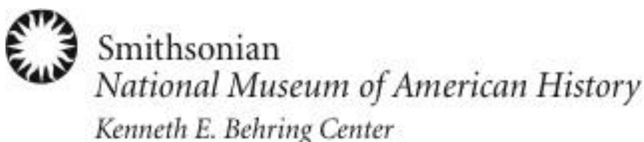

Funding for the Smithsonian Jazz Oral History Program NEA Jazz Master interview was provided by the National Endowment for the Arts.

ORRIN KEEPNEWS
NEA Jazz Master (2011)

Interviewee:	Orrin Keepnews (March 2, 1923 – March 1, 2015)
Interviewer:	Anthony Brown with recording engineer Ken Kimery
Date:	December 10, 2010
Repository:	Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution
Description:	Transcript, 20 pp.

Orrin Keepnews: I wonder if you didn't—or you could do it when you come back, make sure you didn't get to show off Lennie.

Anthony Brown: The dog?

Keepnews: The dog. I remember right now the one strain she couldn't remember to put in there. He's part Jack Russell.

Brown: Okay. That's it. Okay so we'll go from the room tone.

Keepnews: Okay so.

Brown: Oh we haven't got it yet.

Keepnews: We don't have it?

Brown: Just talk to it. Go ahead.

Keepnews: (Laughs)

Brown: Today is December 10th, 2010. This is the Smithsonian/ NEA Jazz Masters Award interview with Orrin Keepnews at his house in El Cerrito, California. And it is a foggy day outside, but a lot of warmth in this house. Good afternoon Orin Keepnews.

Keepnews: Good afternoon.

Brown: We're no strangers and so this is, for quite a joy, and a privilege. We've done several projects together, well let me just say we've done a few projects together, of which I'm very proud. Again, its an honor to be able to conduct this interview with you, to be able to share this time with you so that you could help the listening audience, and the historians, understand—further understand your contribution to this music since our last interview, which was in 1997. You did—you were a recipient—you are a recipient of the N.E.A. Jazz Masters Award for 2011. So, we want to make sure that the world understands what Orrin Keepnews has been doing over the last two decades.

Keepnews: Well sometimes it's hard for me to figure out what Orrin Keepnews has been doing. (Laughs) One of the things that I've done which, at the moment, is questionable in my mind as to whether it was a wise thing to be doing, but I have…All through my career I keep making noises about the importance to me of remaining as unaffiliated as possible. Actually, what had happened a few years before my previous interview, was that I had voluntarily, this is something you can't imagine in the current situation, I voluntarily left a job that I was I was in no danger of loosing. I had been, at that point in the late 90's; I had been working for several years at Fantasy, which meant I was reunited during that period that I was reunited during that period with the availability of my original Riverside material. The Riverside catalogue, having been owned by Fantasy, actually they didn't jump on it right away. When Riverside went out of business in the early 60's, actually my partner in that enterprise, Bill Grauer, died of a heart attack. At the tail end, end December of '63, and it wasn't until the early 70's that I was invited to come out here. That's when I shifted my base of operations from New York, where I had lived and worked almost all the time. I came out here at the invitation of Fantasy, and what happened was I think it turned out to be a good thing for the re-issue concept. The Riverside catalogue, with the exception of a very few numbers, had not been revisited. There had been the systematic use of it until we got into a position where Fantasy began a very large scale, and regular re-issue program. One of the things that everybody had in mind when I was asked to join them—Actually the decade, from very early 70's to 80, at which point—Well, I actually had, in that '79-'80 period, had a good built in excuse because '79, 1979, was the year of my double bypass. That was supposedly a call for a major shifting of things, but what happened was that plus a downturn in business in general and a couple of other things, like maybe my having been in the same place for too

many years, so that in the year of 1980, which now sounds like a hell of a long time ago, and actually it was. What happened there was I left Fantasy and, as they say, it's something that seems incredible and impossible in today's world, but I voluntarily left. I was all the things that you want to get to be, I was running the new jazz program there and heavily involved in re-issue work. You know, it's hard for me, even the language that I use then is hard to use again in absolutely today's world. I made statements like, "No matter how good a job it is, you can only work for other people for so long and you want to be out on your own," and it actually doesn't ring true today, but it was true back then. I put myself into a freelance period at that point but it was a time, and this is something very hard to predict, but the major labels who really are [the] largest and strongest source of earlier material, they have traditionally, and it's hard to believe it but it's true, its not saying it's been done systematically at all, it's dependent on who's in charge of such decisions, was there was something that created an up spike in re-issues. There were times when there was a hell of a lot of re-issue work being done, and that was to be true during that full decade that I was out there on my own, and I did have, you know, very strong working relations with Sony. You have to remember to give the most current corporate names, so not Columbia that we're talking about, its Sony that was doing a good deal of jazz re-issue at that time. Actually, the thing that impressed me that I was told at one point at the end of this was that I had managed to be in charge of the re-issuing of everything that Monk had done for Columbia, with Sony. The impressive thing about that was that's where Monk went when he left Riverside it was to go to Columbia. It was impossible for me to say with a perfectly straight face, he thought he was getting away from me but he wasn't. So actually, it was statistically accurate, everything that he did for the label that he went to after his advisors decided it was good to take him away from this, you know, independent—independent was then, as it has been at various times, it became a dirty word. So that's what you had to deal with there. I had a very, a very active re-issue life until we reached this point and I was working very directly with Steve Berkowitz at Sony. He and I devised quite a number of projects including all of the Monk stuff in various forms. The thing that happened was, we were both extremely excited, I remember, and we're now, we're talking about…I want to try and get my years straight. This would be about a decade ago. What it seemed to say to us was, "Hey, finally we're going to have the two major sources of jazz in the period before…" You know, fundamentally the mid-50's to the mid60's was period of tremendous jazz re-issue activity and of new jazz recordings. That was, roughly, from something like 1953 to 1963, was the period in which Riverside flourished. I'm aware of the fact that jazz was good in those days; jazz was sellable in those days. At the same time, an awful lot of jazz re-issuing was being done. That really was, in our lifetime, that was very much the golden age of being able to sell jazz, both current and from the past. The thing that I would say is strangest about the whole thing is, I can remember talking with Steve about, just sort of licking our chops, rubbing our hands, hardly able to wait to get into this thing. And there was a project that he came up with and sake me to do almost immediately, which was a five C.D. Fats Waller package. And the interesting thing about that was, that

