell you. That gives you all the information you need if they can come in and be a part of that orchestra. Not even for any reward or anything like that. “Oh you’re going to have the job for four or six months” or “Oh we’re
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going into the studio and record.” It’s not that. You have to know how to play. You have to know, to be... As I said, that’s part of being mature and being grown. You have to be adult with respects, so that you’re not what the people used to call a “shuck-in”. (Laughs) So you’re not shucking. When a cat is straight, he doesn’t have any problems. Usually people are very sincere about that.

AB: I bring this up, and I’m glad that you qualify it, because there are many, many brilliant musicians but, as far as their sense of responsibility, or, like you say, the maturity, sure they’re technical wizards, they’re musical geniuses, but personally, they may be not able to make that type of commitment you talk about...

EJ: Exactly.

AB: ...that’s necessary to bring the group together. That must be something that you’re observing before they get in the group. I’m sure you’re observing, checking, and monitoring that.

EJ: I try to be sure that person is qualified before. I say, “This is not a jam session. We’re serious.” You have to be prepared for that. Normally I don’t have any problems because anytime someone comes to me they are more than ready. I’ve been lucky that way.

AB: More often than not, the musicians will come to you and you’re able to select, rather than getting referrals from other musicians. What happens when one of your musicians can’t make the gig and they send in a sub? Do you have a process where you take the person at his word, or do you then meet that musician before you bring them in?

EJ: Well I think they should make sure that I know who the sub is before they do that. Because if somebody comes and say, “Okay I’m coming because Ed George sent me over.” Well I say, “You know this ain’t George’s band. You gotta, you know, we’ll play without you.” If I had to play a duet—it’s as simple as that. You can’t sacrifice yourself for no reason, and that’s a stupid reason. Just because somebody says, you know they’re dodging their responsibility and putting it on someone else.

AB: So throughout your career you worked with some of the most accomplished musicians in this music. Obviously, you’re working with them as a sideman; you’re observing them as a bandleaders. Throughout your career as a bandleader, how were they influential, which ones were influential, and what did they give you, or what did you observe as far as being a bandleader? What are the traits that make a great bandleader, what are the things that you got through other people, or maybe observed from other people?

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EJ: It's a great many things, I think it's more of ... you have to have a natural understanding of the basic psychology of people. You know, you don't scare somebody to death. They might be ready to play but they're shy. So, it's just that you have to be able to recognize what it is that that person is saying or representing, and see how truthful he is. You can usually tell if a person is truthful, and that's enough.

AB: Even though from 1967 on you became a bandleader, yet, you still continued to work on other people's projects as a collaborator. This is seemingly a very rare and very remarkable gift to be able to be a bandleader and then to adapt and be in a roll as a sideman or accompanist.

EJ: Yeah, absolutely.

AB: Does this still suit you to this day?

EJ: You know, I'll tell you it's like they say in the Army, "A good leader wouldn't tell his men to do something that he couldn't do himself." So it's as simple as that.

AB: Do you think you've retained any qualities or any training from the Army? Has any of that served you in this life as a musician?

EJ: Well it gave me a certain understanding of self-discipline. We all have to have that if we intend to grow up and mature as a man or as a person. You know, here you got a horn you say, "Do you know how to play it? I see you got a horn but do you know how to play it?" (Laughs) Somebody has to be...like some people can give it out but they can't take it. It's sort of like that

AB: One thing that's unique about you and the Elvin Jones Jazz Machine, unlike, say, Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers, he brings in young musicians and they play with him and then they go out. You have musicians that play with you, like Joe LaBarbera, who played with you, they come back, then they're going to get some more Elvin then they go back out, and then they come back, and then they go out and then they come back. That's very rare, that's why I want to ask you these questions. As a bandleader you have a remarkable ability to bring these musicians back. You keep expanding what you're doing, but you bring these musicians back even after they've gone out.

EJ: It's the same thing that happens with Duke Ellington's bands. I've seen Ben Webster walk out and six months later he comes back in and stands up and plays his solo. (Laughs) Duke thought that was perfectly alright, it's better than not coming. That's what it's all about; you have to be generous in that sense. It's trust. I trust the guys that work with me and they know it.

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AB: So the Elvin Jones Jazz Machine has been stem rolling for several decades. Ken Kimery and I first saw that group in 1980 in Mannheim, Germany. At that time you had Andrew White, Ari Brown, Ryo? Was he playing guitar?

EJ: Ryo Kawasaki? No. It was Marvin Horn, I think he was playing guitar.

Keiko: Andy McCloud

AB: Andy McCloud

EJ: Yeah Andy.

AB: Tell us a little bit about the beginning of the Elvin Jones Jazz Machine, and if you had a particular vision for that group.

EJ: I didn't have any particular vision for that group because we started, the Jazz Machine with Jimmy Garrison and Joe Farrell (Laughs).

