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James Blood Ulmer

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- Sunday, May 1: Mzantsi Jazz Awards Winner: Thembelihle Dunjana
- Monday, May 2: Sammy Miller And The Congregation Big Band
- Tuesday, May 3: Sammy Miller And The Congregation Big Band
- Wednesday, May 4: Essentially Ellington Alumni Band
- Thursday, May 5: Juilliard Jazz Orchestra: Music Of Duke Ellington
- Friday, May 6: Juilliard Jazz Orchestra: Music Of Duke Ellington
- Saturday, May 7: Juilliard Jazz Orchestra: Music Of Duke Ellington
- Sunday, May 8: Juilliard Jazz Orchestra: Music Of Duke Ellington
- Monday, May 9: Pete Malinverni Trio Featuring Ugonna Okegwo, And Jeff Hamilton
- Tuesday, May 10: Miho Hazama And M_Unit
- Wednesday, May 11: Marquis Hill “New Gospel Revisited”
- Thursday, May 12: Marquis Hill “New Gospel Revisited”
- Friday, May 13: Endea Owens And The Cookout
- Saturday, May 14: Endea Owens And The Cookout
- Sunday, May 15: Domo Branch Trio With Stefon Harris & Imani Rousselle
- Monday, May 16: Dominick
- Tuesday, May 17: Gil Evans Project Directed By Ryan Truesdell
- Wednesday, May 18: Gil Evans Project Directed By Ryan Truesdell
- Thursday, May 19: Orrin Evans Trio Plays Monk
- Friday, May 20: Young Monk Project
- Saturday, May 21: Young Monk Project

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Tuesday, May 24: Jenna Mammina – Rolf Sturm With Special Guests
Wednesday, May 25: American Pianists Awards Preview Concert
Thursday, May 26: Louis Hayes Quintet: My 85th Birthday!
Friday, May 27: Louis Hayes Quintet: My 85th Birthday!
Saturday, May 28: Remembering Slide Hampton
Sunday, May 29: Remembering Slide Hampton
Monday, May 30: Joel Harrison
Tuesday, May 31: Celebrating Ralph Peterson
Wednesday, June 1: Joe Block Trio And Quartet
And Miki Yamanaka Trio: Key Voices
Thursday, June 2: Papo Vázquez Mighty Pirates Troubadours
Friday, June 3: Gerald Cannon Septet: McCoy And Elvin
Saturday, June 4: Gerald Cannon Septet: McCoy And Elvin
Sunday, June 5: Gerald Cannon Septet: McCoy And Elvin
Monday, June 6: Steve Kroon Latin Jazz Sextet
With Special Guest Ron Blake
Tuesday, June 7: Anderson Brothers Play Charlie Parker
Wednesday, June 8: Brianna Thomas
Thursday, June 9: Brianna Thomas
Friday, June 10: Dion Parson & 21st Century Band
Saturday, June 11: Dion Parson & 21st Century Band
Sunday, June 12: Dion Parson & 21st Century Band
Monday, June 13: BMI’s Jazz Composers Workshop Summer Showcase
Tuesday, June 14: Youngjoo Song Sextet
Wednesday, June 15: Jazz At Lincoln Center Youth Orchestra & Jazz Houston
Thursday, June 16: Steven Feifke Big Band
Friday, June 17: Bobby Sanabria Multiverse Big Band: Vox Humana
Saturday, June 18: Bobby Sanabria Multiverse Big Band: Vox Humana
Sunday, June 19: Bobby Sanabria Multiverse Big Band: Vox Humana
Monday, June 20: Connie Han Trio With Special Guest Rich Perry
Tuesday, June 21: Jazztopad Festival: James Brandon Lewis With Lutoslawski Quartet
And Kamil Piotrowicz Sextet
Wednesday, June 22: Jazztopad Festival: James Brandon Lewis With Lutoslawski Quartet
And Kamil Piotrowicz Sextet
Thursday, June 23: The Cookers
Friday, June 24: The Cookers
Saturday, June 25: The Cookers
Sunday, June 26: Rodney Whitaker Sextet
Monday, June 27: Bryan Carter Presents Jazz At Pride: NYC
Tuesday, June 28: Luisito Quintero And 3rd Element
Wednesday, June 29: Michele Rosewoman’s New Yor-Uba: A Musical Celebration Of Cuba In America
Thursday, June 30: Michele Rosewoman’s New Yor-Uba: A Musical Celebration Of Cuba In America

BIRDLAND JAZZ CLUB
315 West 44th St, New York, NY 10036
212-581-3080

Monday, May 2: Stanley Clarke
Tuesday, May 3: Stanley Clarke
Wednesday, May 4: Stanley Clarke
Thursday, May 5: Stanley Clarke
Friday, May 6: Stanley Clarke
Saturday, May 7: Stanley Clarke
Sunday, May 8: Stanley Clarke
Monday, May 9: Kurt Elling, Charlie Hunter
Tuesday, May 10: Kurt Elling, Charlie Hunter
Wednesday, May 11: Kurt Elling, Charlie Hunter
Thursday, May 12: Kurt Elling, Charlie Hunter
Friday, May 13: Kurt Elling, Charlie Hunter
Saturday, May 14: Kurt Elling, Charlie Hunter

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Sunday, May 15: Kurt Elling, Charlie Hunter
Tuesday, May 17: Isaiah Sharkey
Wednesday, May 18: Isaiah Sharkey
Thursday, May 19: Isaiah Sharkey
Friday, May 20: Isaiah Sharkey
Saturday, May 21: Isaiah Sharkey
Sunday, May 22: Isaiah Sharkey
Monday, May 23: Brandee Younger, Chelsea Baratz, Rashaan Carter, Allan Mednard
Tuesday, May 24: Brandee Younger, Chelsea Baratz, Rashaan Carter, Allan Mednard
Wednesday, May 25: Brandee Younger, Chelsea Baratz, Rashaan Carter, Allan Mednard
Thursday, May 26: Brandee Younger, Chelsea Baratz, Rashaan Carter, Allan Mednard
Friday, May 27: Savion Glover
Saturday, May 28: Savion Glover
Sunday, May 29: Savion Glover
Monday, May 30: Gregoire Mare & Romain Collin
Tuesday, May 31: DOMI & JD BECK
Wednesday, June 1: DOMI & JD BECK
Thursday, June 2: Kenny Garrett
Friday, June 3: Kenny Garrett
Saturday, June 4: Kenny Garrett
Sunday, June 5: Kenny Garrett
Monday, June 6: Dizzy Gillespie Afro-Latin Experience
Tuesday, June 7: Al DiMeola
Wednesday, June 8: Al DiMeola
Thursday, June 9: Al DiMeola
Friday, June 10: Al DiMeola
Saturday, June 11: Al DiMeola
Sunday, June 12: Al DiMeola
Monday, June 13: Raul Midon
Tuesday, June 14: Jose James
Wednesday, June 15: Jose James
Thursday, June 16: Jose James
Friday, June 17: Jose James
Saturday, June 18: Jose James
Sunday, June 19: Jose James
Tuesday, June 21: Dave Holland & Kenny Barron Trio With Johnathan Blake
Wednesday, June 22: Dave Holland & Kenny Barron Trio With Johnathan Blake
Thursday, June 23: Dave Holland & Kenny Barron Trio With Johnathan Blake
Friday, June 24: Dave Holland & Kenny Barron Trio With Johnathan Blake
Saturday, June 25: Dave Holland & Kenny Barron Trio With Johnathan Blake
Sunday, June 26: Dave Holland & Kenny Barron Trio With Johnathan Blake
Monday, June 27: Theo Croker & Love Quantum
Tuesday, June 28: Theo Croker & Love Quantum
Wednesday, June 29: Theo Croker & Love Quantum
Thursday, June 30: Macy Gray

BIRDLAND JAZZ CLUB
315 West 44th St, New York, NY 10036
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Monday, May 2: Anais Reno Quartet

Tuesday, May 3: Bill Charlap Trio
Wednesday, May 4: Bill Charlap Trio
Thursday, May 5: Bill Charlap Trio
Friday, May 6: Bill Charlap Trio; Birdland Big Band
Saturday, May 7: Bill Charlap Trio
Sunday, May 8: Steve Slagle Band; Andy Farber and his Orchestra; Arturo O’Farrill & The Afro Latin Jazz Ensemble
Monday, May 9: Mafalda Minnozzi
Tuesday, May 10: Bill Charlap Trio
Wednesday, May 11: Bill Charlap Trio
Thursday, May 12: Bill Charlap Trio
Friday, May 13: Bill Charlap Trio
Saturday, May 14: Bill Charlap Trio
Sunday, May 15: Arturo O’Farrill & The Afro Latin Jazz Ensemble
Monday, May 16: Eliane Elias
Tuesday, May 17: Eliane Elias
Wednesday, May 18: Eliane Elias
Thursday, May 19: Eliane Elias
Friday, May 20: Eliane Elias
Saturday, May 21: Eliane Elias
Sunday, May 22: Arturo O’Farrill & The Afro Latin Jazz Ensemble
Monday, May 23: Tierney Sutton
Tuesday, May 24: Tierney Sutton
Wednesday, May 25: Tierney Sutton
Thursday, May 26: Bill O’Connell Quartet featuring Craig Handy
Friday, May 27: Birdland Big Band; Aaron Diehl & David Wong Duo
Saturday, May 28: Aaron Diehl & David Wong Duo
Sunday, May 29: Robert Edwards Big Band; Dezron Douglas Quartet
Monday, May 30: Ed Neumeister Quartet
Tuesday, May 31: Liebman/Brecker/Copland Quintet featuring Drew Gress & Joey Baron
Wednesday, June 1: Liebman/Brecker/Copland Quintet featuring Drew Gress & Joey Baron
Thursday, June 2: Liebman/Brecker/Copland Quintet featuring Drew Gress & Joey Baron
Friday, June 3: Liebman/Brecker/Copland Quintet featuring Drew Gress & Joey Baron
Saturday, June 4: Liebman/Brecker/Copland Quintet featuring Drew Gress & Joey Baron
Sunday, June 5: Arturo O’Farrill and The Afro Latin Jazz Ensemble
Monday, June 6: Nicole Zuraitis
Tuesday, June 7: Yellowjackets
Wednesday, June 8: Yellowjackets
Thursday, June 9: Yellowjackets
Friday, June 10: Yellowjackets; Birdland Big Band
Saturday, June 11: Yellowjackets
Sunday, June 12: Arturo O’Farrill and The Afro Latin Jazz Ensemble
Monday, June 13: Jim Caruso’s Cast Party
Tuesday, June 14: Frank Catalano Quartet
Wednesday, June 15: Frank Catalano Quartet
Thursday, June 16: Danilo Perez & His Global Messengers; Sandy Stewart & Bill Charlap Duo
Friday, June 17: Danilo Perez & His Global Messengers; The Birdland Big Band; Joey Calderazzo Quartet
Saturday, June 18: Danilo Perez & His Global Messengers; Joey Calderazzo
Sunday, June 19: Arturo O’Farrill and The Afro Latin Jazz Ensemble
Monday, June 20: Stacey Kent
Tuesday, June 21: Stacey Kent
Wednesday, June 22: Stacey Kent
Thursday, June 23: Stacey Kent; Allison Miller & Carmen Staaf “Nearness” Release Celebration
Friday, June 24: Stacey Kent; Birdland Big Band
Saturday, June 25: Stacey Kent
Sunday, June 26: Ron Aprea Big Band: Tribute To Frank Foster; Arturo O’Farrill and The Afro Latin Jazz Ensemble
Monday, June 27: Jim Caruso’s Cast Party
Tuesday, June 28: Tuck & Patti
Wednesday, June 29: Tuck & Patti
Thursday, June 30: Tuck & Patti

SMALLSLIVE JAZZ CLUB
183 West 10th Street-basement; NYC

- Thursday, May 26: Todd Williams Trio; David Gibson Quartet & Jam Session
- Friday, May 27: David "HAPPY" Williams; Corey Wallace Dubtet & Jam Session
- Saturday, May 28: David "Happy" Williams & Native Son; Stacy Dillard Quartet & Jam Session
- Sunday, May 29: Sasha Dobson quartet; Aaron Johnson Boplicity & Jam Session
- Monday, May 30: Victor Lewis Quintet; Jonathan Michel quartet & Jam Session
- Tuesday, May 31: Ben Solomon Quartet; Tyler Mitchell Quartet & Jam Session
- Wednesday, June 1: Sam Dillon / Andrew Gould Quartet; Benny Benack quintet & Jam Session
- Thursday, June 2: Adam Niewood Quartet; Frank Lacy quartet & Jam Session
- Friday, June 3: John Bailey Quartet; Jon Beshay Quartet & Jam session
- Saturday, June 4: John Bailey Quartet; Eric Wyatt Quartet & jam session
- Sunday, June 5: John Sneider & David Sneider Quintet; Hillel Salem Quintet & Jam Session
- Monday, June 6: George Coleman Jr. Quartet; Miki Yamanaka trio & Jam Session
- Tuesday, June 7: George Coleman Jr. Quartet; Jason Clotter Quartet & jam session
- Wednesday, June 8: Jordan Young trio
- Thursday, June 9: Pilc Moutin Hoenig; Sarah Hanahan Quartet & Jam Session
- Friday, June 10: Pilc Moutin Hoenig; Corey Wallace Dubtet & Jam Session
- Saturday, June 11: Bruce Williams Quintet; Stacy Dillard Quartet & Jam Session
- Sunday, June 12: Bruce Harris Quintet; Aaron Johnson Boplicity & Jam Session
- Monday, June 13: Ed Neumeister Quartet; Jonathan Michel quartet & Jam Session
- Tuesday, June 14: Dan Weiss Trio; Tyler Mitchell Quartet & Jam Session
- Wednesday, June 15: Patrick Cornelius Quartet; Benny Benack quintet & Jam Session
- Thursday, June 16: Tom Christensen & Scott Neumann’s Spin Cycle
- David Gibson Quartet & Jam session
- Friday, June 17: Mike LeDonne Quartet; John Beshay Quartet & jam session

(Continued on page 8)
- Aristotle (384-322 B.C.)