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or
archivescenter@si.edu

was the first multi-C.D. package that I did for Sony. It was the opening of that period; it was also the closing of that period. That was, among other things, the last major project that I did for them. Apparently, one of the things that you don't have in your life when you are an independent producer, you don't necessarily get sensible explanations, or any explanations at all for what and when they hire you to do a specific job. The period that we were coming out of, there had been a great deal of jazz re-issue activity. I was working for, at various times, I worked for almost anybody I could think of. But, there was a serious re-issue program going on through BMG of Victor's stuff, the Columbia/Sony stuff, and also for a while there was a great deal of activity with the former Decca catalogue. It was interesting; I don't know how many different labels worth of Louie Armstrong re-issues I got to do at that time. It was obviously selling well enough to justify—One of the things that's always bothered me, frankly, about the major label approach…I was aware, and there was always, and it may not have been in exactly these terms, but there was always a feeling that no matter how well Louie Armstrong was selling for a label, it wasn't doing as well as Elvis Presley was. The problem was that jazz re-issue, I think got to be its worst enemy in that sense. Jazz re-issue was, both in terms of quality and quantity, an extremely big piece of the pie at the time I'm talking about. What really killed it, to a large extent, was when jazz re-issue slipped a bit from its high water mark. I felt it was still selling. When you put all the facts together, including the nominal amount of new expense involved in the next round of re-issues, and the fact that in that period, the end of the last century, and coming into this one…Actually, the whole industry went through a slip at the beginning of the 21st century. I wasn't involved in any of these discussions, but I was clear enough to me from what I was told and from the excuses from not going with what I had for certain re-issue projects, that the attitude was being judged on a really, on an overall basis. I said it in a kind of a joking way, "Louie Armstrong never sold as well as Elvis Presley," but the fact of the matter was clearly, and thank god I don't know who they were and never had a chance to get in any arguments or discussions with them, but there quite clearly were people in executive positions at more than one label reaching conclusions that were no more sensible than that. Jazz did well enough, and jazz re-issue did well enough to be compared without any reservations, and without any understanding of how it got to be, jazz re-issue was being compared with new recording. We did eventually, and in one case, the resurgence of Miles Davis… Apparently, Columbia, where all of that stuff basically was, or a great deal of it, they did achieve a few goals. They did get to the point where you could hand out sort of retroactive gold records and things. Other than that, and I maybe forgetting one or two other exceptions, but Miles is the only one you tend to thing about. There was an exaggeration involved there. The people who probably were never friends of jazz, even when it was selling good, were standing there saying, "See I told you." Because you realize in the entire period, starting with the first blossoming, and you look at it… It's funny because it does get into personalities. The first artist to come and crack through was Herbie Hancock. He suddenly was selling records like people, instead of like jazz. (Laughs) Time and again, the one executive who legitimately could consider himself, and

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or
archivescenter@si.edu

be considered a friend of jazz was Lundvall. Bruce Lundvall in his period as president of Columbia Records, or whatever proper designation would be. And then, subsequently, when he got into that musician label, the Electra period, he had…He was able to bully people into treating jazz like a legitimate part of the sales picture. For all the good intentions, and sometimes the success of a few other people, I find myself now having no hesitation in saying what Bruce accomplished was more than anybody else did. No question about that. As a matter of fact, what happened was…I guess I don't know how to put this. Bruce accomplished more than Bruce did! In a sense, his reputation got to be a little bit larger than what he actually did. He was being the chief executive of a major label during this time. I don't know the inner workings of there, but I do know from what they did with re-issues, what they did with the new artist areas, it was damn good but its always been my, possibly fueled by jealousy, that it could have been a lot more. A lot more could have been put behind jazz, and the selling of jazz, and the publicizing of jazz. What was done was okay, but if you were a real hundred percent champion of jazz…and…Bruce was as close as you'll ever come. I know nothing about what turmoil or internal arguments may have been going on in the mind, or in the brain of Bruce Lundvall, but I do know that he accomplished a hell of a lot but left it hard to ever satisfy people like me wishing he had been a little bit more aggressive. But I do think you can't talk about the period without properly crediting him. And then of course you look forward, you look ahead and you come to the approximately now. Again, it's hard to make unbiased and unprejudiced conclusions. We definitely are in a period where, for a number of reasons, some of them artistic, some of them commercial, some of them technical, the revolution that has been going on in the record business most recently is…I say its pretty anti-product. I don't see the…Well, what's happened, I guess, is that a lot of the sales mechanisms and the whole download concept, and the whole…Strangely enough, its like if there really were any people who, back before the LP, were sitting there stubbornly insisting that single records were still the way to go, they would turn out to be justified because that's what downloading is today. But, I don't think there was anything deliberate about that, it just happened. In jazz, at the same time, you did have…. it has been for some years, possible, for almost anybody, if you've got a big enough bathroom to record at pretty close to a professional level in your own home. So that line that used to exist. The goal used to be to be able to get yourself into a good studio. Whether you did it by saving up your own money, it was, of course, a good part of the flowering of the independent labels in the decade I was talking about, the mid 50's, mid 60's era. At the same time what you had growing, and taking over was the fact that the…. Literally, if you had a big enough bathroom you, could definitely record at home without sinking below a professional level. I mean, not everybody did as good a job, or a good enough job with that. But definitely, we've seen that…at what passes for a professional level, a lot of it is damn good. It's a little embarrassing to have to casually admit that. Sometime, the frequently justified egos of artists, the justification is there. If somebody goes and produces his own record and it comes out sounding pretty good, you can't deny that. The problem is there is a tendency to have a handful of good self produced record be

allowed to over-balance the fact that there are still a hell of a lot more professionally created records. Nevertheless, the field has opened up. There are people like, there are musicians functioning very much like producers. I think of many of them as being the Anthony Brown of today. You've never had a problem with being a, what I would call, a justified interloper in the actual physical work of recording and creating your albums. But you're also aware of the fact that it ain't the easiest thing to for a number of reasons, including, very much, the fiscal reasons.