AB: (Laughs) Okay, it just didn't have that name then?

EJ: Right!

AB: But the idea and the concept was in place.

EJ: Yeah you just add or subtract from that. But it's sort of if it's meant to be, it will be. That means, that's how much effort you're going to put into it. If you're wholehearted, if you're ready to die for it, that's what you're meant to do. You certainly have to have that kind of courage.

AB: Who have been some of the members of the Jazz Machine that you particularly have a fond memory of and anything, if you'd like to share that with us?

EJ: Well, all of them. (Laughs)

AB: (Laughs) Okay!

EJ: I don't know anybody that I can pick one over the other. There's been a lot of people, we've enjoyed each other's company for many years on different occasions. We experienced things together. I try and tell guys, "When we are on the road you have to look out for your colleague. You keep your eye on him; he'll keep his eye on you." That means you learn how to love each other, and take care of each other, and be responsible in certain ways. That's always part of the lesson. (Laughs)

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AB: Maybe I asked the wrong question in asking which people were memorable, I could ask about certain recordings. I have here an album that I wasn't aware of, but I saw as an import, "Very Rare". Recorded in '78. This one was reissued as a C.D., the original one was Elvin Jones, Art Pepper, Roland Hannah, Richard Davis. The C.D. re-issue also includes two tracks with Frank Foster, Pat LaBarbera, Roland Prince and Andy McCloud. I bring this one up because, being that we are still in the '70's, this also has a recording of "A Love Supreme" from the group with Frank Foster, Pat LaBarbera.

EJ: Well when they re-issue those things I don't have any control over that. I wouldn't put that together in that way. It's either all, or don't do it. It's not fair to put an album and say, "You've got one track of one guy, and two tracks of another one." It just doesn't make any sense.

AB: This one also has another original composition from Keiko, "Zangee"? What does that mean Keiko?

Keiko: That's almost praying to God for forgiveness.

AB: How did you write this piece? Was it based on a Japanese folk song?

Keiko: No that's original.

AB: What's your musical training?

Keiko: I grew up with violin. My father loved the classical music and the folk song except we have no local teacher; we don't know anything about it.

AB: Are you talking about Western or Japanese folk song, or Western classical music?

Keiko: We only know Japanese; we don't know anything about the Western world. Nothing. So that's it. Then jazz come around early '50's so you know. I listen to it, I grew up with it. I mentioned before I like haiku and story and poet and I like to sing also. Every time I sing it's never recorded. I'm just lucky. We have a project, some very famous projects that say they want to record only my tunes because every time seems like a hit. You know, Django Brothers, and all this, and other musicians asking me to make arrangements. But it's only idea that comes from Elvin's drums; it doesn't come from saxophone or piano. Only the drum, so instead of piano I got a snare drum.

AB: Again, when we went to see you in Mannheim, Germany in 1980 I remember very distinctly, first Keiko comes out, sets up the drums, tunes the drums. Keiko tell us how you got to be not only the drum-tech, but the drum tuner?

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Keiko: Every moment with Elvin I want to help him. Especially tune up, you go there, take a long time because so many people want to talk to him. And when he's resting in his dressing room, meantime I'll watch him, not worrying about how he's going to handle the kit, (I'm worried about) the sound. So then nine years later, it took me nine years; nine years later I done it. He sounds just like a piano (scats a piano's major scale). He come up. I say, "I did it." He say, "I hire you." So ever since then the tone doesn't go away. Because Elvin start to tune up, so many people start to come up to him so he can never tune down.

EJ: Well she knows how to say get out better than anyone! (Laughs)

Keiko: I am concentrated, very serious. When drummer comes up and asks me I say, "You have to find your own ear of sound."

AB: Before we began this interview yesterday, we were talking, actually before we started documenting this conversation. Keiko was sharing with us that there is no problem booking performances for Elvin Jones because your music is loved all around the planet. What is it that you still would like to accomplish with the Jazz Machine or with your whole career? Is there something you have not done that you still want to do?

EJ: Well I don't think so. If I can continue what I'm doing that'll satisfy me because I'm not that ambitious. I don't think, "Hey it's time for me to play at Carnegie Hall or something." That's just silly. Playing in Central Park is just as important, and its probably more rewarding because then the birds can hear you. (Laughs).

Keiko: (inaudible) I have a very strong aggression, but we talk about it before they join. People call me tough; I'm not tough I just have a lot of passion for the instrument. I trust. It's very difficult. (Inaudible) But you can do it; you gotta communicate with the club owner instead of dealing with the booking agency. It's going to be more expensive for the jazz music to come out and play. Cause they know everybody. Just like Elvin (inaudible). Elvin is a bandleader he has to train those people, that is the only way to take an exercised on the stage. We do a great deal; you do have to pay a tuition or anything. You learn a great deal about humanity, a great deal. Most of the guys are big bandleaders so they can teach after they become bandleaders.