"Republics decline into democracies, and democracies decline into despotisms."
Kenny Garrett
Blue Note
June 2-5, 2022
A system of morality which is based on relative emotional values is a mere illusion, a thoroughly vulgar conception which has nothing sound in it and nothing true.
James Blood Ulmer
Not Trying to Make a Perfect Sound

Interview & Photos
By Ken Weiss

James “Blood” Ulmer (b. Feb. 2, 1940, St. Matthews, South Carolina) is a distinctive guitarist/vocalist of jazz, blues, funk, rock and free improvisation. He’s perhaps best known for his association with Ornette Coleman, beginning in the early ’70s, a partnership that was mutually beneficial as Coleman needed Ulmer’s input to understand how to incorporate guitar into his own work. It was Coleman who labeled Ulmer “a natural harmolodic player.” After a childhood spent in his father’s gospel quartet, the Southern Sons, where he grew his guitar and vocal skills, Ulmer made his way to Pittsburgh and then Columbus, Ohio to play on the R & B and doo-wop circuit. He would relocate to Detroit in 1967, where he learned to read and write music and devote himself to developing his unique brand of performing. Moving to New York City in 1971, Ulmer quickly found work with artists such as Art Blakey, Joe Henderson and Larry Young. It was during his time spent with Ornette Coleman that Ulmer adopted a novel approach to his instrument – moving away from dependence on the piano and developing his own unique guitar tunings to alter resonance patterns. Through the years, Ulmer has proven to be a tough interview. He has never sought out publicity, nor has he been one to sit through lengthy interviews. He’s chosen to let his music speak for itself. He made it clear that, although he would talk about his personal life during our discussions, he wanted the published interview to primarily reflect elements relating to his music. This five-hour interview took place on October 19, 2019 at Ulmer’s longtime home in Soho, where he proved to be an open, warm and welcoming host, as well as follow-up phone conversations through January 23, 2022.

Jazz Inside Magazine: How have you spent your time during the imposed shutdown related to the COVID-19 pandemic?

James Blood Ulmer: I had a lot of concerts canceled including most recently the New York City Winter Jazzfest. I was able to do some performances in 2021 including an eight-stop solo tour in Europe. I don’t want to say anything negative about what God is doing, the pandemic is all apart of the whole thing. Because of the pandemic, you have a chance to fulfill a lot of your creativity because you’re not riding on an airplane and sitting in a backroom waiting to play a gig or something. You know, playing a gig ain’t the most creative part of your life, so when you ain’t doing anything is when you can get your creativity. So, I don’t look at this time as downtime, I think it’s necessary to have these kind of spaces to do what you’ve got to do because there’s always enough stuff you can do to keep surviving. That’s what I’m thinking, I don’t know, you may have a different take on it. I’m always working on music. I’m definitely working on something because you’ve got to work on something if you don’t have anything to do. That’s the most important thing.

JBI: Do the two guitars inspire you in different ways?

JBU: No, I have one guitar tuned one way and the other tuned another way. You’ve got to spend time on that shit to make it all work. I only work on the guitar tuning, not the guitar itself. That’s the most important part of it. Both of my guitars are the same, the only thing different with my guitars is color. One is blonde and one is black. Both of them are the same kind. You can’t play with two different kinds of guitars because then you’d have to have a different ownership for each one. The horn player can do it, they can play one embouchure with three horns but I don’t know about playing different guitars like that, I’ve got to have the same kind of guitar.

JBI: What are the two guitars you play?

JBU: They’re Gibson Byrdland guitars. [Ulmer’s wife Eva adds that the black guitar is from 1954 and the blonde guitar is from 1962] I have no idea about those years, it doesn’t matter to me. A guitar is a guitar to me, I don’t care what kind it is. You have to play the same twelve frets. I’m not into the name of it or how they look, just that if the frets are smooth and you can play it, that’s all I need to play it. I think people buy guitars for how they look. It’s like a girlfriend, you get a girlfriend for how they look although you could get the same thing from anyone. That’s how an instrument is, if you get the [right] woman she doesn’t have to look like the others.

JBI: There’s debate over your correct date of birth. It’s listed as either February 2 or 8.

James Blood Ulmer: I have two birthdays – I celebrate both of them really because I ain’t never heard of such a thing in my life. [Laughs] Oh, you want the real date? My real birthday is February 2, 1940. My mama told me I was born February 8th and that’s the date I celebrate. When I turned 65-years-old, I went to get my pension from Social Security. They investigated and found out that my name and birthday were wrong. My birth certificate had it listed as the 2nd and my name as a junior. I still celebrate my birthday as February 8th.

JBI: Why the discrepancy?

JBU: It turns out my mother didn’t report my birth right away after I was born because it was too far to drive to report it. Supposedly, 80 to 90 years ago in the South, when they had a baby, they didn’t run like the white space] and I play each of them every day. I play one guitar during the day downstairs and then I play one guitar before I go to sleep. I’m working on something though, I ain’t just playing them. You gotta keep working on it.

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**James Blood Ulmer**

(Continued from page 12)

folks and report the birth right away. The closest town was like 33 miles away and you had to have a car, and it took a very, very long time to drive there on the dirt roads. I think that’s why there was the discrepancy.

**JI:** When and how did you come to be called “Blood?”

**JBU:** That came in my late teens. What does this have to do with music? [Laughs] Alright, I’m going to participate. When I moved to Pittsburg from South Carolina, I refused to tell people my name and I think that’s when it happened. They used to call all the people who didn’t have a name – “Blood.” It came from “Youngblood.” My mother also used to call me “Blood” because I was the blood of James, her husband, so I was James “Blood.”

**JI:** Albert Ayler said music is the healing force of the universe. Is that true?

**JBU:** The only thing I know is that, whatever music is, it was here before Man. It’s older than Man.

**JI:** How does it make you feel when you play music?

**JBU:** I play what I feel, that’s what music is. Music is feeling. If you ain’t got no feeling, you can’t play music. Feeling is music, itself. When I start feeling something, then I want to play music. Music is not first, feeling is first. You have to feel something to participate.

**JI:** Albert Ayler said music is the healing force of the universe. Is that true?

**JI:** What’s been your most memorable performance?

**JBU:** The best time I ever had singing to an audience was one night with my Memphis Blood Project with Vernon Reid. There was a lady in the front row singing the words. I always write down the words to the songs so I don’t have to memorize anything, and as I’m singing, I start looking at her as she’s singing the words I’m singing. I stopped looking at the paper and I started looking at her mouth, reading her lips as she sang, and I was right on the money. She knew the music and she loved the music. I have a different experience when I go to Europe, they understand the music in a different way, and I don’t sing the same way there. I don’t necessarily have to look at the paper. I can actually make up everything I’m singing and don’t have to use the same words all the time. I make a new story every time I sing, it’s not like I’m trying to perfect a phrase. [He sings “Look at Me” and laughs] I’m not trying to make a perfect sound, I’m trying to make a new sound, another story. That’s what I really like to do. It’s like playing a solo, you don’t want to play the same solo every fucking night. I try to be creative, even when I’m singing, and I’m getting better at it now.

**JI:** Why don’t you memorize the words to your songs?

**JBU:** I don’t memorize them because you fill up your memory, and I can’t do that. I’ve saved all that memory for playing and learning the unwritten theory of harmolodics.

**JI:** Where do you see your music going ten years from now?

**JBU:** I’m 79-years-old. I’m not trying to play no new shit. I’ve already played my music. He could play – he was working on music all the time – and every time he got something down that was new, different, that’s when he’d want to play, and when he played it, then he’d want to come back and either make it bigger or better or work on something else to play. I learned that and I want to work on something to play. If I play something once, I don’t want to rush back and play another gig playing the same shit I just played last week. I don’t do that. I play one project at a time and then I work hard to get the next one going. I have seven kids, twelve grandchildren, and great-grandchildren and they can’t come over to Adore in the City – Baby Talk (Live at Molde International Jazz Festival 2015) since 2007. Bad Blood in the City (Hyena Records, 2007) did alright but the record company got busted and sued because they didn’t pay nobody no publishing. I ain’t no slave – I learned from [Ornette] Coleman. He didn’t live to just find out how many gigs he could play – he was working on music all the time – and every time he got something down that was new, different, that’s when he’d want to play, and when he played it, then he’d want to come back and either make it bigger or better or work on something else to play. I learned that and I want to work on something to play. If I play something once, I don’t want to rush back and play another gig playing the same shit I just played last week. I don’t do that. I play one project at a time and then I work hard to get the next one going. I have seven kids, twelve grandchildren, and great-grandchildren and they can’t come over when I’m working on a project. I’m trying to get my music played! I’m working on my music, not me! What’s the deal? If that wasn’t the case, Beethoven’s music would have died with Beethoven if nobody worked on his music. I ain’t never gonna stop working on my music.

**JI:** You have promotional CD recordings available for sale at your performances. How do people get those recordings?

**JBU:** Those recordings are not in any record stores. I only sell my records myself on the web or through the mail. I don’t want to rush back and play another gig playing the same shit I just played last week. I don’t do that. I play one project at a time and then I work hard to get the next one going. I have seven kids, twelve grandchildren, and great-grandchildren and they can’t come over when I’m working on a project. I’m trying to get my music played! I’m working on my music, not me! What’s the deal? If that wasn’t the case, Beethoven’s music would have died with Beethoven if nobody worked on his music. I ain’t never gonna stop working on my music.

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James Blood Ulmer

(Continued from page 14)

JBU: Why is it that you don’t want to publicize or promote yourself? You’ve turned down interviews in the past.

JBU: Listen, I play gigs. I’ve been playing, I’ve been working. I take care of myself playing music. I almost died in Europe a month ago. I work to pay my bills. I have no other job to pay my expenses except playing music. I work more than a lot of people think, I just don’t talk about what I’m doing. I don’t advertise it. Why would I? I have a problem with the promotion of music. They do not promote what we call “American Music.” All the music they are promoting is music that is played under the European concept of the piano and the standing structure of it. Music from the European concept involves music where everything is tuned to the piano. That’s European music. They came up with it and it’s good, but it’s European music, and we’re in America. America don’t claim no music. Everyone who came to America came from Europe, except black people. So that music has the cry for freedom in it, no, that demands freedom, nobody wants to talk about that music, but that’s the music I want to play. And I have discovered the way to take my guitar away from that tuning. I don’t really play that tuning at all. We do not want to acknowledge the music of America – meaning the music from America is the first cry for freedom through music. That’s American music right there, and the rest of that shit is European. I don’t want to play European styles. I would like to promote the music that brought that cry for freedom in this country, and no one wants to write about that music. But there are people who are living, and I’m proof of it, who hear it, and pay you to do it, and you can survive. This country created a music that had a cry for freedom in it. Coleman told me, “Blood, you’re a natural harmolodic player.” I said, ‘Oh, that’s good, I’m glad to know that.’ Meaning that I was celebrating the freedom that I had from playing music. I don’t know how to say it, but it exists, and no one is writing about that. They write about jazz, blues, rock, but all that music is brought about through something else. I shouldn’t talk about this because I’m not trying to bring this message to the world, I’m trying to bring this message to myself. Harmolodic is not a music, it’s a way. You’ve got to be free. It ain’t “I’m gonna free you.” No, no. I’m free, I can express it, and if I can express freedom, I’m free right then at that moment, and music is the only thing that will allow that to happen.

JBU: A lot of people in America play music, but we play music from the tuning of the piano, everybody. Everybody tunes up to the piano, and all the instrument makers make it tune up to that. That’s tuning up to a European system, so how you can call that system American music? I’m from South Carolina. Pianos and organs were planted in all the churches. Where did they get those instruments from? Those instruments were planted in these places that we grew up so from childhood we’d grow up hearing these European sounds. They didn’t want what I’m telling you to even exist. I think a writer of music should be trying to dig that up. You should be looking into the difference between American music and European, Chinese, Indian music, because everyone has their own music, but American music, they won’t acknowledge our music.

JBU: But jazz is considered to be American music.

JBU: What jazz? Name the person who played it.

JBU: Louis Armstrong.

JBU: [Laughs] Shit, whoever managed and promoted Louis Armstrong made much more money than Louis Armstrong. That’s why they did it and are still doing it. They’re still getting paid. And when the artist is too strung out on drugs to play anymore, they just go on to the next artist. That’s not no American music, that’s slavery music. Music is a celebration. See, when you can go on the stage all night and play free, anything you want to play, you happy as a motherfucker, cause you ain’t played nothing nobody asked you to play, and then you go back and get your money and go home. That’s all I can say.

JBU: You’ve said that interviewers don’t ask the right questions.

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a record, I know that! I sure hope and pray that making a record is not the last thing I do. Music is so serious to me and it’s so misrepresented. People talking about it out of the side of their neck. They don’t understand what music is and how it affects everything. That’s why I stopped talking to journalists for a while. I’m not speaking for anyone but myself. Somebody told me if I stopped playing music, I would die. So, I can’t stop playing.

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cause when you do an interview, they don’t really want to write about the music. It’s weird. I’m trusting you, but I haven’t done it in so long. I’m doing this to see what happens. But to get to the essence of what’s happening in music, especially in America, that is so crucial. We are forced to follow the piano. All the instruments that are made, have to follow a certain status quo. The only way I can put this is that I am trying to go to paradise. Do you want to go to heaven or hell? I want to go to heaven, and you will need to free yourself from Satan to go to heaven. The music I play doesn’t have scales, no chords, and no sequence. Eliminate that.

JI: What’s been your reaction to getting accolades in the press, such as when noted critic, Robert Palmer of Rolling Stone Magazine, pegged you as, “The most original guitarist since Jimi Hendrix.”

JBU: Is that good press? I read that a lot of times. What are my feelings about that? I mean, somebody’s telling the truth! [laughs] I look at that as truth! That’s it, and not too many people want to tell the truth. Most of the guitar players have to tune up to the piano and learn those chords. But I don’t play like that, and the way Jimi Hendrix played the guitar, you can’t do that either because he had that motherfucker turned upside down and half outta tune too. I think it’s about the tuning of the instrument. I used to play that guitar so loud, right to the feedback. I’d be one micro-second from feedback on it. I would play it as loud and as intense as I could. I wasn’t playing the same style as Jimi Hendrix. I was playing free form, avant-garde jazz, but I would play it loud, like it was rock and roll. And that was exciting, people liked that. As long as it was loud, they were dancing. They didn’t give a shit what it was, as long as it was loud.