Brown: Correct. Well, I want to ask you, since you bring up the role of the producer…I may have mentioned off-tape that we just completed Bobby Hutcherson's oral history interview as well. One of the things I asked him about in talking about his relationship with you I said, "What was it that differentiated Orrin's role as a producer from everyone else that you work with." And when he went on to describe the meticulous that you would set up and arrange everything that you would do all the scheduling, that you would sit down and talk with the musicians, and devise the project and then come back to it. Continually, it was like you were developing the project with the musicians. Rather than the Blue Note way, which is, "Oh you know, just get them in the studio and see what happens." This is one of the things that he emphasized. Your career has basically been one of a record producer and, perhaps, the premier producer for jazz. When I think of, and I've also benefitted from your expertise in your professional acumen as well. How do you see, and I know that we're both agonizing over the changes in the industry. What do you feel as a record producer, what can…What insights can you give, or can you offer, that might help to not capture, or save this industry, but at least keep it so that there is this level of quality or this level of whatever. I'm not sure how to put it, but this is a role that has basically been X-ed out of the whole process.

Keepnews: Well, let me say this. I think that the thing that you are accurately describing as lacking right now is something that was always in very limited supply. There have been, but there have never been, as far as I can determine, enough producers with the same kind of evangelical flavor to their approach to the subject as a hell of a lot of musicians have. There are a number of factors involved there. I have, perhaps, put too much emphasis in my life in crediting the fact that I do not play a musical instrument. There are a lot of people who are producers who don't play at a professional level, but I don't play period! Among other things, you can put that as meaning that there never has been a time when I agonize over what somebody was playing because I felt I could do it better. With that removed, you're able to be a hell of a lot more empathetic. Seriously, all I'm trying to do is to be the best possible producer I can be. I'm trying to make the best records. Whereas, what an artist needs, above all, is ego. He needs the skills to be able to translate his ego into performance, and into thought, and into development of ideas. That, to me, there's a fundamental point of difference there. I don't know very many producers who were sufficiently lacking in a feeling of competition. I don't know that I've ever expressed it quite this way, but I think its very important for a producer to be producer

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or
archivescenter@si.edu

and not a former guitar player, or composer, who has now got himself into this. There have been a lot of examples of people crossing the line. There are two possible reasons why you can successfully cross the line. One is if you, lucky you, fortunate you, turn out to be sufficiently gifted on both sides of the line so that you can function that way. There's also, just simply, that there are some people who should have been producers all along. I don't, you know….And again, it's something that I think happens, and there are tons of examples of it, of people who didn't necessarily know that they were that good a producer until they were…The way I came into the business is…I'm no role model to follow. It's obviously most sensible, and most customary, for people to come in by way of being musicians, of knowing music, of knowing one or more instruments. I may be just a freak of nature here but there was no music, there is no music in my family background. I don't have an uncle who was a damn good bass player or something. In my own childhood, other than what I found on that fairly primitive radio, I found for myself. Other than that, I didn't…There's one sort of classic family story. When I was about six years old or such, and I had a cousin, and older cousin of mine who was sort of dismantling her apartment. She said to my mother who had a young son, "Would you be interested, and I'll give you my piano." My mother, taking a rather practical approach to this, decided that the only way that would make any sense was if I was interested in learning the instrument. Would I take piano lessons? But I was a red-blooded American boy and I didn't want to do that kind of stuff. I wanted to play on the street; I didn't want to play piano. I said that if there is a piano in the house I would be very unlikely to take lessons. We did not accept that offer of the piano. God knows what would have happened at that point if we had accepted the piano and taken lessons. First of all, I would be learning the wrong kind of piano playing, that's for sure. But, not having anything, the traditional music in my background, it was just a… It was literally something that I learned from people on the street. I've always said that one of the reasons for my early interest in jazz was simply that, and that was at a time I guess we're back to, there was the legal drinking age in New York was 18 in those years. There were also two additional factors. There was no particular spotlight on that, and the bartender didn't give a damn. He was not in imminent danger of being busted for serving underage. I also, I looked a little old for my age at the time. I had no trouble being able to drink at a bar when I was really not quite at legal age. I think the statute of limitations, having run out several decades ago, I can admit to that now. (Laughs) This lead to my discovering that there were a number of places that you could, first of all, get a fairly reasonably priced drink and you wouldn't get bothered. People like me, bartenders were used to, and waiters were used to as being towards the low end of the scale as far as running up a good tab. I did find that a place like Nick's in Greenwich Village where there were people like Pee Wee Russell, and Wild Bill Davis, were playing there. I had an exposure to jazz that way. That was good way to have a cheap date. You take a girl to listen some music, and you're not going to run up a big bill. As a matter of fact, really sort of, my earliest friend and helper in that world was Max Gordon. The late and legendary proprietor, founder of the Village Vanguard. Actually, it was a place I took to hanging out at. Again, when I was probably

no more than sixteen. The point is that I asked him once about, because our relationship started where he didn't hassle me, or didn't allow people to. I could come in there and get a drink and I didn't really even know why, and eventually when I got around to asking him about this he said, "Well, you know, you obviously were enjoying what you were hearing. You came in quite a bit, you were appreciating the music, and you also obviously were in no position to spend a lot of money. You were one of the people that we let get away with more time than you were really paying for in the club." My background had all kinds of unlikely flavors to it, and circumstances to it.