AB: It sounds like you're passing on what you received.

EJ: That's the way it should be.

AB: Keep it going. I have a question that was asked by a friend of mine, his name is Leonard Brown, he teaches up at Northeastern University and this will be the 26th year For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



that he's held the annual John Coltrane Memorial Concert. And he said, "Anthony could you ask Elvin, 'What does music mean to him?'"

(Break)

So this is slating take five of the Elvin Jones interview. So Elvin, I asked on the previous tape, what does music mean to you?

EJ: It means that you are, well since you asked me directly, it means that I am doing the work that I was born to do. That's why I'm here. There's no other reason.

AB: Well, when we first came to your apartment Keiko mentioned that you had an operation on your leg that you recovering from. Could you talk about that and how you're doing with that?

EJ: Well I'm doing fine, I had one of the best surgeons in, I guess, in the country. His name is Ben Beneski and he was the Chief of Surgery at Presbyterian Hospital. The doctors said, I went to a specialist, they recommended after I had taken all kinds of tests, angiograms, a battery of tests. He decided that he could actually correct some of the, cause it's my veins, I've got varicose veins in my legs. It's a circulation problem. What he did was make an arterial bypass in my right leg. So that artery supplies, gives a blood supply, to my left leg as well as my right, and it's continued to get better. He did his job and I trusted him. Right after the operation he came by my room and said, "Walk to the end of the hallway. Okay now run back and forth for a while." (Laughs) And I had just had this thing and he said, "Well if it's going to work, it's going to work now or it never will."

AB: How long ago was it?

Keiko: November 22nd 2001.

AB: So about a year and a half. Why did you feel it was necessary to get the surgery? Did you have some complications?

EJ: I couldn't walk! I was stuck. I walked from here to the door and I have to stop and massage my legs to stimulate the circulation again.

AB: Was it something gradual or did it happen all at once?

EJ: You know, and it hurts. It was painful.

AB: Just more and more.

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EJ: Now it doesn't hurt anymore, I don't feel any pain, very little.

Keiko: (Inaudible)

EJ: Did you see I had to buy three canes? (Laughs) Yeah and he came to the Blue Note with the whole operating room staff (Laughs)

AB: He said, "See what we did!" (Laughs)

Keiko: That was a highlight of our lives. I don't know. I cannot put my words together. I had a large breakdown. I said, "This is the last one." Then we had to have the other legs operate by the same doctor. But he is very conservative, very honest doctor. In the meantime, you might remember this, gene therapy, the news; it's in all the newspapers. He become model for the jean therapy.

EJ: You mean a guinea pig.

AB: Oh! Big difference.

EJ: Yeah it works!

AB: I've heard it.

Keiko: We keep in touch with the doctor but I'm still scared when he plays the drums.

AB: Are you on a particular diet?

Keiko: Oh yes, I have to change his diet.

AB: Okay so you changed your diet.

Keiko: Yes because he lost almost a whole pound but we are staying on par.

AB: He looks great! (Laughs) He sounds great, looks great!

EJ: I'm down to skin and bones! (Laughs)

Keiko: He is a genius but he has to do what most people don't. Most people complain about job. We both don't complain.

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AB: I believe he's very lucky, I believe you're very lucky, I believe everyone on this planet is lucky that Elvin Jones and Keiko Jones are here so we can enjoy your music and what you bring to our lives. So I want to say thank you for myself and thank you for everyone I know, whose music, whose life, and whose spirit you have touched. And of course, Keiko, we honor you too because we know how important, how supportive and how much you contribute to Elvin's continuing to perform and create great music and to enrich all of our lives. Unless there is any other comment, I just want to say again, Elvin Ray Jones, Keiko Jones thank you so very much for agreeing to do this interview. We wish you continued success and health and please keep doing what you're doing.

(Question not heard, Keiko is describing sitting in NY apartment during September 11th attacks)

Keiko: I say, "Elvin something is wrong." I put on the television set and there was, "BANG!"

EJ: That's when the second plane hit.

Keiko: I was like, "What is this? Joke! What's going on?" Then I had to call CBS on the telephone because I could not believe what was going on.

AB: So you were trying to actually drive back downtown?

EJ: Yeah, we had a car service.

Keiko: It was going to New Jersey. We crossed and we never come back. We can never come back because we cannot go through.

EJ: They closed the bridge.

Keiko: They closed the bridge and I said, "I smell something funny." He say, "Yeah." Elvin was very quiet. I say, "Driver let's go home," he say, "Yeah but the doctor." I say, "Don't worry about doctor." We made a drum clinic for the doctor, for days later.

EJ: Yeah it was Barry's, over at Barry's.

AB: Four days later?