JI: Did you ever have contact with Jimi Hendrix?

JBU: I saw him one time while I was in Pittsburgh playing with the Del-Vikings. We played in Aliquippa [PA] and he was on the same bill. That was the closest I ever got in his midst. I didn’t talk to him at all.

JI: Ornette Coleman’s concept of harmolodics has greatly influenced your work. What is pure harmolodic?

JBU: Who said that? Coleman told me when he had met me that I was a natural harmolodic player and he wanted me to move into his house and stay with him so he could learn about the guitar, and I sat down and practiced with Coleman, eight hours a day, day in and day out, until he heard the guitar. And I was playing what I was playing before I met Coleman. I didn’t come to no damn New York to learn no damn music. I was already on the road for damn near 10 years with organ players. I came off of the road and stayed 5 years in Detroit because I didn’t want to go nowhere anymore until I found out what I wanted to play, and I didn’t do that until I left Detroit. Detroit was the most educated place for the musicians. Every musician I know went through Detroit, except for Coleman. So that’s the truth about it, but now everybody wants to make up stories about harmfulodics and harmolodic that, but, I told you, harmolodic is that cry for freedom from slavery. That motherfucker don’t want to be no slave. I turned down three to four movie deals. A guy wanted me to sing one of them old damn blues. It sounded like he just got off the slave ship. I don’t want to play no songs like that on some film. I’m not gonna do that. I love Coleman so much because he searched for that music that I’ve been trying to talk to you about. Nobody wants to talk about that music, they want to make a name for it, like jazz or blues, but, no, that is the music that John Coltrane and Coleman played, and all of them fellows who took their dang gone instruments and tried to free themselves. [They didn’t] play it like it was designed, they changed the structure of it. I played with guys who’d take the mouthpiece off their horn, turn it upside down, and blow through the other end. I didn’t want to meet Coleman to start playing, but he made me realize with what he was doing that you could go free. You didn’t have to play blues and rock and roll and jump up and down and dance on the stage, acting the fool. I used to try to do all kinds of shit, but I quit, and in 1965 I moved to Detroit. I taught guitar at the Metropolitan Art Complex there for three years. But then I met Coleman and said, ‘Boy, this is a free guy. I want to be just like him.’ I was his bodyguard because he was a little guy and I was a big guy. What I learned from him was that what I was thinking of doing was permissible. He made me feel that I could do whatever I was thinking. As far as harmolodic? I don’t know. With Coleman it was just how you play, he didn’t have any textbook for you to learn from or changes for your ass.

JI: You said you were Ornette Coleman’s bodyguard?

JBU: [Laughs] I was like his bodyguard. I was living there for a year, and he was determined to do what he wanted to do. Coleman was deep.

JI: What was your early experience with Ornette Coleman?

JBU: I started with Coleman when he had that big band with 3 horns, including Dewey Redman, Charlie Haden on bass, Ed Blackwell and Billy Higgins on drums, and Coleman on sax, and he decided that he wanted to get the guitar. The first gig we played was at Ann Arbor with 30,000 people. At the time, Coleman was looking to get a new band together to do something new, something different, especially after he heard the guitar. He knew he had the chance to do something different, so he changed the band to me, him and Sirone Jones on bass. And then, he got more inspired and he wanted two guitars after me. He didn’t even tell me I wasn’t in the band anymore. I was just walking into his house and I heard them practicing. I said, ‘What’s going on?’ Coleman had Jamaaladeen [Tacuma] playing electric bass, two guitar

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James Blood Ulmer

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players, and him, and they were stretched out, and fuck, I kinda liked what they were doing. They were really right on it.

JI: That’s how you found out you had been let go from Coleman’s band?

JBU: I don’t know if it was let go or not, I didn’t know what it was. Me and Coleman were real good friends the whole time, even after that. He used to come to my house every day. I don’t think he told anyone else that they weren’t in the band anymore either. He’d just start doing something else. I don’t think he really thought of it like that. He wanted to try some different shit. He decided he wanted to use two guitars. When he used to play with

JBU: The first record I made was called Revealing [recorded 1977] with George Adams, Doug Hammond, Sirone and Cecil McBee. I was staying with Coleman when I made that record. I took that record to Coleman – I’ve never told this story to anybody – and I said, ‘Coleman, I want you to listen to my first record.’ I put that record on, and I was playing what I wanted to play on that record, and he listened to it. He said, “Blood, I’m a make your first record. I’ll produce your first record. I’ll play on it.” I said, ‘You’re gonna play on it? Okay, good. You’re gonna play my songs?’ He said, “Yeah,” then I wrapped up the eight songs, he played them, and he put it out as Tales of Captain Black. That was my second record.

JI: Can a young person, learning to play on their instrument, play this American “Freedom” music?

JBU: See, that’s what I’m saying. Harmolodic is not music, it’s a cry for freedom. When you play music, it’s something you have to feel inside to play, unless you’re just reading music off paper. But if you’re gonna write a song and play it, you’re gonna have to create some kind of feeling to do that. Harmolodic music, I told you, I think it’s a cry for being free. You celebrate the fact that you are not following no rules. In fact, once the melody is over, you don’t have to follow chord changes, sequence, meaning patterns, or bar lines. It’s boring if you have to follow [rules]. I used to play in a band that played “Stella by Starlight” about seven times a night and I got so tired of that song. Coleman figured out a technical way of how to write that music. He could write it down, that music that he called harmolodic.

JI: Can harmolodic be applied to any style of music?

JBU: No, I don’t think so. My true take on harmolodic music is a cry for freedom. When you play music, it’s something you have to feel inside to play, unless you’re just reading music off paper. But if you’re gonna write a song and play it, you’re gonna have to create some kind of feeling to do that. Harmolodic music, I told you, I think it’s a cry for being free. You celebrate the fact that you are not following no rules. In fact, once the melody is over, you don’t have to follow chord changes, sequence, meaning patterns, or bar lines. It’s boring if you have to follow [rules]. I used to play in a band that played “Stella by Starlight” about seven times a night and I got so tired of that song. Coleman figured out a technical way of how to write that music. He could write it down, that music that he called harmolodic.

JI: What is the difference between harmolodic music and freely improvised music?

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JI: Why do you think the concept of harmolodics is not more popular with musicians?

JBU: No one wants that concept to be popular because it don’t sell instruments and it don’t make good race relations.

JI: Do you have to be Black to play harmolodic?

JBU: No, I don’t think it was only Black people who came here to be free.
JBU: I play the guitar and he played the saxophone. Hell, [Laughs] you can’t have the same concept with the guitar that you have with the saxophone. That’s why he wanted to play with the guitar. He figured out how to conduct a band like you do an orchestra. If you noticed, Coleman was the only one that took an out-front solo, and everything he was playing, he turned that music into like what an orchestra was playing, but the band was playing without reading. That allowed him to play on top, the melody. I thought it was a hell of a concept. I love Coleman’s way, the way he did things, the freedom that he gave the band. He let everybody play just the way they want.

JI: How does your concept of music differ from Ornette Coleman’s concept?

JBU: I had this studio in Brooklyn where I used to play at. I had it full of drums and a loud guitar amp, and I used to have neighborhood kids come in and beat on my drums and I would play with them. Billy Higgins used to come through there because the subway stop was there. He stopped in one day and told me he was Billy Higgins. I had never heard of him, but I invited him to play on my drums and we played together. When we got through, he said, “I’m gonna take you to Coleman’s house.” I said, ‘Coleman who?’ I had never heard of Coleman before. He took me to the house and told Coleman that he should play with me. Then me, him, and Billy Higgins started playing.

JI: How did you come to move into Ornette’s loft?

JBU: He wanted to work with the guitar. We worked together to bring the music forward. We sat together for one year. I played guitar and he played sax.

JI: You were able to find work with many great leaders early in your career.

JBU: See the thing about it, when I came to New York, all the jazz people were trying to get a guitar player in their band because Miles Davis had a guitar player. That’s what that was about. It wasn’t about me, it was about the guitar, it had crossed over. I played with Joe Henderson and Larry Young and Art Blakey, they all wanted to put a guitar player in their band. After Miles started it, the guitar was plentiful, they started working with the jazz guys then. Before that, guitar players never worked with jazz guys before. There was a movement happening then. The guys started hearing something besides the piano because McCoy Tyner had worn that piano out! [Laughs] McCoy Tyner took that piano and he said, “Y’all never get past this shit!” [Laughs] I bet John Coltrane would have gotten one if he had lived another year longer.

JI: You mentioned Art Blakey. You had a steady gig with him at Minton’s Playhouse at the same time that you were playing in Coleman’s band. What did Blakey have to say about Ornette and his music?

JBU: I never talked to Art Blakey about no dang gone Coleman’s music.

JI: What was your experience performing with Art Blakey?

JBU: He hired me and the bass player who was in my band in Detroit at the same time. Lee Morgan was in the band and he didn’t like the guitar. [Laughs] The only people in the band who liked the guitar was Art Blakey and George Cables. But that Lee Morgan, every time he got ready to take a solo, he’d look at me and say, “Lay out, lay out, motherfucker.” [laughs] He didn’t want the guitar in the band. It wasn’t about me playing with them, it was about them trying to play with a guitar, because the guitar didn’t need nobody playing with it. The guitar was getting ready to do something by itself, and I don’t know why [all those leaders wanted a guitar], and those jazz players couldn’t play with them guitar players too good. You have to play free to play with the guitar, I think.

JI: Would you talk about the dream you had one night that led to your sudden breakthrough of tuning all your guitar strings to the same note, allowing you to adapt to Coleman’s music?

JBU: That tuning did not allow me to adapt to Coleman’s music, let’s get that straight. Coleman used to rehearse my ass, eight hours a day, just soloing, telling me where to go...
and from having babies. There was no dancing and parties, unless it was at school. I didn’t want to do that. We played church songs and made money. My daddy used to give us money, ever since I was thirteen years old. I started at seven years old, and they used to give us money from the collection. I used to put that money in my pocket and go to school with that. I liked it. I did better than a lot of other brothers who were working on the farm, digging potatoes. We picked cotton for our cousin who got some slavery land down there, but that was the only thing we did. My cousin had 350 acres and about fifteen kids, so we helped out, but it was cool.

JI: Did your folks ever come to terms with the music you went on to make?

JBU: When I made my Tales of Captain Black record, I brought the newspaper home so my mama could read what they were saying about it. It talked favorably about the music, and my mama said to me, “Put that guitar down and get a job.” [Laughs] I don’t know if she listened to the music, but she read the newspaper. I don’t think she had a record player. She didn’t listen to no music. My mother died at 68 years old, she was kind of sickly. That was the last thing I heard from my mama about what I was doing. She thought I had gone to New York to get a job. She also said, “And stop cussing in the newspaper.” You know I sure wasn’t listening to her. [Laughs]

JI: Would you talk about your early career in music

JBU: I played gospel music seriously in South Carolina from the age of seven to thirteen years old – singing and playing the guitar in my father’s quartet, the Southern Sons. When I left at eighteen years old to go to school in Pittsburgh, I couldn’t find a job that I wanted to do. I knew I wanted to play music so I investigated how I could get into it. Pittsburgh had many singing groups that were playing on the street corners doing doo-wop music but none of them had a guitar player. I started hanging out with doo-wop groups and then I was asked to join a group called the Savoys, but I hadn’t brought my instrument from South Carolina. So, the band’s manager bought me a Silvertone guitar and amplifier after I auditioned for them. I later ran into the manager of the Del-Vikings, the famous doo-wop group who had a hit song called “Come Go With Me.” They wanted to have a guitar player for the first time and they hired me. We used to do the Dick Clark show, which was outside of Pittsburgh. The music I was asked to play at that time all had something to do with the way you play blues and gospel together and I was right in it because I already played that in South Carolina. I fit right in.

JI: As a teenager you encountered George Benson while living in Pittsburgh. What, if anything, did you pick up from him?

JBU: George lived in the Hill [district]. He’d play his guitar all the time, he’d sit outside on his step and play the guitar. He was the talk of the town. A little, phenomenal young brother coming over, playing his pants off on the guitar like that. I used to go over and listen to him play. He’d play progressive stuff. He could copy Johnny Smith, Wes Montgomery, anybody you asked about, he could play. George Benson was a little child star, and
I'll take care of the inside."

Note, “Blood, you take care of the outside and wanted to play the kind of music he made. I played with a pick since then. But I never picks away. George Benson is the one who playing so fast with a pick that I threw my and can play it faster than anyone else, but he thing for him to do. He knows every scale, didn’t study to do that. That was a God given learned from George Benson. And when I

“I used to like Wes Montgomery, and I was playing in Indianapolis at the Hub-Bub Lounge and Wes Montgomery stood at the bar for two sets. After the first set, I went to the bar, got close to him, and he said nothing. And after the second set, he was still there, and I went down, standing a few people from him, and that motherf*cker didn’t say good morning! And from that day on, I stopped playing inside. I went free after that and I never tried to sound like Wes Montgomery ever again.”

learned those blues changes from George, that’s when I left Pittsburgh. He had a gift, he didn’t study to do that. That was a God given thing for him to do. He knows every scale, and can play it faster than anyone else, but he doesn’t play phrases. George Benson was playing so fast with a pick that I threw my picks away. George Benson is the one who made me not play with a pick. I haven’t played with a pick since then. But I never wanted to play the kind of music he made. I ran to the free players early. I was breaking all the rules. George once told me at the Blue Note, “Blood, you take care of the outside and I’ll take care of the inside.”

play in America with that bald head. Shoot, she had bigger crowds than Aretha Franklin and all the other girls who had hit records out. Her bald head was bigger than their records. That’s who I played with but I wasn’t playing the same kind of guitar I’m playing now. When I joined her I had a Silvertone guitar which cost about five dollars and I designed it. I had all kinds of things taped to my guitar. I could do crossword puzzles with my guitar. When I got that gig with Jewel Brynner, she said, “Boy, throw that guitar over there. I don’t want you on the stage with me with that guitar you’ve got.” And she went and bought me the first Fender Stratocaster guitar, the one that Jimi Hendrix started playing, but I got mine before Jimi Hendrix got his. Jewel wanted ed me and her frontline to look beautiful with our instrument representing her on the stage. The guy next to me got a Fender electric bass and he looked really, really good. So we had electric bass and guitar and a piano on the frontline and the horn player was playing a Selmer saxophone. That’s how it was. George Adams and I were in the same band four different times. When we played with Jewel Brynner, there was only enough money for two to sleep in a room for one. We used to sleep in the same bed crossways because we [weren’t gay]. After the first year, I became Jewel Brynner’s bandleader and stayed with her about three years, and out of those three years, I was off about three weeks total. That’s how I paid my rent, but I eventually lost my first wife through that, being on the road so much. I stopped playing with Jewel because I wanted to be something else besides a woman’s bandleader for an R & B band. That’s when I sought out George Benson for the lesson. That’s when I left town and went to Columbus, Ohio.

JI: What happened in Ohio?

JBU: When I got to Columbus, I started my own little group called Blood and the Blood Brothers. I was playing the clubs around town and as the house band for the 502 Club for over two years. In those days, singers did not carry a band with them so the club owners had a house band who would play for everybody. We’d have to learn all the music for the singers when they came for the week. The high-light of that was Dion Warwick came and after we played with her, she wanted to hire me to leave my band and go on the road with her. I didn’t want to do that because I liked my band and we were doing pretty good. Plus, she was only offering 105 dollars a week. I played with my band until I got a gig with organist Hank Marr. I think he had the best technique of any organ player at the time. Jimmy Smith had everybody on their head, but Hank Marr was a good organ player. He hired me and George Adams and I played with him for three years. I learned a lot from Hank Marr. I learned how to play with the organ and how to read chord changes and a lot of stuff since I didn’t go to school. He would play a song and call the changes to me while he was playing, and I could play them and learn. Those were rough travel days. We were traveling everywhere and riding in a covered wagon, so to speak. We drove from California to Houston, and all of the towns in between, in a car. After that trip, George quit the band and left to go to New York to play in the Mingus Big Band. He always wanted to play with [Charles] Mingus. After George left, I started thinking of leaving also because by then, we had played everywhere that an organ player could play. By that time, I had been on the road for over ten years and I was worn out. I wanted to find my own music and that’s when I went to Detroit. I used my time there to fig-

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ure out what I was playing and to find the direction that I wanted to go in so that when I left there, I wanted to know what I was doing, technically. That’s where I learned how to read and write music and I had a lot of good players. I had a group there called Focus Novi and we played pretty free music. Eventually, I realized I had to go to New York. I tried not to come to New York, but I went. I always depended on myself though.

JI: While living in Ohio, you had a frustrating encounter with your then idol Wes Montgomery which altered your career. He watched you play guitar in an Indianapolis club, and you did everything you could to get him to acknowledge you, but he never said a word. That spurred you on to find your own voice.

JBU: I used to like Wes Montgomery, and I was playing in Indianapolis at the Hub-Bub Lounge and Wes Montgomery stood at the bar for two sets. After the first set, I went to the bar, got close to him, and he said nothing. And after the second set, he was still there, and I went down, standing a few people from him, and that motherfucker didn’t say good morning! And from that day on, I stopped playing inside. I went free after that and I never tried to sound like Wes Montgomery ever again. I went to Detroit after that and I really started playing free there.

JI: Did you ever meet up with Wes Montgomery again after that night?

JBU: No! I never even talked to him. I never really thought about other guitarists because I was playing the guitar all my life, ever since I was seven years old. I don’t know nothing but the guitar. I never worried about anybody else. I liked Wes because he used to play those octaves, but after I learned how that octave went, I never worried about Wes.

JI: It’s a great story that the owner of Detroit’s Blue Bird Inn liked your music so much that he gave you money to move to New York with the directive to hunt down and play with Miles Davis, but instead, you met Ornette Coleman. How do you think your career would have diverged if you had met Miles first instead of Ornette?

JBU: Miles was playing rock. I didn’t play that. I’d already been playing the music that I played when I came to New York. I’d been on the road for a long time, playing with different bands. When I was getting ready to leave Detroit for New York, the last gig I played was at the Blue Bird. I told the owner I was going to New York and he said, “Yeah, that’d be good. Go and find Miles and tell him I sent you.” That was the deal. He wanted that, not me. I didn’t need Miles Davis. Listen, when I went to New York, I was playing my own music.

JI: How did you make the transition to New York?

JBU: In a car. [Laughs] That was a long time ago. Every musician has to do the same thing when they come to New York. They have to find a place to stay and find out what you want to be. Shoot, I didn’t know anything about New York City or Brooklyn or the Bronx, uptown, downtown, Harlem. I didn’t know about all of that. When I first came to New York I went to my brother’s house in Far Rockaway as my first stop. [Ulmer declined to talk further about his difficult transition] I don’t want to tell that story. That’s got nothing to do with music. That’s gonna make me make less money. I’ll make less money than ever if I have a story like that. That was before I met Ornette and before I’d even made a note in New York.

JI: Where specific memories do you have of playing with Ornette from 1972-77, especially with Ornette, Don Cherry, Charlie Haden, Dewey Redman, Billy Higgins and Eddie Blackwell?

JBU: I played one concert with them, the last concert of that band. I’ll tell ya, I was an arrogant person. I didn’t come to have no experience with these motherfuckers. I already knew what I was gonna play. I knew from Detroit that you had to have your own music. If someone wants you to play with them, they want you to play with them for a reason, and that reason is nobody can fill that reason but you, otherwise somebody else would have been called. Playing with somebody else isn’t going to do shit for you. When I came to New York, I had money. I wasn’t poor, looking for work.

JI: You’ve played with so many great artists.

JBU: Larry Young was the last organ player I played with. He was trying to play something different on the organ. I don’t know why he hired me. At the time I was with him, I’d spend all my time off stage playing scales on my guitar. If I was having a conversation, I’d be [playing scales], modulating. I just constantly kept my guitar around my neck, and whatever I would do, I would keep playing. Larry Young told me one day, “Blood, you should try to play like Jimi Hendrix.” [Laughs] I said, “Oh, man.” I can’t say too much about him. I wasn’t in his band too much. I just did some gigs with him, so he couldn’t tell me what to do, just what he thought. He wanted somebody in his band who sounded like Jimi Hendrix and used pedals. I didn’t use no pedals. He didn’t really have a choice since there weren’t really too
James Blood Ulmer

many guys playing guitar.

JBU: I liked Joe Henderson. He lived in Brooklyn and I used to go to his place to rehearse. He liked the guitar, but he didn’t know what to do with the guitar. He didn’t know how to make that stretch between the guitar and the piano. He really wasn’t free enough for me. He could play, but he was an inside player. I love the way he played, but I have to play with free people. You have to decide which group you’re going to follow – the inside or the outside players. The free players make more money, [Laughs] not on the top level, but on the bottom level. There’s not too many hit free records, you have to go commercial to make a lot of money. If you’re an inside player and you haven’t really sold out, you’re not gonna get that much money playing them clubs.

JBU: When he died, I got a telephone call from the news people. They thought it was me who died. I said, ‘No, I’m not dead yet.’

JI: You had an experience with James Brown. He wanted to sit in with you after he got out of jail?

JBU: [Laughs] James Brown just got out of jail and wanted to sit in with me. He was a bad motherfucker and he just got out of jail! Get out of here! No way we could let him on the guitar.

JI: What were those times like?

JBU: I didn’t really think about those people because I didn’t know who they were, and they didn’t sound too professional to me. They were going on the same path that I was going on, and I don’t think they were too musical. Captain Beefheart, they had kind of an avant-garde way of playing, what you call, dance music. Beefheart was kind of an avant-garde type of guy. Columbia Records was promoting my records and they knew how to do that much better than me. I didn’t have no crew trying to get gigs for me.

JI: Any comments on Captain Black meeting Captain Beefheart?

JBU: Those other groups weren’t that famous. I was more famous than them. I was on a major label, they weren’t. They were opening up for me.

JI: Odyssey (1983) was your last recording for Columbia. It’s generally considered to be one of your best recordings. Why were you dropped from the label after recording it?

JBU: Oh, you think it’s one of my best recordings? I played it with the open tuning on the guitar. I totally left the regular way you play the guitar. The label guy called me into his office. His name was Damien. [Laughs] ‘I wanted me to do some blues by Jimi Hendrix and Bruce Springsteen, and have it produced by a guy who had used my song ‘Are You Glad To Be In America’ for a commercial …’ He said, “Blood, I’m gonna tell you. If you don’t do this, this is your last record coming up. If you do it, you can make more records.” I had a choice and I said, ‘This is my last record … If I had continued with Columbia, I’d be out there right now singing ‘Roxanne.’”

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no bass, just violin, drums and guitar, that’s it. I couldn’t find myself doing that then. Now, since I’ve been out here so long, I’d probably make a blues record with somebody else’s songs. In fact, I did with Memphis Blood, but that was with Vernon [Reid]. But I don’t let it control me. If I had continued with Columbia, I’d be out there right now singing “Roxanne.” [Laughs/sings “Roxanne”]

JI: How have you been able to keep all your bands going after all these years?

JBU: All my bands are still going after all these years. I play with every one of them. Every one! I don’t want you to miss that point. All my bands are working, and the musicians get paid more money than they get paid with any of the other bands they play with. Memphis Blood just got done playing for 5,000 people. My next gig is with Odysseya, and then solo, and then my Black Rock band, although I lost my boys for the Black Rock Trio because Calvin Weston doesn’t play his Black Rock music anymore. He plays his Rock Trio because Calvin Weston doesn’t know how to play that kind of thing. Vernon do, that’s why he’s still in the band. [Laughs]

JBU: I was supposed to open up for Miles. [Laughs] I was on Columbia Records with that Black Rock record and they were promoting that record a little bit. That was when Miles came out with his thing with the guitar. Miles had made a record and he was selling it. Then Miles heard my record, I know the guy who brought it to him, and Miles told his manager, “Fuck Blood!” [Laughs] So, even after it was advertised in the newspaper, I didn’t get the gig. I don’t really know why he blocked me, I can only imagine why. He knew my band was gonna wear his band out. That’s why. There was a movement at the time. Miles was trying to get the guitar players in his band. I had two guitars in my band – me and Ronny Drayton. He’s a great guitarist.

JBU: I heard that music, but that music didn’t have nothing to do with what I was doing. Miles was always an inside player to me, and he was good at it. He never played avant-garde. When he started playing with the players that he played with [later in his career], I didn’t really like Miles. [Laughs] To tell you the truth, I’m on a boardwalk by myself. I don’t think about none of these brothers, and I’m not impressed by this society. Why don’t you put this down? ‘He’s impressed by nothing of this society! Nothing in this American society impresses James Blood!’ Not even the music.” Life is supposed to be simple and easy. What I like is to eat food.

JBU: Vernon thinks like that, but I don’t think like that. I would have never gone into Electric Lady Studios. No, Vernon did that intentionally for the promotion of that record and we both got a Grammy nomination for that record. That was good. I don’t know how to play that kind of thing. Vernon do, that’s why he’s still in the band. [Laughs]

JBU: Vernon has produced all your Memphis Blood recordings and your solo Birthright CD. He arranged to have you record in historic recording studios—Sun Studios in Memphis, where Elvis worked, and New York’s Electric Lady Studios, where Jimi Hendrix recorded. Did working in those hon-ored studios have a transformative effect on you?

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JBU: Vernon produced one Third Rail recording [1995] with Bill Laswell. What happened with that band?

JBU: We just did a big show in San Francisco with Third Rail – me, Bill Laswell and Bigfoot Brailey. Really, Third Rail is not the name of a band, it’s the name of a record. It was my record that I called Third Rail because I produced that in Bill Laswell’s studio, and I didn’t want to put my name on his independent label as a James Blood Ulmer record. I told you I’m arrogant, so I said call the record Third Rail. Third Rail never was a band.

JBU: Hell no! Don’t ask me no silly questions. Hell no! How that gonna have any affect on an old motherfucker like me? I don’t got a shit about them motherfuckers. I told you I’m arrogant. What do you think I’m supposed to feel there?

JBU: Vernon likes that kind of shit. [Laughs] That’s about the best advice I can give you right now.

JI: Do you have any guiding principles for life that you can share?

JBU: Yeah, believe in the Lord and leave the Devil alone. [Laughs] That’s about the best advice I can give you right now.

JI: What are your interests outside of music? What are your guilty pleasures?

JBU: Eating, praying and playing. I pray to God five times a day. I don’t want to be on the same page that everybody else is on. I know I don’t have any guilty pleasures. I do not spend time on superficial things. I am not impressed by this society. Why don’t you put this down? ‘He’s impressed by nothing of this society! Nothing in this American society impresses James Blood!’ Not even the music.’ Life is supposed to be simple and easy. What I like is to eat food.

JI: The last questions have been given to me from other musicians to ask you:

Melvin Gibbs (bass) asked: “What inspires you to make music these days?”

JBU: That’s a silly question. [Pauses] Oh, you’re looking for an answer? [Laughs] I’m working on the same music I’ve been working on all my life. I ain’t got no new inspirations or nothing. If I would wait until the day I got 80 years old to have an inspiration, it would be 50 years too late.

Nels Cline (guitar) asked: “What is your first memory of hearing a guitar and were you drawn to the instrument right away?”

JBU: The first time I heard the guitar was my daddy playing it and singing about my mama to me. I didn’t choose the guitar, the guitar was in the house. That was the only thing to play with. You know what instrument I love? The saxophone. I wanted the saxophone so bad, but I didn’t even get the chance to see a saxophone until I was sixteen years old because they didn’t have any instruments in our schools until I got to high school. For me to hear a guitar to move my emotions in the way
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he’s talking about, it would have to come straight out of heaven, not from J.C. Penney’s down the street. I can’t think that I would go to a music store to find a guitar that would move my heart. I can’t do that. That would deplete my ambition of even thinking about music. What I’m saying is that a guitar don’t have a thing to do with what I do with the guitar. I don’t have no relationship with a guitar. My relationship is with God only, and that’s all I’m trying to please. My first guitar was a milk can with some wires, and I used to beat it with a stick. Now that was more emotional to me than the guitar. The guitar, you’ve got to work on that, and study it. I have to make the guitar do what I want it to do and bow to me. They don’t even make the guitar right. I’ve returned my guitar, and if I could redo the neck to make it fit to what I’ve been playing for the last 20 years, it would be great. So why am I gonna say something about that dang gone guitar and it don’t produce what I want it to do?

JI: Well, that turned into a great question and answer. That revealed a lot about how you think.

JBU: Why is that good? I don’t really want people to know a lot about me. I want to be as mysterious as possible. I do not want to get in the bag with everybody else. I want to be one mysterious as possible. I do not want to get in what I understand, it’s an obscure concept from quantum theory that combines space and time into a single item. They say time can expand and contract, and I’ve been thinking about this in terms of playing and improvising and the concept of bar lines and how this concept makes bar lines constricting. I got into this after I read an article about how everyone experiences time differently. The critic Robert Palmer had once written that Ornette’s music was based on biological rhythms. I’ve been thinking about this in terms of playing music and trying to play with a rhythm section that understands the traditional notions of what a jazz rhythm section is supposed to do, like play swing, but trying to do it in a more modern manner. This might be a bit farfetched. I wondered what you thought of this?

JBU: Nothing, I take nothing from it. That’s too damn complicated. [Laughs] I’m not interested in nothing like that. The only thing that matters is what’s between the wires on [my guitar] and me. Bern Nix went to college, he’s educated. I’m not educated. I’m uneducated. I don’t know what he wants me to say.

JI: I think he wants you to crack quantum theory.

JBU: I don’t know what that is. You’ve got to know what that is to answer that, I ain’t gonna lie. I talked to Bern Nix over the years, and I often didn’t know what he was saying.

Kevin Eubanks (guitar) asked: “Why is it that we don’t hear blues in jazz anymore?”

JBU: It ain’t gone, it’s still there, it’s just changing hands. Blues were first made and sold as an obscure way of continuing slavery in a more spiritual sense. Now blues is kind of changing hands, meaning that it’s not used by everybody the same way. You can go to Europe and hear a lot of European groups playing blues. You used to not see blues there, but now they have them. In this country, how can people play something that doesn’t exist? Music is something you’ve got to feel. If you don’t feel it, how you gonna express it?

Mike Stern (guitar) said: “Please tell Blood that I’m a big fan and always have been, and I know he knows that. Blood is deep into the blues. My question is who are your favorite blues musicians? Give him my very, very best please.”

JBU: Blues musicians? B.B. King. Mike Stern, he can play the blues pretty good. I didn’t grow up on no blues players. I didn’t follow them. We weren’t allowed to hear no blues players. I’d have to sneak to hear something. We had three guitar players in town, they would play blues, but they didn’t play church songs. I don’t play the blues, I wish I could. B.B. King knows how to play blues. He make you put your guitar down. He made me not let nobody sit in on my guitar no more. [Laughs] If you want to sit in with me, you got to play your own guitar, you ain’t taking mine. That motherfucker took my guitar and played so much shit on it! [Laughs] When people start playing like that, I start hanging out with the girls. [Laughs]

Jean-Paul Bourelly (guitar) asked: “Which identity inspires you the most to create? Do you see yourself as a guitarist first or a musician who plays guitar?”

JBU: A musician who plays guitar. Yeah, that’s more like it.

JI: A few years ago you gave me a question to ask Jean-Paul Bourelly for an interview. I’d like to turn your question around and ask it of you because it applies to you - Which do you think is closest to music – your voice or your instrument?

JBU: Your voice because your voice is created by God. God didn’t make the guitar. That was an easy one.

JI: Do you find people are touched more by your guitar playing or your singing?

JBU: I can’t figure that out. I don’t look at myself as a singer. I don’t know if what I do is singing or not. I’m delivering a message.

Jean-Paul Bourelly also asked: “Through the many phases, cycles, decades you have been through and seen, what was or is the greatest challenge in staying true to yourself within each change in the trends?”

JBU: I only promote what I’m doing. I don’t worry about what nobody else is doing. I’ve turned down three television opportunities already because I don’t want to promote what they’re promoting. I don’t chase money, I have money chase me. I learned that from being a gangster.

JI: You were a gangster?

JBU: [Laughs] I’m just saying. I think all musicians are gangsters. Gangsters don’t mean killing people or stealing.

Bill Laswell (bass, producer) asked: [Acknowledging one of Ulmer’s earliest records - Are You Glad to Be in America?] “Are you glad to be in America in 2019?”

JBU: Oh, my goodness. No, no, no. I have nothing against America, except America.

JI: What do you have to say looking back at the career you’ve had?

JBU: I hate that it’s over, I wish I had more time. It’s like a fun that you don’t want to end. How do you put that into words? If it ends, I won’t have anything to do. I was just facing that after the last gig because my doctor told me to temporarily stay off airplanes because they don’t have good oxygen. I don’t want to give up playing right now, I want to go out on a G chord. [Laughs]
Louis Sedell Hayes [b. May 31, 1937, Detroit, Michigan] honed his unique drum stylings in Detroit during the late ‘40s-mid ‘50s, mixing it up with the multitude of future jazz greats spawned by that city at the time. After getting the call from Horace Silver to come to New York to replace Art Taylor in his band, Hayes spent years in the Cannonball Adderley Quintet and the Oscar Peterson Trio. His work with bassist Sam Jones remains one of the most admired rhythm sections. He went on to lead or co-lead a series of groups with Freddie Hubbard, Kenny Barron, Junior Cook, Woody Shaw, Joe Henderson, James Spaulding and Dexter Gordon.

Hayes’ discography lists many of the most influential albums ever made, including sessions with Silver, Adderley and Peterson, as well as John Coltrane, Gene Ammons, Nat Adderley, Curtis Fuller, Terry Gibbs, Grant Green, Barry Harris, Johnny Hodges, Freddie Hubbard, Joe Henderson, J.J. Johnson, Sam Jones, Clifford Jordan, Harold Land, Yusef Lateef, Jackie McLean, Wes Montgomery, Phineas Newborn, Jr., Woody Shaw and McCoy Tyner. Hayes remains active, most recently leading the Cannonball Adderley Legacy Band, a renewed version of the Jazz Communicators, a Horace Silver tribute group, and a project covering the music of his uncle, John L. Nelson, who also happens to be the father of Prince. This telephone interview took place on May 8, 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic surge.

Jazz Inside Magazine: What have you learned about yourself by way of playing your music over the years?

Louis Hayes: It’s something that happens gradually over the years. You start out as a youngster, and you have these heroes that you would like to be able to perform with in your life. I wanted to be on a very high level of playing, so I had to work and be a loner a lot of the times in order to reach that level. It doesn’t stop, you always have to work at your art form in order to keep growing. You change all the time, along with your life. You learn more things about yourself because you don’t have a choice. You start out as a youngster, and you have these heroes that you would like to be able to perform with in your life. I wanted to be on a very high level of playing, so I had to work and be a loner a lot of the times in order to reach that level. It doesn’t stop, you always have to work at your art form in order to keep growing. You change all the time, along with your life. You learn more things about yourself because you don’t have a choice. You don’t have a choice. I don’t say things about my spiritual life, but at times, I can feel certain things, depending on whom I am appearing with, and depending on how my body is feeling at the time. That happens at certain times and is unexplainable.

Jazz Inside Magazine: How is it to play drums as an octogenarian?

Louis Hayes: It is different than when I was a youngster. I was trying to reach a certain level of ability when I was younger. I have made so much history now in my life, and so, I feel different. I don’t have the energy that I had when I was forty. Luckily, my playing is on a high level, so I can still do this because my body works just fine. It is different because I don’t work out the same way now that I did when I was younger. Most of the people I came up with have already passed away, so I am dealing with a whole other set of younger musicians, and that is different.

Jazz Inside Magazine: How, if at all, do you feel your role as a drummer has changed over the course of your career?

Louis Hayes: Yes, it has. I started out wanting to fit in, and be a person who was accepted, and over time, that changed to being a leader, because you have to, I had to. Whether you like it or not, that’s the way it goes. Life changes and your role changes, I couldn’t perform otherwise. There were no artists that I could be in their groups anymore like that, I had to have my own. I grew to the point where I was Louis Hayes and people looked at me like that. That was completely different, and I had to look at life differently. I had done so much already by then that it was pretty easy for me to look at myself another way and turn into the leader of the group.

Jazz Inside Magazine: Unlike many of the drummers who emerged on the scene during the hardbop era, who played with a heavy hand, you’re known for having a lighter touch with intricate rhythms and cymbal work. How did you form your own style?

Louis Hayes: I didn’t plan on anything. I didn’t work on that, I was just Louis Hayes all the time. I didn’t really try to copy anyone. I listened to a lot of people, but I didn’t really try to play like them because you can’t do that anyway, you can only get certain knowledge. I didn’t take any lessons from any “recognized” drummers in New York. I was around a lot of drummers that were “recognized,” but we were together as friends. I can go on and on with names, but I didn’t ask them how they did certain things. I wasn’t that type of person. I always felt that I wanted to play like I wanted to play. I’ve been like that since I was a youngster in Detroit. I really admired all of the musicians, not just the drummers. My father, Louis Hayes, started me taking lessons as a youngster, but I had a cousin, Clarence Stamps, who played drums professionally sometimes in Detroit. He had a knowledge of the instrument that was magnificent, and I was his only student. I had a

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Louis Hayes

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lot of knowledge about the instrument and music when I was pretty young—ten, eleven, twelve years old. I watched all the musicians, and it’s a wonderful thing for the people that you admire to accept you as being a part of the history. I like everybody who can play well on any instrument because when you play drums, you are in control of the group. You’re playing the loudest instrument and the rhythm up there. You are in control, and if you can’t play, is nothing gonna happen with the band.

LH: When did you really have your style together and what did your peers say about the style you played?

JI: When was the last time you felt insecure as a performer?

LH: Oh, I’ve never felt that, [Laughs] I’ve never felt insecure. No, the only thing I felt insecure about is how much money is being paid on the job.

JI: Was getting paid a problem?

LH: Yes, especially when I was a young kid. In New York, I just didn’t like the money that artists, like myself, were being paid. That goes for all of us, all the artists in jazz, working at the highest level. We were not being paid for who we were and our artistry. I’ve always felt that this art form was not recognized on the level that it should be recognized on. We can play classical music, but classical musicians can’t play our music, and we are recognized all over the world. That’s the problem that I’ve always had, I have it now. [Laughs] That’s been my major problem ever since I’ve been doing this—it’s money.

LH: I haven’t stolen. I’ve liked so many, but I can’t say which drummer I have taken much from because when I get up there, whatever comes out is in my body, it’s in my head, and that changes from time to time. I’ve taken from everybody. I like Kenny Clarke, Philly Joe, Elvin Jones, Buddy Rich, Gene Krupa, Louis Bellson, Max Roach, all the others. I come from all of that. There are so many drummers, and so many drummers have done things for me. When I first came to New York, Ed Shaughnessy got me a deal with Slingerland drums, and then I went on to the other companies. After that, I never paid for another set of drums. My mentor was Jo Jones. He had a reputation for saying things to people, and for being hard to get along with, but he liked me, so I was around him a lot. Jo paid close attention to me, and this wasn’t only about playing drums, this was about how to live in this world and to stay on top of keeping your life together, and what to do when you are in certain places in the world. I didn’t try to play like him because, [Laughs] as he used to say, “You didn’t come up on the same corner as I did.” I couldn’t play like Jo Jones, and I never thought about it. I haven’t really had any one drummer that I have tried to perform like. I care what instrument they play, I’ve made more [historic] recording dates. I can’t answer that question of why, and it doesn’t bother me. It really does not bother me. I feel all the history I’ve made, playing with all these people, all the recording dates, and I’ve never stopped. At this point in my life, I’ve done it. It’s hard for me to make any more history now because the people I made history with are not here anymore. So, maybe they will get to the “Baby-boy” before I go away. I’m not concerned about it, I’ll tell you that. I feel good about all that I have accomplished. Someone just sent me a recording by Norman Granz called Jazz at the Philharmonic [Complete Live in Stockholm November 21, 1960] that I’m on with Dizzy Gillespie, Stan Getz, J.J. Johnson, Victor Feldman and Sam Jones. I’ve done a lot of things that people tell the younger people at clinics that you can’t do that anyway. You can’t pick one person to play like because in life, you can’t do that. All you can do is live your life and try to be the best you can be. You can admire other people for a lot of different reasons, but you have to love yourself. You have to know yourself, and other things will come into your life that will affect you. It won’t work to do things like other people, it just won’t work. That’s how I feel about it.

JI: Your list of accomplishments is quite impressive since moving to New York 64 years ago, yet you’ve not been named an NEA Jazz Master. Any thoughts on that oversight?

LH: You’re right about that one. [Laughs] My younger friends and musicians say and think I’m a “Jazz Master,” but you are right, I’ve never been recognized as a Jazz Master. I feel the people that are in charge of that, they do things the way they want to do it. I’ve made so much jazz history myself, like you said, and more than most people. I don’t

“I was fortunate to come to New York to be with Horace Silver, and to grow in his band. I got to not only play, but to record with him, which makes a big difference. Playing with somebody, you’re making a job, which is magnificent, but recording is on another level because that’s there for life.”

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Louis Hayes

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will never have the opportunity of doing, and that’s what knocks me out. I know who I am so, I’m not worried about these people in special positions who are gonna choose who they want.

JI: Many drum leaders take the opportunity to feature themselves with frequent drum solos but not you. Why is that?

LH: I do feature myself, but I’m featured playing with the other musicians – my sound and the way the group sounds. I’m already featured being on stage, I’m featuring myself. I don’t have to play drum solos all the time. When I was a youngster, I didn’t like to solo anyway, but I’ve done it over the years. [Laughs] Those things don’t bother me. I’m not concerned with trying to prove that I’m great, I already know that. I don’t have to put myself out there. I can take solos, but they

record me as a leader. Now I’m glad I did it. I was young, I was only 21 or 22. We were appearing at the Apollo, doing a lot of shows, and after the last show, Cannon gave me his whole band, except for him, and we made the recording. I made it with Nat Adderley, Barry Harris and Sam Jones. The record company asked me who I wanted on saxophone and I said Yusef Lateef, because I was in Yusef’s group in Detroit, just before I left. So, they got Yusef and we recorded, and I still hear them playing that album on the radio. That’s the way life goes, I’ve always been like that. I haven’t had to say anything, just me being on the drums in front of people, and playing this artform that I love to play, that’s how I feature myself.

JI: Why didn’t you like to take drum solos when you were younger?

LH: Because I was enjoying so much accompanying the other artists. I guess that was my personality. I could do it, because I practiced a lot when I was young, and I had these facilities, but I wasn’t interested in taking

mind, what I wanted to do, and play more than anybody could play. I knew I could do that, and that would come to my mind at times when I would play a drum solo. How I did it would change depending on what day it was or how I felt, but I always could do it because I spent time pulling that together. At the age that I am at now, I use solos in a different way because I don’t have the energy or feel like playing a drum solo like I did when I was much younger. I still do it because I have a group, and I have to do it, and I enjoy doing it, but I don’t have the facilities, because I don’t work out hours and hours like I used to do.

JI: When you listen to today’s younger core of drummers, what do you hear? Is there an element in the art of drumming that’s lacking?

LH: No, there’s a lot of younger drummers that I really enjoy listening to because they are going through what I used to go through when I was much younger. The artform is the same, and it’s changed. What has changed a lot is being able to play in a group, a group of artists that would stay together and grow. They also don’t have the places to play like there used to be. We used to go all over America and there were places to play in all the cities. You could travel. We weren’t getting rich, but we were performing on a very high level and making big history, and when you came to town, people knew who you were. They knew all the artists in the band, and people came out and were very happy to see you and invite you to their homes. This was going on all over the place. They don’t have that now. These artists who are now in college, and are playing well when they leave, there’s really limited places to play in. But they can play, and this great artform that was created in America will always be on a high level.

JI: What irks you most as an artist? Do you have a pet peeve?

LH: During my recording dates as a leader, I like for the engineer to record the group the way I want it recorded. I don’t have problems on stage because all the people that I play with in my group, we’re in tune with each other. We respect and enjoy each other on stage and off. That’s what makes the music work.

JI: How much are you performing now as a non-leader?

LH: Not much. I don’t choose to do it and people don’t call me anyway. I do clinics and once in a while, I’ll do some things with somebody in the Cannonball Legacy band, like Jeremy Pelt, who featured me in Europe to celebrate my 80th birthday. Mainly, at this

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point in my life, it’s with my group.

JI: Most musicians come to New York and struggle to find work. You came with a job offer from Horace Silver, so you had a running start to your career. What was the biggest struggle of your career?

LH: There’s been some off times where I was not working enough, and that causes problems with money. In your life, everything is not “Mellow D,” all the time. You have to be strong and get through it. I was going through a period where I had a group with Bobby Watson, James Williams and Clint Houston, but we weren’t working enough. At that time, McCoy [Tyner], who was a friend, wanted to have a trio and he called me. I went with him and we started working a lot. I did that for a couple of years and enjoyed it tremendously. After that I went back to doing my own groups again. Life sure doesn’t stay the same, and you’ve got to figure out how to make it work for yourself. That’s what I’ve always done. I’m pretty happy with my life playing this art-

form that’s not recognized on the highest level. When I was very young, I knew exactly what I wanted to do, and I’ve done it. And I’ve done it by doing only the things that make me happy. I’ve had the opportunity to do a lot. Sam Jones and myself recorded with John Lee Hooker. I like being able to say I made history with him. I played a concert with Thelonious Monk, who I respected and enjoyed since I was a kid. I’d listened to him, but playing with him was completely different. We didn’t rehearse or talk it over, we just went on stage and played. I’m very happy to have recorded with John Coltrane and played jobs with Sonny Rollins. Stan Getz used to call me and want me to join his quartet at the time. Stan Getz and myself had a wonderful feeling as two people, but I couldn’t do it because at the time I was with Cannonball and I couldn’t leave. I recorded with J.J. Johnson. I made a job with Lester Young while I was with Horace Silver, and that’s something that I will always treasure. I played with him for a whole week in Cleveland. I also had the opportunity to play with Coleman Hawkins and Roy Eldridge together at a place called Cork N’ Bib in Long Island.

JI: Any specific memories of time with Lester Young, Coleman Hawkins, and any of the other greats?

LH: I’ll just say that my time with them was when they were at a certain time in their lives and they were older gentleman. I’ll leave it at that. I had the opportunity when I was with Oscar to travel with Duke Ellington’s Orchestra, and sometimes at concerts it would be Coleman Hawkins featured with Oscar’s trio. Just being in Coleman Hawkins’ company, and how he could play, how he carried himself, and the energy that he had. He felt like he was the number one saxophonist in the world, and he was, and he carried himself like that. I was around the Duke’s orchestra quite a bit. I made a recording date with Johnny Hodges. I used to watch him play with Duke’s band and he used to amaze me because he would play while looking around at people like it was nothing. And that sound would come out like that. When I was with Oscar, I had the opportunity to travel with Frank Sinatra and Quincy Jones and play in concerts with Basie’s band. I spent time with Ella Fitzgerald. She was just on another level. Just to be in her company as a young man, and Ella liked me. I look back on all this now, and how I was in the company of all these people and accepted by them, and that’s why I don’t worry about [being named an NEA] Jazz Master. I’ve already been accepted. Put that in there!

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JI: Was there a seminal event in your childhood that led you to decide to become a musician?

LH: Yes, that’s very easy to answer. When I was coming up, that was before television, most of the people in the neighborhood had pianos in their homes, and that’s how they entertained themselves. My mother played the piano, my dad played the piano and drums. So, the instruments were there. I started off playing the piano and then I changed to drums. I immediately was very comfortable playing the drums. I knew immediately that I could do this better than other people. That’s what got me started in playing music, because the instruments were there. The other kids in the neighborhood had instruments too.

JI: Elvin Jones relays a memory in Art Taylor’s book Notes and Tones. He recalls you and [drummer] Roy Brooks asking him to open the venetian blinds at Detroit’s Bluebird Inn so that the two of you could watch him drum through the window.

LH: I don’t remember that. Roy was younger than me, I didn’t know him that well. I used to see Elvin play, especially at a place called the World Stage in Detroit with Barry Harris and Kenny Burrell and other artists on that level. Elvin knocked me out. Elvin was a big influence on me, but I never tried to do what he was doing because I couldn’t figure it out anyway. We played completely different. I liked his feeling, and Elvin liked me. I was accepted by Elvin. He would look at me and smile. We never sat down and talked about music, but our feeling was just magnificent together.

JI: What memories do you have as a teenager watching or playing with Detroit’s older musicians such as Paul Chambers, Doug Watkins, Elvin Jones, Barry Harris and Tommy Flanagan?

LH: Detroit was such a magnificent place to come up in and the direction that the artists there were going in was really something. There were so many guys that could play so well. You were fortunate to be even around them. And for them to accept me, it made me feel [special].

JI: You made a number of recordings with Yusef Lateef a few years before his landmark Eastern Sounds album where he explored Middle Eastern music. Did he have you playing any of that type of music? Have you explored ethnic rhythms and music?

LH: No, I never explored different ethnic music. I learned how to play Latin rhythms as a kid from my cousin, and I practiced it and learned how to do it my way. That really helped me because you get put in these situations, and a lot of times, artists don’t write music for drummers because they can’t write it and tell you how to express. No one wrote anything for me, although I could read pretty good when I was a youngster. I recorded with Ravi Shankar. I’d listened to Indian music, but I wasn’t listening to it with the thought of playing Indian music, which is altogether different. When I was in Detroit, Yusef didn’t know me, but naturally I had seen him play around town. I was playing in this club, you were supposed to be 21 to get in there, with this organ group, and I think what happened was, Yusef was bringing his own group into the club next. I struck a groove with the club owner and he asked Yusef to have me play drums for him. So, Yusef came over to my family home and he said, “Louis, you have the job, but I will give you a six-week trial,” and that’s how it started. It was marvelous with Yusef Lateef and Curtis Fuller on trombone, Hugh Lawson on piano, and bassist Ernie Farrow. I was already in New York when I recorded with Yusef. I wasn’t even in his band, I was with Horace. They came here and recorded. But I listen to that stuff now and man, I don’t know how I played that stuff myself. I could never have thought of that again in my life. How the hell did I think of that to play? [Laughs] At the time, it’s what happened.

JI: How did the recording with Ravi Shankar come together?

LH: When I recorded with Ravi Shankar, I was with Cannon in L.A. and I got this call to come to the studio. I didn’t even know who Ravi Shankar was at the time. I went there and I saw Ravi Shankar and the guys in the group sitting on a rug with their instruments and music. Now, I didn’t know how to approach that. That was their music, how am I gonna walk in and play that and fit in? I said in my mind, “I’m not gonna try to fit in with that. They asked me to come, so they probably want me to play what I play,” and that’s what I did. I couldn’t figure out what they were doing. [Laughs] I just played for myself, and I’m very happy that I was able to make that recording date with him. I sure enjoyed it.

JI: Would you talk about getting hired by Horace Silver to start your career?

LH: What happened was that Doug Watkins and Donald Byrd were living in New York and working with the Jazz Messengers. They came home to Detroit and I was playing at an after-hours place called the West Inn. I didn’t know them while I was in Detroit before then because they were older than me and on a different level. We got to know each other that night and played together a little bit. When they got back to New York, Horace was leaving Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers to start his own band. Arthur Taylor was his drummer at the time, but they didn’t get along well. Doug Watkins and Donald Byrd were the ones who told Horace to get me. He called me up and I didn’t think it was really him. I had been listening to and looking at Horace Silver on those album covers for so long, and I didn’t really think that Horace Silver would be calling me. I mean, that’s a hell of a thing. I thought it was one of my friends playing some kind of a funny game, but it was Horace. I got with my family and took a train to New York, and Horace met me at the train station with a great big smile. He checked me into the famous Alvin Hotel on 52nd Street and Broadway. I could look out my window, right down on Birdland, which was amazing to me. That was my beginnings in New York.

JI: Did you feel ready to play with Horace Silver at age 19?

LH: Yes. What happened was that I’d go to Horace’s apartment and he would play the compositions for me and let me interpret them the way I wanted to play them. I came here in August and we made the first recording 6 Pieces of Silver in November. Horace wasn’t the type of person who would just go into the studio, we had played these compositions on jobs and everybody was familiar with what they had to do. I was comfortable playing the music because I knew it. I was fortunate to get to know Horace very well, and he really liked me. I was very comfortable being in his company, and that was a magnificent start for me. It gave me the opportunity to grow here in New York at such a young age. I wasn’t worried about money at that age. I roomed with Doug Watkins on 81st Street, after the Alvin Hotel, and Doug introduced me to a lot of people—club owners and musicians. That’s where it all started. I made five recordings with Horace Silver, and I like all of them, but the one I really like is Finger Poppin’ [with the Horace Silver Quintet]. That’s when my body started feeling a little different.

JI: Would you share a memory of Horace Silver?

LH: I’m not going to say anything personal about Horace. I’m just gonna say this, we started out as friends when I first got here, and when I went with Cannon, we stayed in touch all through the years for the rest of his life. He didn’t have that many close friends, and when he got to the point later in life that he wasn’t feeling well, he would have his son call me to come visit him in New Rochelle. We’d talk about life and our lives together. After he passed, I decided to make a record-
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ing date tribute to him with the help of Maxine Gordon. I wanted to do it on Blue Note because that was the recording company that Horace was dealing with when I came to New York. I spoke with Horace’s wife and she wanted me to do it, I didn’t just do it.

JI: You made your recording debut with Horace Silver at Rudy Van Gelder’s studio. What was your Van Gelder experience?

LH: That first record was done at Rudy’s parent’s home. That was the first time I was in a studio in my life. My relationship with Rudy grew over time and we developed a comfortable feeling together. Rudy could get a sound that was magnificent, everyone liked Rudy’s sound. I didn’t like the sound at a lot of the other studios because it didn’t sound live. The sound in these other studios could sound one way on the playback in the studio, and when the album came out, it would sound a way that I wasn’t completely happy with, but not with Rudy. His sound was right up live. Rudy had a way about him. If he knew you, he would treat you a certain way, if he didn’t know you, [Laughs] he’d get strange. When I was going out there, and I had some younger guys that didn’t know Rudy, I would tell them about certain things before we got there. Rudy would cancel a record date, he’d get mad if you were fucking around, but people that he knew, it was a different feeling. If you went around and started making yourself too comfortable in there, and he didn’t know you, he’d say something to you about that. I didn’t have any problems with Rudy. I was one of the lucky ones.

JI: What was your impression of the New York City jazz scene when you arrived there?

LH: Everybody was older than me, I wasn’t around people my age on the major scene. I was around people who had already made history. Some of them I had only heard, I didn’t know what they looked like. I was young with no responsibilities and not in my parent’s home anymore. I could stay out as late as I wanted to [Laughs] in these clubs that didn’t close until 4 AM. I was paying attention to life in New York City, a place that I had always wanted to come to. I was friends with the other Detroit musicians, and Doug Watkins was my roommate. He turned me on to where to go and who to meet. When other musicians came later from Detroit, we did things together.

JI: What were the circumstances that led you to leave Horace Silver after 3 years?

LH: I had this opportunity [to play with Cannonball]. Sam Jones told Bobby Timmons and myself that Cannon was leaving Miles [Davis] and starting his own band again, and would we consider coming with Cannon. It was a big thing to leave Horace, I had to think about that. I had made history already with Horace, so that’s why I decided to go with Cannon, and I’m glad I did it because I was with Cannon for 6 years and made a whole lotta history with him that I would not have made with Horace. That recording with Nancy Wilson [Nancy Wilson/Cannonball Adderley, 1961], that record is still played today. We really did a lot of creative things in those 6 years.

JI: You worked with Cannonball Adderley’s Quintet from 1959-1965. What was the biggest adjustment you had to make when joining that band?

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LH: I didn’t have to make any adjustment. There was nothing different. I’m playing with a quintet and I’m playing me. In his band, everybody could be themselves on stage and off. That’s what makes a group work on the highest level and be happy. Some groups can play well together, but as human beings, they don’t get along too well. People in the audience can see that, especially in the black community. With Cannon, we played together, and we enjoyed each other. That’s why we were together for a long time. Cannon did things differently from Horace. Cannon’s band didn’t rehearse all the time, but we could play together so well. Cannon was a free spirit and people really liked Cannon-ball. He was a highly intelligent person. All these guys were. We recorded a lot, and Cannon liked to record live. The band was a family band. It was more than a musical involvement. It was bigger than that.

JI: After your first gig with Cannonball in Philadelphia, the band drove to San Francisco. What was that long trip out west like with your new bandmates?

LH: I drove out with Nat in his ’58 Buick station wagon and Bobby Timmons and Cannon drove out in his Cadillac. We always drove to places in two different cars. Sam met us out there. We didn’t stay in any hotels on the way. We just changed drivers and kept going. It took us two to three days to get out there. Some memorable things happened on that trip, but I don’t want to say what. [Laughs] We drove out to L.A. a few times after that to play and record. I’ll say this – Cannon could drive very well but I was just learning how to drive. Sam was the only other one out of that group that was a dependable driver. When Sam was driving, you’d go to sleep and relax. Everyone else, you had to watch them.

JI: Do you have a memory of Cannonball Adderley to share?

LH: Cannon was highly intelligent, and he had a great memory. He could speak on all kinds of subjects and things. It used to amaze me how he would have something intelligent to say on all these subjects. He was smart and he could play. There were no limits to what he could do. He got along with everybody. It was very hard to get into an argument with Cannonball, you really had to do something to him to make him mad. Joe Zawinul did something to him one time [Laughs] and Cannon told him, “Okay, we gonna go out here and I’m gonna kick your ass, and then we gonna get back on stage and make love.”

Cannon was too intelligent to get into arguments with us. I couldn’t have made a better decision then to go with Cannon and his brother Nat. It never will get any better for me, being with Horace and Cannon, with Oscar, it was about history making.

LH: You’re right about that. I didn’t realize it was fourteen years later. I had a problem about thinking about being a leader. I was never the person that actually wanted to be a leader. I was doing other things, performing on the level that I wanted to do it on, and I never wanted to be a leader. I wasn’t interested in that. After I did that record, I put a band together of people who could really play well—Ronnie Matthews, Junior Cook, Woody Shaw and Stafford James. We toured mainly in Europe, and that band was unique. Then I had a quartet with Frank Strozier and Harold Mabern and different bass players. A hell of a quartet. Frank Strozier was magnificent, although he was a strange kind of a guy. Those bands didn’t stay together as long as they should because we didn’t have the right people handling the business to keep us going.

JI: After being with him for six years, things started changing and, on several occasions, Cannon’s band played opposite Oscar. [drummer Ed] Thigpen joined Oscar at the same time I joined Cannon in ’59, and in ’65, he was leaving Oscar, as was Ray Brown. Oscar was aware of Sam and myself and he wanted us to replace them. I wasn’t aware of that until Cannon came to me and said something about Oscar wanting me to join him. After being with Cannon for all those years, it was time to do something different. Cannon told me that Oscar could pay me more than he could ever pay me. That’s what happened.

JI: Being a part of the Oscar Peterson Trio elevated your stature. How did that change things?

LH: Oscar took me to the big stage and the money was right. Because of being with Oscar, when the Duke Ellington band was appearing in New York, I could ride in their bus and be with them. I got to know them! When they would come to town to play, my wife and I would get sharp and go to hear Mr. Duke Ellington, and we were welcome because the musicians knew me. I got to know Benny Webster real well, he and Joe Zawinul were roommates. I used to watch Duke. I’ll tell you one story about him. Oscar’s trio would go on first, and then Mr. Ellington and his orchestra would come on, and then Ella Fitzgerald. After we played, I would get me a chair and sit behind the curtain where the audience couldn’t see me, and I would watch everything. After concerts, they would have somebody to put you in the taxis and take you back to the hotel. One time, they put me in the taxi with Mr. Duke Ellington. Now, I’m sitting there, in a taxi, with Mr. Duke Ellington. What am I gonna say? [Laughs] It was a messed-up situation for me. So, I didn’t say anything because I felt there wasn’t anything for me to say. I just sat there, but I’d watch him on stage, and I knew his movements, I knew how he walked, how he directed the band. I was paying attention real good.

JI: You played with [bassist] Sam Jones in the Cannonball and Peterson groups, and together you were one of jazz’s great rhythm sections. Why did you two bond so effectively?

LH: It’s like the song goes – it was just one of those things, because we sure didn’t work at it. We never talked about music. [Laughs] Really, it was just that we could do that. I was so comfortable with Sam that I could go to a recording date and say, ‘Today, I don’t think I’ll pick up a stick, I’ll just play with brushes.’ I did that one time with somebody. When you’re young, you do silly things. I could do that with Sam because we had this special time together. It was like we were
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floating in air, we were sailing! And Sam was dependable, he was the same all the time. We just had that connection, we didn’t have to think about it. When I went with Cannon, I didn’t realize that Sam Jones was much older than I was because we were just wonderful friends together. It was just natural, it was a feeling that we had together. Especially, with Cannon and Nat [Adderley] and the band, it was a real family. They were all great artists, and we not only enjoyed playing together, but we enjoyed being together as men. We cared about each other and were involved in each other’s lives. Sam and myself, we made a lot of history because other artists wanted Sam Jones and Louis Hayes to make history with them. We recorded with a lot of artists who were making a recording date and they wanted Sam and myself to be there. We did that a lot and that was a wonderful time. That was a very important time in my life.

JI: Oscar Peterson was known as a demanding leader. What was your time with him like?

LH: When I played with those other groups, I was in control of exactly how I wanted to play, but with Oscar, it was different. I was on a big stage now, tuxedos every night. A lot of things were different, but I wasn’t on my own to just do what I wanted to do and to create. I respected Oscar, and Ray Brown was there too? Shit! And Papa Jo [Jones] wanted me to play with Oscar, and if Papa Jo asked me to do something, I was doing it. There were problems sometimes with Oscar. Everything was not perfect, but that was a different way of me approaching the instrument and playing with a trio—the greatest trio in the world. That was a challenge. Oscar was so domineering, not only playing the piano, but as a human being. Oscar was a very domineering person, that was his personality. You had to be a certain type of person to deal with Oscar. We all played on a high level all the time, that’s for sure. Everybody I played with was very serious, in all the bands. There was no joking around. Oscar was like that. He was one of the greatest of all times. He could dominate on the stage and he could dominate people, especially if they were kind of weak thinking. The audience didn’t know it, but Oscar could take people through things, so they were not able to perform on the right level with him because he was just too much for them, on stage and off. [Laughs] Oscar was too much! But he liked me. That’s why he asked me to come back the second time. I could deal with him, and we could play together. It was magnificent, the people that I was introduced to around him, the money. We got “off time” salary. That’s the first time I’d heard that. With Oscar, everything had to be right, from the places we played, to the piano. McCoy [Tyner] was different. He would play no matter what the situation was. McCoy would play through it and never complain. He made all the jobs; he wouldn’t quit nothing. Oscar was not like that. If things were not right, Oscar would go home. “Louis, pack the drums up!” He’d quit so fast. [Laughs] Oscar did not play. He’d quit a job and go and give you a [plane] ticket. He’d pay you for the job and send you any place you wanted to go. Oscar demanded respect. If the audience made too much noise, or if the respect wasn’t there, he did something about it. [Laughs] You could depend on Oscar Peterson. I must say that if you had a problem, Oscar would solve the problem. I respect that about Oscar. He was no joke, and Norman Granz was like that too.

JI: While with Oscar Peterson, you branched out in 1967 to work with the Jazz Communicators, a collective featuring Freddie Hubbard, Joe Henderson and Kenny Barron. How did that impressive lineup come together and why name the band that way?

LH: I got to be close friends with Freddie. We both got married for the first time and lived in the same building in Brooklyn. We were playing all the time. He was with Art Blakey and I was doing my things. We practiced together a lot. During one of the times I wasn’t doing too much, I found a club in Manhattan and I told the guy in charge that he had nothing happening there and I wanted to bring in a band for the whole summer. All of the people in that band weren’t doing much either at that time. We all lived in the same neighborhood. Freddie named the band. That band was magnificent when we were together, but the personalities between Freddie, Joe and me, that couldn’t last. We were the three leaders of the band – three leaders, you knew that wasn’t going to work. Everybody wanted to do what they wanted to do. We had to go our own ways.

JI: The Louis Hayes Sextet formed in 1972 but three years later, you had moved on to the Louis Hayes-Junior Cook Quintet. Why did you stop performing under only your name?

LH: Junior Cook was my friend, we had been together with Horace Silver and other things. I still was a person that did not really want to be a leader. I wasn’t aggressive enough. I got Junior to come with me. And then, Woody [Shaw] was coming up pretty good, and he wasn’t doing nothing important at that time, so we got him and Ronnie Matthews and Stafford James. We developed into a very strong unit. We got along together, and we had things to play, we had arrangements. We just didn’t have anybody to handle the business end of things, so it was only going to go so far. We enjoyed competing against each other because it was a challenge, and we could play. Woody could play that trumpet, he was unique. He was different from Freddie and Lee Morgan.

JI: Would you talk a bit about Woody Shaw?

LH: Woody was a great thinker and he could play the trumpet so well and write. He liked to do tai chi. Sometimes we’d be at train stations, waiting for the train, and he’d start doing tai chi and people would look at him and wonder what he was doing. He had a problem with his eyesight [retinitis pigmentosa], so he had to have help getting from place to place. He was coming on to be his own person and a magnificent musician, he was gonna make history on his own and do big things. That’s why the band came apart, because Woody wanted to make his own history, and Junior wanted to do what he wanted to do. Woody had the problem at the subway and that was it. He just got out of here too soon.

JI: Dexter Gordon used your band to make his triumphant return to the States in 1976. That event created a sensation. Would you talk about those early appearances with him?

LH: My band was booked through Europe, and when we got to Copenhagen, where Dex was staying, he played with us several times at the Jazzhus Montmartre club. So, we were attuned with each other. Maxine Gordon [the road manager for the Louis Hayes-Woody Shaw Quintet] somehow talked Dex into coming back to America. Woody and Dexter got to be very close friends. Dexter had worked with some other groups, but he didn’t like them, and I think it was Woody who said he should use our band. That’s how that got started. It was my group that recorded with Dexter, but I didn’t get credit for that. It wasn’t like the Louis Hayes Quintet featuring Dexter, and I wasn’t intelligent enough to make it that way at the time. We had a job at the [Village] Vanguard, and we recorded it live for Columbia. The record [Homecoming] was a hit. Dexter was Dexter Gordon, his personality stood out. Sometimes in introducing a composition we were gonna play, he’d get on the mic and recite the lyrics. A lot of artists at that time had their own special personalities, that was one of the reasons it was such a great time to be around. I even had things that I would say that people still quote me for saying – like “Mellow D.” That’s stuck with me for all these years. Horace Silver wrote two tunes from things that I would say [“Mellow D” and “Swingin the Samba”]. Dexter was unique. He was tall and he presented himself a certain way. He stood out, first the way he played, because if you can’t do that, the other shit don’t mean nothin’.

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Lionel Hampton was sitting there with his phone. He gave me a throne one time. It was a seat, but it was so spectacular it was called a throne. I don’t know why he did it, but we cause they were there. I would not disturb anyone. I walked by and Lionel Hampton said something to me, but he called my name. Now, that was to me, a hell of thing, for him to even know my name. [Laughs] I had the opportunity to make two recording dates with Phineas Newborn and Sam Jones during the time I was with Cannon. Phineas Newborn, I have to say, was magnificent. I mean playing the piano, goodness gracious! I told him one time, “I practiced the piano so much when I was a kid, my fingertips would bleed.” Damn, Phineas!

LH: Sometimes before the band retook the stage, I would go on stage first and I would play this samba rhythm to let everybody know it was time. Horace wrote a composition around it. I used to say “Mellow D” all the time, I still say it. Everyone knows, they called me “Mellow D.” How I started saying that as a youngster, I haven’t any idea, but I always used it and it stuck with me through the years.

JI: You brought up John Coltrane. You played and recorded with him. What surprised you the most about him?

LH: I basically only made recording dates with him. I did get the opportunity to play with him three times, once in a Brooklyn club called the Blue Coronet, and twice when Elvin had not showed up after the break. The first time that happened, I was playing in Philadelphia with Cannonball at Pep’s, and he was playing around the corner at Showboat. At our intermission, I ran around the corner to listen to them. Elvin hadn’t gotten back from intermission yet and Coltrane asked me to come up and play with him until Elvin got back. The same thing happened in California at Shelly’s Manne Hole. At one point, I lived on 101st Street and Coltrane lived on 103rd Street, so I had the opportunity to go to his apartment sometimes. During this time, all he was doing was practicing nonstop. He didn’t answer his door or the telephone.

JI: You had much contact with Buddy Rich and Louis Bellson?

LH: People had a problem with Buddy Rich, his personality. I didn’t have a problem with him at all. We would talk. And Louis Bellson, what a nice guy he was. He was one of those guys who was very secure in who he was. He gave me a throne one time. It was a seat, but it was so spectacular it was called a throne. I don’t know why he did it, but we had a feeling together.

JI: Any other music related memories come to mind?

LH: I was in a club here in Manhattan and Lionel Hampton was sitting there with his lady. I was not the kind of person to go over there and say anything to anyone just because they were there. I would not disturb anyone. I walked by and Lionel Hampton said something to me, but he called my name. Now, that was to me, a hell of thing, for him to even know my name. [Laughs] I had the opportunity to make two recording dates with Phineas Newborn and Sam Jones during the time I was with Cannon. Phineas Newborn, I have to say, was magnificent. I mean playing the piano, goodness gracious! He told me one time, “I practiced the piano so much when I was a kid, my fingertips would bleed.” Damn, Phineas!

J: You’re not typically associated with the avant-garde scene, but you did appear on Cecil Taylor’s Hard Driving Jazz [1959, UA] album [later released under Coltrane’s name as Coltrane Time]. How was it to play with Cecil Taylor and make that recording session??

LH: I recall Coltrane and Kenny Dorham were in one area of the studio, and the rhythm section was in another area. Me, being so young, playing with Cecil Taylor was unique for me. Playing with him was unusual. It was just a recording date though; I didn’t take it any further. How it happened, and who put it together? I don’t remember. It was different for me because I didn’t know what Cecil was doing. It wasn’t planned or rehearsed. At that time, I wasn’t turned all the way into Louis Hayes. I was Louis Hayes, but like I got to be later. So, listening to Cecil Taylor was unique for me. [Laughs] We got to be friends later in life. That was history, and I was glad to do that. Kenny Dorham sounded fantastic.

J: So, at the time, you didn’t really know who Cecil Taylor was?

LH: No, I didn’t know who Cecil Taylor was at all. I didn’t know his history or what he played like.

J: What did you think of his playing at the session?

LH: He was so different, I didn’t know what to think. [Laughs] What’s he doing over there? I was in awe of how he approached this artform. And he was already Cecil Taylor. He was playing like that then. I was just getting my act together then. It was an experience that I’m glad I had the opportunity to do, but I wasn’t on the level at that time to figure out what he was doing. After getting to know him many years later, we used to go to bars together in the Village and drink and talk. Since we’re talking about the avant-garde, I also knew Ornette Coleman. We liked each other as people. We could talk very honestly to each other, no holding back. Oh, we would go at it, having fun. I enjoyed conversations with him. His music? I would get to understand where he was coming from later, but I wasn’t in tune with that when I was young. With him, I could talk about it. We could debate about it.

J: On that recording date, Cecil Taylor wanted Ted Curson on trumpet, but the label insisted on Kenny Dorham, which led to a strained relationship between Taylor and Dorham. Do you recall that?

LH: I don’t know about that. I wasn’t old enough to be involved in that, but I can say this – Louis Hayes said this – I’m damn sure glad he got Kenny Dorham rather than Ted Curson. [Laughters] That’s Kenny Dorham!

J: What were your thoughts on hearing free jazz drummers such as Sunny Murray and Milford Graves early on?

LH: I’m not gonna speak about those guys. They were doing what they wanted to do and that’s the best I can say about that.

J: Your discography doesn’t reveal much work with vocalists. Is there a reason you haven’t worked significantly with singers?

LH: I never really wanted to work with any singers, to tell the truth. I will say that the recording I did with Nancy Wilson and the Cannonball Adderley band [Nancy Wilson/ Cannonball Adderley, 1961, Capitol], that was wonderful. I knew Nancy well. I also used to do some things with Betty Carter, although I was never in her trio. We’re both from Detroit. On occasion, she wouldn’t have the group that she needed to make the job and she’d call me up. Another one to mention was my friend, Carmen McRae. We never played together musically but we had this rapport together as friends. We really liked each other. She always said to me, “Louis, if you ever need a job, call me.” That’s as far as it went because I wasn’t gonna call no Carmen McRae about a job. That’s it, I never wanted to be in a singer’s group.

J: Why didn’t you want to work with vocalists?

LH: I wanted to play with musicians, instrumentalists. It’s just a feeling I’ve always had. I didn’t want to be in a vocalist’s group. I wouldn’t have been happy with that.

J: Have you done much commercial work during your career?

LH: No, I haven’t. I would love to have done some of those things and make jingles. Chico Hamilton did a lot of that. He was a friend of mine. He was unusual, and I have a knack for being around unusual people, I must say. When I first went to California with Cannon,
Chico, who is from there, he came and took me to his home, and said to me, “Louis, you’re the only person I ever tried to play like.” [Laughs] Later, here in New York, we would talk. He drew me a picture and showed me where he felt the drum set was supposed to be. He drew the drums to be out front and had all the other musicians in the back. He said, “They didn’t come to see them, they came to see you.” [Laughs] That’s what Chico would tell me. I’d say, ‘Okay, Cheeks.’ He called me “Luigi.” He certainly was different. He played different. He told me he had to get his own band because nobody was gonna call him to be in their band. He was right.

JI: Chico Hamilton wanted to play like you?

LH: That’s what he said when he first came and got me. One of the reasons was at the beginning of me coming to New York, I got known for playing single beats on the cymbals. I did that as a kid in Detroit and I came to New York and did that for a period of time. At certain times, I played single beats instead of playing the regular cymbal beat. I got known for that, it stood out. I was doing it with Horace at first and then I stopped. I got a reputation for that, and I think that’s what Chico liked because I was doing something different. I stopped it because I didn’t want to sound like that anymore. I still do it on occasion. My main approach, and what I’ve always been known for in playing the drum set, has always been my cymbal beat in whatever I was doing. I’ve always been able to control the sound of my cymbal. That’s the truth. That’s the main thing in my life that’s kept me going, it’s kept me Louis Hayes and recognizable.

JI: Your latest recording Don’t Play with Love- The John L. Nelson Project [2018, Makin It Music] featured songs by your uncle, who was also the father of Prince. Would you share some memories of Prince and what his level of interest in jazz was?

LH: My mother was Prince’s father’s older sister. I didn’t know too much about the family coming up but when Prince started coming up, they told me that I had this little cousin in Minneapolis that was staying a lot of times with my mother’s sister down in the basement playing his music. Prince knew of me, but we never met in life. I spoke with his father on the telephone at times, and he came to see me once when I was appearing in Minneapolis. My family got upset with me one time when Prince was appearing at Madison Square Garden and I wouldn’t go backstage to meet Prince. I never said to people that I was Prince’s cousin when he was making all this history, but some people became aware of it and they would say things to me. Prince’s sister, Sharon, wanted me to put a band together and interpret her father’s music. It was very interesting, and I was very happy to do it. We recorded it at Paisley Park, so I was able to take in Prince’s place that he put together.

JI: Much of your work over the past 20 years has been with the Cannonball Adderley Legacy Band, the renewed version of your Jazz Communicators, and a Horace Silver tribute project. Talk about those bands.

LH: I wasn’t planning on having no Cannonball Legacy Band, but my friend bought the club Sweet Basil and changed it to Sweet Rhythm. He asked me to put a band together and play Cannonball’s music and he gave me the club for a week. I still travel with that band on occasion. We play a lot of the music that I had recorded during my time with Cannon. The Horace Silver group is not like that. I also wasn’t planning on doing a tribute to Horace, and to just keep playing his music. I just did it because he would ask me to come and spend time with him during the time that he was leaving here. So, I felt that I should do something in honor of him and to keep his music going. He used to say to me, “Louis, you’re part of my history.” I didn’t mean it to be a band that just plays Horace Silver’s music. When we perform, we don’t just play his music—we play anything we feel like playing.

JI: Looking back at your career, what was the most unusual playing situation?

LH: Being a youngster in Detroit, people would just call the home and ask me to come make a job. My fantastic mother would take me to these jobs with the drums and then come pick me up. I had a job one time with some guitar players and a bass player who played a tub, a real tub that you’d wash clothes in. He put a cord across it and used a stick to play it like a bass. That was his instrument! That was a very unusual experience. [Laughs]

JI: There are many stories from back in the day about dangerous times in jazz clubs such as Slugs. What was the most dangerous situation you’ve been in?

LH: I’ll name one. Coming up in Detroit, racism was there, but I wasn’t intelligent enough to know how prevalent it was. It never affected me because there wasn’t any place I couldn’t go or anything I couldn’t do. When I was about seventeen, one summer, 1955 or ‘56, I got a job with some friends down in Birmingham, Alabama. The reason I was interested was that a bunch of girls were going down there to sing, and I wanted to be around them, being a stupid youngster. We drove down there and met a bus driver who had been contracted by the club owner to transport the instruments and personal belongings from Birmingham to Tuscaloosa. The problem was that the club owner didn’t pay him, so he pulled a gun and said, “I’m going to teach you ‘Ns’ a lesson!” He was going to take my drums and our clothes, but the club owner paid him and we got our stuff back. That was the most messed up situation I’ve ever been in.

JI: You played during a time when drug use was rather prevalent in jazz. Do you care to talk about what you observed and experienced personally?

LH: I’m not gonna say too much about that. I’m not gonna mention names of people I was around who were doing things. If you don’t have something nice to say, don’t say shit. [Laughs] You’re right, during that time, in order to be in certain environments, doing those things got you in because you were part of those people. I didn’t have any enemies, and they were all fine with me not doing it though. I didn’t do it because it didn’t work for me. I was introduced to things that were available. I tried certain drugs because they were there, but I didn’t know what they were gonna do. I didn’t like them, and some of them made me real sick – heroin, snorting it. I was so sick that I knew I didn’t want to do it again. Other guys told me I was lucky because of that, and I think that’s why I’m still here. I respected myself and I wanted the other musician’s respect. I didn’t want to be on stage after having a drink. I figured out early in life that I can’t drink and play. I learned how to say no thank you real fast. I liked to dress a certain way, I liked to look nice, I liked the ladies, so, all of that was how I did it. Papa Jo, I can say this now, he liked to drink cognac and he smoked those Winstons, and I think that’s what messed him up. He was great up until a certain time. Those old guys used to drink that Hennessy straight. That stuff – no, no! [Laughs] When I got much older, I would try some reefer and have some drinks, but that was it.

JI: What are your interests outside of music? What are your guilty pleasures?

LH: I like history, African history. I like the history of people and the world. I like to see how the world began and who was in charge.

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because, I feel, when I was going to school, those books that we had to read, they didn’t tell the truth. They didn’t tell the real story. As I got older, I got into history, and that’s one of my main things. I like archeology. I do like television, and coming up, I liked sports quite a lot. My number one is basketball, and also track and field. I don’t have any guilty pleasures.

JL: The final questions have been asked by other musicians:

Jeremy Pelt (trumpet) asked: “I’d like to hear about your friendship with Papa Jo Jones.”

LH: I have no idea why he liked me. He would call me up and I’d have to go meet him. He would take me places in Manhattan. A lot of drummers didn’t want to be around Jo because he had a way of using the English language, he was good at it. And he would tell the truth, say things that people sometimes didn’t want to hear, although Jo was friends with Gene Krupa, and very close with Sonny Greer. The main thing that Jo taught me was how to live life, and how to grow up and conduct myself to be a man. It wasn’t about music all the time, it was about how to get through this world on a certain level. I’ll tell one story. When I was a kid, my father had a drum set on his basement. One day, we were playing with Horace and Jo would come around and say, “You have to take that off. All the drums have to be natural.” I’d say, ‘Okay Joe, I’ll take it off,’ but when he would leave, I’d put it back on. But, Jo used to make [unexpected] appearances on me and I couldn’t do anything about the damper because I was playing and I couldn’t get it off. Eventually, I took that off and I never used it ever again. That’s what I’ll say. The other things are just too much. He played an amazing role in my life, he was a big influence.

Billy Drummond (drums) said: “I love Louis, he’s been a huge inspiration for me for many, many years. I actually had him come to Juilliard, where I teach, for a masterclass. He did a Q & A and it was delightful. I’d like to know some things that you practice now as a seasoned drummer. You’ve been playing for almost 70 years, are there things that you practice now that you’ve always practiced or worked on since you started playing the drums?”

LH: I don’t practice anymore. I’m thinking of getting back to it, but I haven’t practiced in years. I just warm up now. I have four exercises that I do, but that’s it. That carries me. It’s been keeping me so that I’m able to get on stage and enjoy myself.

Billy Drummond also asked: “You told me that you are naturally left-handed but you play as a right-handed drummer. How is it possible to go against nature, using your naturally weaker hand to play the ride cymbal as great, or maybe better, than those of us that are naturally right-handed? How did you develop the ability to play your ride cymbal with such an unmistakable sound?”

LH: Because my cousin, Clarence, said to me when I was young, because I was playing left-handed, he said, “No, Louis, if you’re gonna play, you’re gonna play right,” and he changed me to play right-handed. It’s as simple as that, and I never went back. I will tell you this, as a kid playing sports, I broke both arms several times and they didn’t set my left hand correctly the last time I broke it. They wanted to break it again and do it all over again, but I said, ‘No, that is not gonna work. I am fine.’ So, I play a little differently with my approach from my left hand, but it works just fine for me. I’m very happy that he made me change, because to me, left-handed drummers look funny. It looks awkward. They can do it well, but I don’t like the way it looks.

Billy Drummond also asked: Who were some drummers that influenced your cymbal playing specifically?

LH: As a youngster, I enjoyed listening to Kenny Clarke. His feeling, the direction that he was going in. The sound of his forward motion I liked a lot. He was the first one for me.

Billy Cobham (drums) asked: “Whom in Cannonball Adderley’s band did you have the strongest connection with during performances, and why?”

LH: First, it was Sam and myself, we played time together. There was always the feeling between us, but I tuned into whoever was playing the solo. As a drummer, you have to support the person taking a solo at that time. Now, it’s important for me to like what I hear. If I don’t like what I hear, it makes me very uncomfortable. And different instruments can do different things. You can’t play behind a saxophonist like you can play behind a trumpet player because a trumpet player can go up, playing high notes, and you can go with him, but you’re playing the drums with sticks. You can go up there and stay, he cannot go up there and stay, he has to come down. You gotta play with him. With different instruments, you’ve got to realize you are playing to accompany. You want to be able to do your thing so you’re showing your personality and your sound, but you also have to be able to accompany people on instruments that can only do certain things. Also, people play differently, which you have to be aware of. I like playing with people who I can play with, and who make me feel good. If it doesn’t make me feel good, I don’t like playing with you.

Andrew Cyrille (drums) asked: “What are your memories of you and me practicing together when you lived on Vernon Avenue in Brooklyn, and I lived around the corner on Nostrand Avenue? Max Roach lived around the corner on Willoughby Avenue with his wife Mildred and I remember one time you and I played on Max’s drums, which were in the basement of his brownstone house. You were playing with Horace Silver then. Max came downstairs and you were at the drum set, and in jest Max said, with a laugh, ‘What’s that shit you’re playin’?’ I was just standing on the side looking and listening.”

LH: I remember practicing with Andrew. He had a wonderful personality and I enjoyed his company. He laughed a lot. We laughed a lot. It was an enjoyable time we got together as two young men. I enjoyed him as a drummer and as a person. We just don’t see each other anymore. Max Roach lived around the corner from us but I never went around and bothered Max. I didn’t deal with Max Roach, one on one, until we were both living in Manhattan and then we got to be close. Then I would go to Max’s apartment in Central Park and we would talk.

JL: Final comments?

LH: I enjoyed this, it was one of the longest interviews I’ve ever done. I will always play the drums because this music does something to my body that nothing else can do, it touches me. When I’m playing, and it feels good, nothing can ever feel better than playing drums in this art form. Nobody can ever know what goes through my whole body and my head. So, no retirement, but I only want to play what I want to play.
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