Brown: But you mention, I was going to say that you mentioned something that seems to have been, I think, paramount in this. That is the love of the music. Max recognized that, that's what brought you there.

Keepnews: Well what happened was, it worked both ways. The love for the music developed from opportunity to be exposed to it. And the opportunity to be exposed to it was partially phony. Partly, artificial, let's say. I mean I can't do a very good psychological job on that. The feeling I get is that circumstances, and my being pre-disposed for some reason, had a hell of a lot to do with it. Once it was established, because I know that I was interested, I did start buying records. And again, what did I buy? Buying records meant 35 cents, and 50 cents, which wasn't that little and amount but it was still a little for an individual 78 RPM record. You didn't have to save up for an LP because there weren't any LP's.

Brown: But again, the love of this music, that's what you built your career on. It has driven your career. You are known as a jazz impresario, a jazz advocate, jazz producer, and jazz whatever. You are indelibly, historically, associated with jazz in America.

Keepnews: What I can't tell you, because it apparently exists somewhere under my surface, I don't know why and I don't know how. I do know that the odds were probably against my ever having this exposure. In sort of a semi-accidental way, it began. There also was, remember we're talking about in the 30's when there was a hell of a lot of swing music to be heard on the radio. I was, you know, I was ten or twelve years old when that was happening, so that I did have, maybe a subliminal exposure to it. In that sense my timing was pretty damn good. I was there when you almost couldn't avoid it on the radio. As I say, I suck myself into an evil nightclub way of life without really meaning to. I just don't know how…well…again…obviously I was not the only person who had these exposures. There was some kind of a chemistry waiting to happen, trying to happen. The exposure of me to this music, despite how hard I fought to avoid it, how many pianos I may have rejected, it lead…There was a combination created and it lead to my having this really heavy interest. Then there were a lot of circumstances that came out of that. The guy who was the largest practical influence on my early involvement in jazz was Bill Grauer. Bill was a classmate of mine at Columbia. And he had, easily, the worst

eyesight of anybody I've ever known. (Laughs) [He had] owl like glasses. The point is that, just, I felt the need when I got out of the Air Force. I was in the Air Force and got out in the beginning of 1946. I literally felt that I had been professionally illiterate for the first three years in the service. Since it was a practically automatic thing, as a Columbia College graduate, and I had graduated courtesy of a handful of credits that they were handing out to people who had military service. I got ten, whatever, points for being a veteran. That was enough to put me over the line. I didn't have to go back to school. But I wanted to go back to school, to go back to college to feel literate again. Because what I wanted to do with my life was to put myself…you know I wanted to be a writer, or an editor, or a newspaper person. I knew that was where I wanted my life to be. When I returned to the campus area, I actually lasted about a matter of a couple of months or so. Then I realized that graduate English was not going to be the way to get into the real world. I eventually went out and got myself a job at a book-publishing house. But I was in a group of people on the campus and several of us were people who had known each other before the military service, or like Grauer, not being able to go in because of his horrible vision. Here I am and my jazz interest is growing, being associated with this guy who, even back then, was a legendary kind of collector. So, I…you know, we became close based on the fact that he had this jazz background. And then eventually what happened there, in fairly quick succession, he was working as the advertising space rep for the Record Changer magazine. I'm not going to attempt to go into that, or I probably did the last time we talked. But, the title of that magazine was somewhat a pun, "the record changer" and "record changers," which nobody in today's world would have any reason to know what that means. It was that mechanical advice that knocked down the next 78-rpm record so that it was the next one to play. You could stack them up on the changer and it would change the records for you. He then took ownership of that magazine. He became the publisher. He bought it from west coast jazz fans that had been running it. He then asked me to work with him on it. Bill has been…he died, his dying was one of the, I guess, culminating acts in the failure of Riverside at that point. [At the] end of 1963 he had a heart attack and died. During that period he asked me to come and work with him on the magazine. He was listed as editor and publisher, I was the next name down, and I was the managing editor. What it meant was anything I wrote about jazz could get published in that magazine, because I was the guy making those decisions and I heavily edited and re-wrote for a lot of other people who were writing for publication. But eventually what happened was-- as I say I know that I gave you detail on this before so I will skip that -- but what happened was based on some weird things that happened and got us involved with a major label, with the RCA Victor people asking us to produce some jazz re-issues for them. But then they backed out. You know, a standard, simple, corporate gesture. We, having made certain steps to acquire the rights to certain material…So what happened then, I got started in the record business by being one of two people who were running…like the only two legitimate…there was a heavy area of jazz re-issue bootlegging going on there. We had leased the rights to the Paramount label material, which was jazz and blues label in Chicago. We decided, alright, that was the

label where we had come up with the intriguing name of “Riverside” for. Again, I know I gave that too you before.

Brown: We got the sign from Ken. Let’s take a break here. Orrin one of the major things that marks you as a producer is that you have, for the most part of your career, have had your own label, which seems to be of great importance to you. When we look at the Riverside era you were coming out here to work with fantasy. Then you formed Landmark. So, if you want to pick it up there and talk about why you insist on having your own label and let’s talk about the progression from Landmark to the other labels, as well.