EJ: Well people started coming out. I said, "Well, what are they afraid of?" They gotta keep living.

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Keiko: The great hell has passed and they have something to listen to: Elvin playing the drums. I can't even talk at that. It was terrible. I said, "Elvin what is this? Joke or movie?" Friend of mine was taking video. He cannot believe that these are people falling. He look up and smoke. I hear that he made lots of money because he sold tape.

AB: What did you think when you saw that Elvin? What went through your mind?

EJ: I first thought, cause I recall when...in the 40's when that B-25 bomber hit the Empire State Building on the 70th floor and killed a lot of people, but it didn't do the damage that these did. And I thought, I said, "Well you know, the sky is clear. It couldn't be, they couldn't have done it by mistake. Somebody trying to land a LaGuardia airport and they got of course or something." Then I said, "Well, no, that's deliberate. Somebody just did that." Then you find out that all these planes got hijacked so that solved that riddle. That's terrible and before that, before they had that bomb, this truck bomb, we were there a day before. I saw all of these policemen and I say "What is this?" They didn't say anything; there's like 100 cops out there. The next day, "Bang!" They should have...if they had stayed there it wouldn't have happened (Laughs). You really can't prevent things sometimes. Most times you can't. If anyone is determined, they're going to do it anyway. They do or die, that's their philosophy. You know, to me, I always think about what is their philosophy about religion? And everybody claims to be this, and it's got the tenderness of loving each other, and this is practically all religions. So what do they do in Israel? They leave the mosque and they go blow up a house? I don't see any religion there? That isn't God's work, that's the devil. That's not God.

AB: Do have any views or any concept of what's going on in this world? Keiko is saying, "There is another one coming."

Keiko: Oh it's coming. I just hope it's not the nuclear bomb.

EJ: Are we finished? Cause...

AB: Oh I was just going to ask you about the Blue Note date. When I was here last month, you gave a drum master class at the Manhattan School of Music.

EJ: Right.

AB: I wasn't able to attend cause I had to go to this other one over at Columbia. But how did that go? I heard a lot of great things.

EJ: It went great. Like a lot of the student body, they brought instruments in. Trumpet players, and saxophone players, and two trombonists, and there was a bass player from Puerto Rico. They wanted to jam; they wanted to have a session. Part of my lecture was For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



that I enjoy playing with anybody. (Laughs) So we had a great time on stage, they just came up and had some fun. They loved it! Especially when you get a kid that's reluctant sort of, he's a little shy or something, it's hard to come out of their shell. But if you can do it, you can hear something that comes from inside of them. And that's what I heard, all these kids, everybody took a solo. It was great.

AB: What happens when... I don't know if there any students you've had for a long period of time that you can say yes that, or they can say yes that they've studied with Elvin Jones maybe more than one or two lessons. What do you do with a student when you're trying to nurture them and bring them along?

EJ: I try to get them to... they have to admit what they want. It isn't what I can give them, it's what they want. What can I do to help them understand the problem they're trying to solve. That's the role of a teacher. When they begin to understand that it just, all of the problems dissolve.

AB: Just like you mentioned Charlie Persip was studying with Sam Woodyard, is there anybody that can say, "Oh I studied with Elvin Jones." Is there anybody? Can we keep our eyes out for them?

EJ: There's a lot of guys. I used to teach down at Frank Ippolito, upstairs there. Frank was teaching there and Norman Grossman from Manus College. The three of us, we had these kids, these students coming in. So I ran into one of my students who lives in California, out in Los Angeles. Every time we play at the Jazz Bakery he comes in. He brought all of his kids, his son! Big boys! They're grown up now. He's got dozens of students and he always comes by to say hello. He always comes to see me.

Ken Kimery: Did you teach Adam Nussbaum anytime?

EJ: He took a lesson but I didn't teach him. Adam Nussbaum was curious but I didn't think he was serious.

AB: What's that students name out in Los Angeles?

EJ: Lennie something. What's his last name?

Keiko: Very serious, we have become so proud of him.

AB: What years were you teaching?

Keiko: 1972.

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AB: 1972? Just one year?

Keiko: Yes. About eight months. We were broke; we had to make money at some point. He was teaching up to five students

AB: And now to really bring this to a close, next week Elvin Jones at the Blue Note. And, as Keiko said, in December. So what are we in store for if I can make it back? Elvin Jones, I know you're doing the two second sets with Cecil Taylor?

EJ: Then you'll see me playing from a wheel chair. (Laughs)

Keiko: No! (Laughs) That's terrible!

EJ: After Cecil gets through with me! Enjoy it!

AB: Yeah, sure! On a throne, whether it's the drummer's throne or a rolling throne, you're on it. (Laughs) Okay well I think the table is being set!

EJ: Well while I think she's getting everything set here I can take you downstairs.

AB: Oh great!

END OF INTERVIEW

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