Keepnews: Well, the statement that I made someplace along the line, the difference between working for somebody else, regardless of how friendly and pleasant, and how much actual authority in my field of operation I might have, the difference between that and, for better or worse, its yours. When you get spoiled to begin with, and what happened at Riverside, basically, that’s where this being my own thing began. You take a look at the Riverside situation, so that’s virgin territory for everybody involved. What happened was, I guess, Grauer who was a pretty strange guy in a number of ways, had an almost hypnotic effect on people who were working under him, and who had…He it turned out, what he was interested in more than anything else, was to be in control of his situation. He was one of the best dealmakers that I ever have encountered. It’s too bad he didn’t get a lot more of an opportunity to exercise that. He died in his early forties, that was a sudden, unanticipated heart attack. What happened…So Riverside was definitely taken out from under me. I ran it for what turned out to be six months between his death and…Let’s just say, I suppose it’s quite possible that he might have been to find a way out of the fiscal mess we were in. I certainly couldn’t. We owed a hell of a lot of money; it was a hell of a lot of money that had been advanced to us, and pretty unfortunate interest rates, and all that kind of stuff. I certainly didn’t know what the hell to do with it. So, we eventually just went out of business. I was…Well, at the time there was almost a ten year period in there where I was pretty much scrounging around in the sense that…I had, as I recall, two major sources of income in that period. One of them was that, there was a certain amount of material that had come out on Riverside, which was stuff that we did have, we did retain the rights to. Basically, the re-issue stuff that had been on Riverside, and that was European market for that, definitely. The Riverside masters had been acquired quite promptly but the ones that we retained the rights to were strictly for the re-issue things. The other stuff had passed down to the hands of the people who bankrupted us. Even all these years later, you’re not going to get a very sensible explanation of that period. For several years in there I was working for what amounts to the remnants of my past. I was on a retainer from the company that was an outfit that specialized in remaindering things, and selling records off of it. They acquired the inventory and those domestic rights to all this other stuff. Basically, I was giving them guidance because one of the things that was true, even back then and is certainly a

characteristic of our business, is the paperwork left a lot to be desired. I was sort of like the walking archives, and was able to tell them, “Yes, you own this. No, you don’t have the right to do that.” That was one thing I was functioning with. The other thing was the guy who had been our sales manager had bought an existing, small, New York based label. [It was] not jazz, per se, but it had a certain amount of jazz on it. I was, supposedly…I guess I did produce some records for him, but I was working there as, it was Audio Fidelity records, and I was the A&R man there. This meant that I did virtually no jazz, and a couple of really strange records. For instance, when this guy acquired the Riverside remnants, and acquired Audio Fidelity, and went into business on that basis. One of the acts that acquired, and decided that it was obviously selling a certain amount of records, was the Clancy Brothers. [They were] an ethnic-Irish folk group. I did, I think it was, three Clancy Brothers albums. Therefore, giving myself wide experience in an area I would never return to. Several years went by and then I learned that finally these people who had owned, but done nothing with, the bulk of the Riverside masters, were going to be selling all that they owned to Fantasy. At first I heard this as a rumor, then I got a phone call from the guy who was running Fantasy at the time, having acquired it from the original owner. This was Saul Zaentz bought Fantasy from the Weiss brothers, who were the founders of it. Saul, who had…he had a great deal of originals. This is before I became involved in it, but it’s an interesting story. He had this stuff and it had been bought up because it was a catalogue label and he could do something with that. Saul was, long before he became a movie producer, was a very knowledgeable and active, small jazz label operator. You’ll find early Brubeck on Fantasy, and Jerry Mulligan, you know certain things like that. What happened there, basically, was he decided to take a chance on this group that was headed by the kid who worked in the mailroom. And the kid who worked in the mailroom was Fogerty and his group was Creedence Clearwater Revival. And, all of the sudden Fantasy had this pop hit on its hands. I guess it was at that point that they felt they had the money to indulge their desire to scoop up this Riverside stuff, which nobody had made a move on in this several years of its complete inactivity. And they decided that they wanted to, you know, put the Riverside catalogue back in the work and start doing new recordings on that level. I guess they first started to talk to me because I obviously had some practical knowledge of what was involved there, and that very quickly proceeded into their asking me to come and work for them to revive Riverside. What I had been doing for the last few years of this interim period of mine was I had started, with very inadequate funding, was Milestone. That was my second label. I had done a few things there, not a hell of a lot, but there were a couple of interesting things in there. So anyway, I made the decision to accept the job offer, which basically meant being the A&R department at Fantasy. And again, which we decided…Milestone existed, but it didn’t have a particular reputation, good or bad. But Fantasy had a certain kind of meaning where it hadn’t had successes initially. It had been Brubeck and a mulligan, or two, and some of Cal Tjader’s stuff. So, that…I think they figured they could get, and figured correctly, they could get mileage out of those ancient Riverside things. That was when I was offered the opportunity to work for a

company in the San Francisco area. [I] came out here to do that, and eventually, you know, got to the point…Well, it's funny. I seem to have been motivated; maybe that's what gives me faith for right now. Most of the time in my record business career, it seems to me that generally the lousy shape of the industry at the specific point when I either am forced to, or choose to make a move. And that's what happened a couple of times in the past. When we got to the tail end of '79 I was starting to figure in terms of going ahead and…It was the one time in my life that I tried, with a certain amount of success, to do things in an approved business style of doing it. The strange thing that I did was that I decided that I was going to start a new label, and the label was going to be a limited partnership with myself owning 50%, and I was the only general partner, and then the rest of the thing would be that I gather investors. You know, let me see if I was something of some consequence in this business. Landmark was a label that I created in order to prove that I could be a label, I guess. I had been doing a lot of producing, but I had been doing it for other people. It was a strange period. The thing is, at Riverside there had been; you know…I gave you Riverside, conversationally, before. We didn't do badly for what we were. We found, or we had made available, some pretty valid artists. Never in a normal manner, because I don't think anything normal ever happens in a jazz record business, but take a few things. I don't know…There's a wonderful sequence that goes like this. Monk, of course, was a strange thing to begin with. Monk was our first significant artist at Riverside. Monk came about because…

Brown: You wrote a review about him.

Keepnews: What?

Brown: You wrote an article about him.

Keepnews: No, it wasn't like that. Riverside…the thing that happened…well, that. But, the article I had written the years before…I wrote…When Grauer took over The Record Changer and asked me to work with him on it, it was about two nights a month, that's what I contributed to it, and what happened there was a couple of years…Riverside started as a re-issue.

Brown: Orrin, we're going to loose time talking about your recent achievements in the last couple decade.

Keepnews: No, wait a minute. I know that. I'm going to get this straight first. The starting of me, and the last time I started a label, was Landmark. Okay, Landmark came about because, let me give you a quick chain of command, and I'll do it quickly. Monk, we know the story of how Monk came into the plan. The first breakthrough record for Monk on Riverside was "Brilliant Cornish." The final session of that, we had two tunes yet to be done; we finished that. We showed up at the studio, and Monk, without

bothering to tell me about it, had made two changes in the band. One of them was actually there before I got there. The only time we could get, we were working at Reeves, was late morning into early afternoon kind of thing. I think we had like a ten-o-clock start. I get there, and one of the people was already there, but he was fast asleep on the floor on the studio. That was a young bass player, who had recently started working for Miles Davis. Having had a fight with Oscar Pettiford during the previous session. And he became aware of this guy, because Monk was always aware of what was going around him. He un-hired Pettiford and brought Chambers into the situation. Also, Monk did have, theoretically at least, a quartet going at that time. But, he couldn't work in New York because he didn't have the necessary cabaret license. So, his quartet didn't work very often. And, the horn player that he had in that group had accepted an offer from Dizzy Gillespie to replace Phil Woods in Dizzy's Orchestra. So, he had, with utter disdain for other forms of logic, he had hired a saxophone player, an alto saxophone player to replace…I'm sorry he had hired a trumpet player to replace the previously existing saxophone player. Ernie Henry had been on the earlier sessions of this record, and Ernie Henry was the horn in Monk's quartet. Except Monk made the statement, "Out of my band, off my record date." So, instead of having Ernie Henry on this final session it was Clark Terry. Monk liked the way the Clark played. We had wanted to do something with him, but we never had though. And Clark, of course, was always, and is to this very day, an eminently calm and collected take care of business guy. Not only was he just…Actually what happened was, one number got done and then we were really like within twenty minutes of running out of time and I still only had the four tunes and I didn't have enough time. I turned around and—the balls that I had, I have to wonder about, really—I turned to Monk and I said, "We got about twenty minutes of studio time left. I need another five minutes to have a respectable, useable length on this thing. Can you give me, in one take, hopefully, a five-minute solo piano tune? Preferably a standard?" And that's how the last tune on "Brilliant Corners" got recorded, which was. "I Surrender Dear," the standard that was on that. The chain of command I'm talking about, the firing of Ernie Henry led Monk to bring this guy in, Clark Terry. So, about a week or two later I am walking through Greenwich Village one afternoon. I'm at Sheraton Square and in about…I'm about a half block away from The Bohemia. There is a guy who's standing in front of the Bohemia. He hails me, and it's Clark. He says, "Come in! I want you to meet a couple of friends of mine, the Adderely brothers." So we had a long conversation, and hit it off very well together. I discovered, partially through this conversation, partially through getting together with him again, that he was in this weird situation. He was under contract to Savoy. Cannonball was under contract. So, yeah, he was working and his A&R was Bobby Shad. He was really unhappy with them. For instance, what had happened was….Cannonball, at that point was on the verge of, which he then went ahead and did, of breaking up his band. I remember what he told me, he said, "I won't say we are in trouble, but the best weeks I have are when we are not working. Then, at least, I break even" I got involved with the Adderely's. Nat was not signed anywhere. Cannonball was…and it turned out that what had happened was the

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or
archivescenter@si.edu

contract that he had signed, and it wasn't Savoy it was Mercury; it was Mercury. They did a couple of albums, but the first…They did an album by, supposedly, the working group. That came out shortly after Cannonball had broken up that band, because it wasn't doing anything, it wasn't getting anything. So, at any rate, that led to the Adderely's signing with us. Cannonball was the first artist I ever worked with who had a manager. So, I remember this meeting involving Cannonball, Grauer, myself, and John Levy, who was Adderely's manager. We signed Cannonball, and part of the deal, a very important part of the deal, is his feeling that if he had had any kind of label support he could have kept this band together. I said, "I'll make you a promise." What he was going to do, was, he was going to break up the band at that point and accepting an offer from Miles. He said, "No way will I stay with Miles more than one year." So, what he was proposing as a deal was, he signs with us but he's a non-band leader. He will record a couple albums and then there is a guarantee to be no longer than a year, he will reform a band. Literally the promise I made him, I said, "Look. You're going to put a band together. It's a year from now. You're putting a band together; you're going out on the road with the band to put it in shape. Wherever you are when you feel that you're ready to record with that band, pick up the phone and call me. I'll come out there, wherever there is, and record you." So, he calls me and, as I have frequently said in the past, for some reason I decided I wasn't thinking in terms of it going very far. I figured I might get a call telling me, "Okay. We're in Philadelphia next week and we want to record" Uh, "We're in San Francisco. The band is really breaking it up, we're drawing big crowds." I don't really think that…He had no idea about studio situations. I got a hold of Dick Bach, who I knew slightly by this time. He recommended and engineer who he said was excellent, and had done an album for him of the…the Master Sounds, Wess' two brothers. This guy is good, and that album kind of proves it. That album hadn't been released yet. So he's recommending that engineer and we were working on getting a studio. Well, by the time I get out to San Francisco, we have decided that…First of all, I have discovered that I need to make a change in my engineering plans because the album that he's talking about, which was a live album done at the Jazz Workshop was so badly recorded that they scrapped that tape and went into a studio someplace with another engineer and did another album. Yes, I could feel perfectly free to ignore him. Luckily, I hadn't talk to this guy yet. So here I am…And then also the expert opinion is that there is no such thing in San Francisco, at this point, as a studio good enough to record. So you want to put it out on the nationwide jazz record scene. So, what I end up doing is…Let me see, I guess the…Your almost running out of time.

Brown: We're going to run out of time. I'm looking up there at all your Grammy awards and we should probably talk about, since some of them were received in the last ten or fifteen years--

Keepnews: Well, no. What happened there was there were two things that are longevity, really. I got one… They are…You know, one is longevity and the other is…

Brown: Why don't you have Ken point to it because I don't think we are going to be able to technically have you go over there.

Keepnews: Well, no I get there.

Brown: No, but I'm talking about the cords. The cords, Orrin, you're hooked up.

Keepnews: See if I go…And what happens is…This is what I got to remember is if I sit for too damn long my legs have gone completely stiff on me. This is a National Trustees Award for…because I don't have my glasses here…Boy I'm really…

Brown: Well, let me go over there and read that.

Keepnews: Come over here and read this.

Brown: Hang on. Let's see what I got here, I think I might have to go around this way.

Keepnews: Cause these three are just normal Grammys and then they have these two huge ones.

Brown: Okay. So, I remember, I may have participated in this one. "National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences", "National Trustee Award 2004, to Orrin Keepnews who is a producer, historian, and archivist, and fan, has played a pivotal role in both the development and preservation of jazz." And then next…

Keepnews: This one was for one of the last re-issue packages that I did.

Brown: Right, and this is the one that I'm very aware of, and that's the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences, "Orrin Keepnews, Compilation Producer, Best Historical Album 1999. Duke Ellington Centennial Edition, Complete RCA/Victor Recordings: 1927-1973." So, these are the ones that were acquired since the last interview. Of course, the Ellington one was, that centennial, was quite celebrated internationally, globally. You were responsible for the definitive recordings of Ellington in that period.

Keepnews: I'm just trying to…

Brown: Keep walking.

Keepnews: All I'm saying is that I can't, very well, sit here with you and tell you about all the wonderful things that have happened to me in the last couple of years, or are about to happen to me, cause they ain't.

Brown: Well, you received this award. That necessitated this interview, and hopefully your being able to go to New York to collect it. So, what does the N.E.A Jazz Master's Award mean to you at this stage of your career knowing all the things that lead up to you, and your involvement with N.E.A. etcetera, etcetera.

Keepnews: I think that I have no hesitation about feeling proud and pleased at any award of real stature like this. The important thing is, you know, strangely enough, that they don't make the distinction. But there is supposed to be, and there is a chain of, though it's non-performers that are in there for one of these slots…and its known, although I didn't see it in the formal announcement of the thing, but this is known as the A.B. Spellman Award, this particular thing, because it's for advocacy. I didn't see that in their original, the original publicity piece, and the original announcements of it. That's their problem not mine. I'm very pleased that I got this, and I'm very pleased that I didn't have to wait any longer for it. I have nothing but respect and admiration for the people who have been selected in the preceding years. I thought that giving it to John Levy was a wonderful idea. Including the fact that John Levy was the artist manager in what I described as the first signing scene where the artist had a manager. (Laughs) That ties in with that very well as far as I'm concerned. So that the…I am…I'm delighted that I do have, and have been able to talk with you about, a whole slew of tangible accomplishments. I've done that without even throwing in the names of some fairly heavyweight people who I can take a certain amount of credit for like Johnny Griffin, like Jimmy Heath, like Bill Evans…

Brown: Wes Montgomery?

Keepnews: Wes Montgomery. Yes. Actually, I guess when you're putting things in order; it's Bill Evans and Wes Montgomery that stand out as an art. They are just a matter of my being told about somebody and having followed up on it. That sequence of events thing that I was starting to talk to you about with the presence of Clark leading to the Adderely's, and the really the next step in that story is Cannonball coming into my office one morning. He had just gotten back from a one-nighter in Indianapolis and telling me, "I heard this really great guitar player. We've got to get him for the label." To me, the biggest part of that is Cannonball Adderely referring to Riverside as "we." Because, by way of contrast, I had recently taken part in a conversation where it was said to Miles Davis…He had shown up, he had followed Bob Weinstock into the Riverside offices, which were then one block away…

Brown: Into Riverside, or Prestige? He came to your office?

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or
archivescenter@si.edu

Keepnews: He came in. What happened was, Weinstock had come…our office, I don't really remember why…we were on West 48th street, and Prestige was on West 50th street. Miles was curious. Where was Weinstock going in the name of them? Really curious when he saw where he was going, so he walked in moments afterwards. So, we got involved in a conversation in which I said…I got it now. We had some recent albums on the wall, including a couple of Randy Weston. I had, no, I look around and saw that Miles was looking at these things and I was…and he said, "Oh, Randy! I'm glad somebody got around to recording him. It should have been done along time ago," and I said, "Well if you feel that way about Randy, why didn't you recommend him to your label?" Miles was still at Prestige at this point. He gave me, what I later came to recognize as a typical Miles Davis withering glare and he said, "I should recommend somebody to him?" He was indicating, with great scorn, Mr. Weinstock. Now, that's a story, since both participants with me in that conversation are no longer with us, which can be used. As a matter of fact, that's an outstanding example that if you happen to wait long enough, if you happen to be the survivor, there are lots of stories you can tell. (Laughs) That was…let me see…the thing was, there we were sitting there. It was kind of, you know, the Bill Evans thing is almost as ridiculous. That story has been told quite a bit but that's in the same bag, that's Mundallo playing a demo tape over the phone or Grauer and me. There's a weird part of what a bad idea that is. Yet, there was something was to be heard. The next thing I did was; first of all, let me hear that under somewhat better circumstances. Bill was playing with, he was sort of, he was sort of in that, he played some with Herbie Mann, and he played with Tony Scott a good deal. You know, so that, you know this was a very valid point, the point was that I was aware of Bill Evans through other people, through the chain of events. I was aware of him before Miles was. Then we got into that situation where we did one record with him, with Bill, he was very reluctant to record again. That's a story that I've told where he said, "I don't have anything new to say." And to me, that is a very important part that era. There were artists, practically, to be picked up on the street. Jimmy Heath, who was doing some recovery time…Kenny Durham came into my office one day and said, in the course of conversation, "You know little bird is getting out of jail pretty soon." He was in the federal rest home. I didn't know who little bird was! He was rather surprised that I didn't know of Jimmy Heath. So what happened was, I used to say, "I'm startled at the fact that I don't see any other… Here I am in Bird Land and I don't think I've ever seen another A&R man, for anybody, in here." I managed to have friends who happened to be musicians. There were people who obviously, well we certainly had some tastes in common, and there was compatibility. But people like Jimmy, like Griffin, like Blue Mitchell, these were my friends. I'm very aggravated about the whole geography bit where I was just saying earlier that I'm really very far away from Hutcherson. And Hutcherson has not been doing, in the last couple years, local gigs really. I got a whole history of…I don't think there is anything unusual. If I was taken over by this music, why would I not have a number of friends that have the same taste, the same musical

compulsions? These were the people that I was living with! They were doing what they felt they had to do! I'm the same story.

Brown: One of the things that Bobby said in the course of his interview, in discussing his relationship with you, was he said, "Orrin is always finding and searching for new talent, new sound," I think is how he phrased it. Even though in the last two decades you haven't been as active, you still succeeded in doing that. I know that Dave Ellis is one of the artists that you helped to bring to the public. Me personally, I am very grateful for the fact that you introduced us at the Monterey Jazz Festival when we were doing the Ellington. Here you are, you've now produced the definitive Ellington collection for the Centennial, I'm doing something called, "Far East Suite", and you were introducing us at the Monterey Jazz Festival. The next thing I know you're saying, "Well, Brown have you ever considered giving Monk the same treatment you gave Duke?" That launched a project that we worked on that ended up getting a five-star Downbeat review, and being selected as one of the albums of 2004. You know, your track record continues to this day, of what Bobby said, you're finding new sound and trying to get it out there. The jazz advocacy award is really suited for your achievements, and your accomplishments, and your career. That's what you've done! You brought Monk to the public; you brought Bill Evans to the public, the Adderely brothers, Wes Montgomery, and a host of others. So, we can look at you as a producer, we can look at you as a advocate, we can look at you as an advocate, we can look at you as a writer; but when one reflects on the career of Orrin Keepnews he brought sound to the public. He made it possible for these people to be heard around to the world. And in this field, what could be lauded in greater fashion?

Keepnews: I'm sold! (Laughs) I appreciate, not only your feeling that way, but I appreciate your being able to articulate it god-dammed well.

Brown: Well, I credit that to having been associated with you for so long. People know, well, "Orrin Keepnews is articulate. You don't want to get in an argument with Orrin Keepnews because he will rip you to shreds." You do know so much about the music, you do care, and the passion is a proven track record. Your taste in this music is a proven track record, your advocacy. When I talked to Bobby Hutcherson he said, "Orrin Keepnews, if you do him a favor he'll remember it. Orrin has this very personal relationship with the musicians." That goes a long way to talking about family.

Keepnews: Well, I'll tell you. Right now, that goes a long way with me because one of the things I have been upset about is the circumstances within the last couple of years have been such that, we have really hardly seen the Hutcherson's at all. I felt the draft, I felt at least as responsible. And a lot of it has to do with; if you set things up geographically, you could hardly have two sets of people, both scribed as living in the Bay Area and physically so far apart.

Brown: Well, people said that about New York. They said you have to live in Manhattan. If you live in the Bronx or Brooklyn you might as well be in another state, you might as well be in New Jersey. But here your geographic separation is much more tangible. Unfortunately it is true. We just drove from Bobby's house and that took an hour and a half to get there. How's he going to play at Yoshi's? It takes him an hour and a half to get to get to Yoshi's! You know, this does create and impediment for keeping that familial relationship, which is what Bobby emphasized so often during his interview. He said, and Snooky Young, and all of the other people in the jazz field, they talk about the family, he family of the musicians. When I asked him about the award he said, "Awards doing mean that much, but being in the room with all your family, being there with all your friends, being able to say, 'Hey!' that's the reward, the family that came together because of the music." And he spoke highly of you as part of that family. I think that that's, for me, as a jazz musician, I truly value that. I wouldn't be involved in this if I didn't think I was part of a family. You helped create that.

Keepnews: I'm delighted to hear this. It's no more than I deserve but you get what you deserve in this world!

Brown: Well Orrin, we only have a few more minutes but I just wanted to say, since I have the opportunity to say this for the historical record, that of all the people that I have worked with in this industry, you have epitomized that concept of family and really giving you all to this music. What were you going to get in return? You don't really get to go up on stage and make people feel, you know, feel the enjoyment of the music, but you brought it into their homes. People could take it home with them. If they couldn't hear it live, they could hear it on the radio. You helped disseminate the feeling of family, the love that goes into this music, the spirituality that's in this music. You helped to disseminate, and I think that that goes towards making this music so imbued with humanity rather than all the other trappings that come with entertainment. I think that you have been instrumental in getting this music to people.

Keepnews: It, not only, is extremely, flatteringly well put, but I'm aware that is a hell of a of what it is that I've been trying to do.

Brown: And you've succeeded. I mean you have succeeded. Look at the track record, not just the artists, but that you've persevered. You didn't give you; you've stayed with this your entire life. From the time you got bit by the jazz bug you've stayed with it.

Keepnews: Yeah, I should have been smarter. (Laughs) More flexible, is the word I should use.

Brown: Anything else you'd want to have on the historical record?

Keepnews: No. I think we covered…Well you brought in a nice, big theoretical chunk there, which I hope you allow to survive. That's the only problem, if you don't edit yourself out.

Brown: Well, I just want to say again, on behalf of the Smithsonian Institution and the National Endowment for the Arts, I just want to express our gratitude for your achievements, and your accomplishments, and this opportunity to be able to spend to this time with you so that we can make sure that the public is continually, and forevermore, made aware of you contribution to this music.

Keepnews: Well, now I'll have a hard time keeping alive! (Laughs) I've done it! Thank you.

###

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Kyle Kelly-Yahner

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu