

Donnie Heitler Oral History Interview Transcription
December 17, 2013

Scott Schwartz: SS

Rory Grennan: RG

Donnie Heitler: DH

SS: Alright, this is Scott Schwartz and Rory Grennan and we're with Donnie Heitler of Urbana, and we're going to talk today about Urbana's and Champaign's jazz scene. And why don't we just kind of introduce each other so we've got voice recognition. Rory?

RR: Rory Grennan, archives assistant at the Sousa Archives.

SS: Okay, and Donnie, you're up. Why don't you just say something...

DH: I'm Donnie, and I'm present.

SS: (laughter) Alright.

RG: Check.

SS: Alright, Donnie, why don't we start at the beginning, and give us a sense, you know, where you were, you know, born, raised, where you studied music, you know, the general biographical kind of information, to kinda start with.

DH: Oh you mean my, my, not starting with, uh—

SS: When were you born—

DH: Oh you need all that stuff?

SS: Yep, yeah, sure! Just kinda give us a sense of who is Donnie.

DH: Well, I was born in Pekin, 1936. Uh...when I was a very young fellow—well, I was born blind, so, schooling, when that situation occurred, which occurs to everyone maybe, you know, when you're 4 or 5 years old, most people go to public school. Mother and Dad had a short marriage, it didn't last long, and at the time she had to make a decision about my schooling, they weren't together so she had to make a decision, and at the time and up until recent times, there was a school for the blind in Jacksonville. And I enrolled at the school from kindergarten through high school. I went to school, it's a residential school, so I was away from home except for holidays and summertime. So really, most of my growing up was spent away from home and in a school. Although I had access to go home very—at that time they had bus service everywhere and you could get a bus from Jacksonville to Pekin. Uh, when I was at the school—I think you're interested in music—you know, we saw, when you're at the school there you're with blind people, so one of the first things you do, which is a great thing, is learn to read and write Braille at a very early age, and we, uh, well we just went through the grades, the grades in high school there, I mean uh, uh...I guess it was my junior year in high school. At the time, they, they, they were not, actually at the time, today you wouldn't, they don't have residential schools like that so I'd be mainstreamed or, there's a process called "inclusion," you know, whatever the political word is for it. You'd be sent to a school, locally, not a residential school.

Having gone to a residential school I can make a real good case for it, IF it contained stu--you know, reasonably intelligent students, and so forth and so on, all the conditions that would sort of make it equal schooling except that you're blind. Well, the school became a repository for very severely handicapped people. Almost, you could call it a human wastebasket. I hate to say that, but some of the cases I've heard about that have gone through there are just pathetic. Uh, quadriplegic, blind and deaf. What do you do about that one? People who can't, who have to be diapered. All sorts of behavioral situations, which, we, we had a pretty much mainstream school for the blind, and at the time, that I was in school, very early in schooling, I had an opportunity to take piano lessons. And that came in the second grade. And my teacher, I remember my teacher asking we students, "Who wants to take piano lessons?" Well, it interested me, I kinda fooled around with them at home, pianos, you know, just, "Well, I'll do it." So I began to study at school. The school had two, full-time, dedicated piano teachers! Wonderful. They had a voice, choral teacher, full-time. Now this school had 200 students, so that's pretty good. We had a full-time band and orchestra person. Uh, interestingly enough, because if you think about it, it's a good occupation for blind people, we had a full-time blind piano technician teacher.

So that was, we, yeah. Well, I took music, and took to it readily, and had a lot of fun with it, learned to read Braille music. Uh, I got along fine, I remember one time when I was a sophomore in high school I could recall the best lesson I ever had where I never played, and that was when I went into the studio one day and there was silence. I mean, you know that kind of silence, I mean there's a person in there but it's silent. Now there's a kind of silence that, I sensed it. I thought, ooh, what's cooking. Well, my teacher said, "Well, sit down," and he said, "We got to talk." So he said, "You know, you been horsin' around, you been fooling around with that jazz." Which I liked to do, you know, I'd fool around, I'd go up, we had practice rooms at school there. And you could over to the main building--we called our dorms "cottages," oddly enough—and you could go to the main building, we called it the main building, that's where you had all the classrooms, they had practice rooms, they had the teaching studios, uh, and I could go, my teacher's studio, as I recall, was basically unlocked. So I can go in there, he had two pianos, he had an upright piano and a grand, I could go in there and play. And in high school I got to play on the Steinway grand in the auditorium, which was really a beautiful piano.

Uh, and uh...oh, when...yeah, I got sidetracked there. I was telling you about this piano lesson that I had where the teacher got me down, he said, "You know you been horsing around," he said, "You know, you could play in a hotel in Baltimore right now if you wanted to," he said, "If that's what you wanted to do, it's fine." But he said, "I'm here to teach you, I'm here to help you. That's what I want to do, but if you don't want me to do that, that's fine." He said, "It seems like to me like right now, could be that you and I are wasting our time." Said, that didn't make sense, did it. He said, "You can go now." You know how you feel after that. I mean, well, I worked my ass off for two years, really gave me a jolt to work, and that was a real good...

Well I got out of school, and I enrolled at Illinois Wesleyan—

SS: Donnie, can I interrupt?

DH: Yeah!

SS: Who was your teacher, um, at...?

DH: Uh, now my teachers at the school were people who wouldn't be known, I mean you wouldn't know 'em.

SS: Mm-hmm, oh, but nevertheless.

DH: Very beginning teacher was George (Gerlock?), a very strict German kind of guy, he knew his music, and he was strict, and that's what you needed. And he got me to reading Braille music and understanding it. Uh, he retired, I guess I was in sixth, seventh grade and Mr. Jacobs came along. He was a younger fellow than Mr. Gerlock. And he taught me through high school and remained there after I graduated. UH...

RG: So the conversation about jazz was with Mr. Jacobs.

DH: It was with Mr. Jacobs. He liked jazz. He wasn't against my doing it, I don't think, except that he knew that it would be beneficial for me to learn what he had to offer. He had a lot to offer. Anybody that can put you into the world of--I'm gonna call it classical music for lack of anything else—it's a great thing, boy there's so much, you know. Later on as you go through school, you take these counterpoint, I enjoyed counterpoint, you take these courses, theory and counterpoint. And uh, analysis courses, I like those. Well, you get to figure out what a piece is all about and it begins when the teacher's teaching it, the teacher's teaching you how to play the damn thing. And then the more you play it, if you've got any insight, the more you learn about a good piece of music. And that's true! You know, you take a Bach Invention, and you could play that thing a hundred times and it's still amazing how it's constructed. I mean, it's, it's, I mean, they're perfect diamonds, they're perfect gems, they really are. Yeah, they're perfect, you know.

Well, okay. Uh, so after I finished school in Jacksonville, I enrolled at Illinois Wesleyan in Bloomington, over there in Bloomington. And I studied with Dwight Drexler. You might know of him.

SS: Mm-hmm.

DH: Uh, he died, oh he was an old fellow too, 96 or something. But I studied with him two years, learned a lot from him.

SS: Do you have a time frame?

DH: Oh yeah! Okay, alright, let's see, I graduated in '55 and I entered Wesleyan, uh, what would that be, in '55?

RG: Fall of '55?

DH: Fall of '55 it would be, wouldn't it. In the fall of '57 I matriculated to the University of Illinois. The reason I matriculated to the University of Illinois was that I had a roommate a Wesleyan and he went over here to audition for Stanley Fletcher and made it. And he said, you know, he came back and said, "You know, I think it would be good if you could study with Fletcher." Uh, I came over here and auditioned and he took me. So, in a sense I hated to leave Wesleyan, because it wasn't that Drex, oh, he was a master, he was a great teacher. But I, then I did transfer, and I came over and studied with Stanley Fletcher, you know who Stanley Fletcher is?

SS: Yes! We have his papers.

RG: We know his name at the Sousa Archives, yes.

SS: Yes, we just acquired his materials summer before last.

DH: Ooh, I wonder what that's all about...

RG: Discovered, I've been discovering a lot of sound recordings of him and his ensembles as we go through the School of Music stuff.

DH: Really. He was a good player.

SS: But he wasn't known predominately as a jazz player.

DH: Oh hell no. No no no, no no no, no. No. But then, people apparently had heard about me, uh...I came over here...okay this kind of sets the thing up, really.

SS: Sure.

RG: Okay.

DH: Because I'm coming over here to study with Fletcher, I'm not coming over here to play jazz music, although I did play a lot of it. But, when I got here, I roomed where the new music building is located. At one time they had two student rooming houses for boys there. Two, right next to Alpha Gamma, what was it, Alpha Gamma sorority, one of those things, uh, right down the street. We had the two on the corner there. I hadn't been here very long, and the phone rang at the rooming house, and it was a fellow by the name of Tommy (Shodder?). "Hey, would you like to play at Kam's this coming Wednesday?" I had just gotten to town.

RG: Literally just got into town?

DH: I had just—I mean, I hadn't been here a week, probably. And, uh, I said, "Well yeah, I guess I can." So that started it, and we played, we had a Dixieland band. And we played at Kam's on Wednesdays and Saturday. Wednesday evening from 7:30 to 9:30, and Saturday afternoon from 3 until 5. I remember I always got home in time for dinner, for supper.

SS: laughter

RG: At the boarding house.

DH: Now at the same time, the Capital Restaurant had Dixieland music on Saturday afternoon from 3 to 5.

RG: Where was the Capital Restaurant?

DH: The Capital is now Murphy's.

SS: Really!

DH: Murphy's Pub--

RG: The pub on Green St.

DH: --was the Capital Restaurant. Now, the jazz scene, now that was a little part of it. Then you had something that the, I, I guess it was Star Course, maybe. Somebody had "Jazz You Like It." Now I played a lotta "Jazz You Like It." And that format was every Thursday at the Illini Union from 7 until 9, in a room that they used to call the Commons. The Commons. It isn't there, you wouldn't recognize it. It's all been changed. Kind of an intimate place, hell, I don't know, I'm not good at numbers, I guess it would hold 50 people. I'm guessing. That'd be good, 50, 60. And the kids would come in there and pack it. We got paid \$7 a performance.

RG: Was that for the entire group?

DH: No.

RG: Okay.

SS: Well that was good then.

DH No. And it was double for the leader. And of course we would change leaders—let me, let me back up.

SS: Sure!

DH: See, I remember, I, when I was, I--you're interested in the jazz thing. When I was in school, at the school for the blind, I played with adult bands. We played every Friday and Saturday night at McMurray College at a place called The Hub, from 8 to 10. It was an adult band and we made \$7 a night, and that was—in those days you could buy a malted milk for 15 cents. Now, I made \$14 a weekend.

SS: That's a lot!

RG: That's a lot. That's a lot of mad money for a high school kid.

DH: Do you realize how many hot dogs you could buy for \$14?

SS: Laughter

DH: Hell, a hot dog was 20 cents!

RG: All you needed, all you needed, I'm sure.

DH: I had a lot of money. Well, I didn't have a lot of money but I had money. You know, I had enough to spend. I mean, kids didn't borrow from me but I'd buy records and stuff. Oh, I got to, I had a mentor who let me borrow records. That was in the day when you could go to a record booth in the record-- you go back in the record booth you could spend a whole Saturday afternoon. I come in there every Saturday 'cause-- the guy's name was Boots Brennan, uh, his son taught over here at one of these towns outside of Decatur, uh, Warrensburg-Latham, Boots' son Terry, he went to school here. And, uh, Boots was a mentor in that he would, I would come in, he would say, "Hey, hey, man." Uh, it was called the Jacksonville Novelty Shop, they sold records and knick-knacks and stuff. "Got this guy I want you to hear, (unintelligible), name of George Shearing." So I go back in the booth, he says, "Put that on, see what you think." So practically every Saturday he'd say, "Look, why don't you take these guys home and play 'em, and you bring them back to me in a week." So I didn't have to buy records. I'd bring 'em in, take it home, listen to it. I guess he still (unintelligible) the record, I'd try not to hurt it.

Anyway, we're getting back up to where I came to school, here at Illinois, working at Jazz You Like It, and then, uh, I don't know how much of this, I think a lot of credit, I give a lot of credit, to, the...uh...the black, the Afro-American community. What do you call it, the black community?

RG: All of the above.

DH: The brothers. Yeah. You know. Now at the time, have you ever heard of Joe Farrell?

SS: No.

RG: I don't know his name.

DH: Ok, well he was a famous musician who came out of here. Probably as famous in the jazz field as anybody who ever came out of here. He recorded with Chick Corea, and, oh he's got recordings out, Joe Farrell, check him out, I mean, there--

SS: It's Joe Farrell?

DH: Joe Farrell. His name here was Joe Firrantello but he had to have a name, so he's Joe Farrell. Kind of a cocky kid, a lot of talent. As we found out later, he played with Elvin Jones, he played with the best people in the world.

RG: What was his instrument?

DH: He was a saxophone/flute player. I thought he played better flute than saxophone, but his—and he's got some good recordings on the flute too, he's a hell of a flute player. Well, he was good at both of them. And we palled around together, we were in a group, we were in a group called the Modern Jazz—what was that, the University of Illinois Jazz Workshop, I guess, or whatever you want to call, well, we thought we were really hot stuff, you know. And uh, there were four of us, we were in a quartet.

SS: Who else played?

DH: Dick Borden, drums. Joe Farrell, saxophone. Perry Rudman. Perry Rudman is a lawyer in Joliet, you might want to call him.

SS: Hmm. And he played what?

DH: He was a bass player.

SS: Bass player, got it.

DH: Perry was a bass player. Uh...we did jazz jobs, the Jazz You Like It, and we also played fraternities and sororities. They had jazz combos. I mean, jazz was popular when I went to school. When I went to school the University Auditorium was the only venue for large, well-known, let's say, well-known jazz offerings like Dave Brubeck. When Dave Brubeck or George Shearing or Erroll Garner had come to town they had to do two shows. Because they couldn't, they didn't hold enough people.

SS: You had Ellington here.

DH: Oh, hell, listen. I, I remember, oh, Ellington, are you kidding me? I remember going to hear, listen, oh. Not only Duke Ellington, we had, oh, (Over and On?), that's a different thing, that's...they'd bring these things into Huff Gym, they'd bring the Jazz at the Phil, or its equiv--whatever they call it, the Jazz

All-stars, I went over there one time, they had a show, they had Count Basie, Sarah Vaughan, Art Tatum, and Stan Kenton! Now I'm not shitting you, that's a fact! We could go, I remember, they used to have homecoming dances here, and they would have bands like Count Basie playing for the homecoming dance. You could go over, we'd, we'd do it, they had the dances last till one o'clock. Kids had to be in, you had to be in at one o'clock. Girls had to be in at one, they had to be in at one! But the band, they'd go till one o'clock, and we'd come over from gigs and for a buck you could sit in the balcony and listen to these bands. It was tremendous, tremendous. And that was going on, now, the combo that I played with, that was going on, we played a lot of--they would book us two years in advance, believe it or not. To book a sorority, they really would. We worked with a Johnny Bruce Agency and they had three or four agencies in town and they were all busy, thriving agencies. Johnny Bruce had an office right above Sixth and Green there where the Busey Bank is. You'd go up there every Wednesday and pick up your check. And, uh...

RG: Right next to Capital.

DH: Right next to the Capital!

RG: Got it.

DH: Now, at that time, I'm sure they had at least ten working bands in the territory. Big bands. And we would all--there used to be a service station, the meeting place for all these guys was a service station, it was a Standard Station, at Sixth and Green, where you'd meet on Friday--Friday or Saturday night to go and play your gig. Your gig might be in Mt. Carmel, might be...hell, we went all over the place, you know. Crawfordsville, Indiana, and the Indiana Roof over in Indianapolis...

SS: Who drove?

DH: Well, various drivers. You know. Much of the time the leader would. We'd take two cars. Two or three or whatever we needed. Uh, when I was on Johnny Bruce's band that's where I met a lot of the faculty. Because they were on the band. I mean, they were, that was kind of, what do you call it, moonlighting, or they were just playing a gig, they were getting a little recreation. So you know we had a top notch band. That was the best--it was all faculty, Haskell Sexton, we had Jim Fleischer, we had Bob Gray, we had, uh, oh we had all those guys, Willis Coggins--

SS: That was Johnny Bruce's band?

DH: That was Johnny Bruce's band. Now, Dick says they had a band just like it with different personnel and sometimes interchangeable personnel. Johnny Ronaldo had a band, uh, his band was jazzier, it was a good band, I played a little with them. Actually, Johnny Bruce and Johnny Ronaldo, kinda, there was kind of a bidding war for my services. Now this is, the standard pay on a typical dance job was \$10. By the time they took out withholding it was \$9.77. Now Johnny, okay. Uh, Johnny Ronaldo wanted me to play with him. I kinda wanted to play with Johnny. But Johnny Bruce, I knew he had more stability, and Johnny Bruce said to me, he said, "I'll tell you what I'll do." And, hell, he was making a lot of money, I thought this was big money, he said, "I'll tell you what I'll do, instead of \$10 a night,"--he stole me, man. He said, "I'll give you \$14." \$14 a night, big deal! But, it got me away from Johnny Ronaldo. Now, now, so we had that scene. The black scene was very interesting, too.

SS: Let's—can we—before I, I wanna just, for the Johnny Bruce band, you had Robert Gray, yourself, Haskell Sexton, who else?

DH: Oh, Jim Fleischer, I don't know how you spell that name. Oh, who all, who was in that band? Well, eventually, Michael (Cataravic?), Tom Fredrickson was in that band, he was the bass player. I see Tom still. Um...(Oss?) McDowell.

SS: Oh really?

DH: Yes indeed! Clarinet player. Uh...you're in, you're getting me, trying to get me to remember this stuff. I should have taken my memory pills.

SS: (Laughter) You're doing great!

DH: Yeah...who else was in that band? The drummer, I don't think the drummer, um...Ron (Faithwit?), no. Jim, uh, I'll think of his name. He might've, might've--oh! I worked a lot of jobs with Jack McKenzie. He used to be the director—Jack, he's, now Jack, he probably played great legitimate percussion, but Jack couldn't keep a jazz tempo. I mean, you started playing a tune—he...I was working, I remember, I remember giving him checks for 25 bucks, you know. He would slow down the tempo, he couldn't keep the jazz tempo. And he was the head percussion teacher. I'll let you figure that one out.

SS: Huh. Just couldn't swing it?

DH: Couldn't swing it, just couldn't keep rhythm. Buh-duh-duh-duh, just kept slowing down. Um, Joe Farrell, I can't overemphasize, he really—and I'll tell you another guy who was here who is still active today. Boy, he'd be worth talking to even long-distance if you had a chance to talk to him and that's Denny Zeitlin. Denny Zeitlin. Denny Zeitlin was a phenomenal piano player. He was absolutely—and still is! And what Denny went on to do, first of all, he was in pre-med, but he could—if I had half, a third, a fourth of his technique! I remember he was 18 years old, we went into Stanley Fletcher's studio and he ripped off Giant Steps at tempo. Running, running the line and the right hand and the bass line. At tempo! He was 18 years old! But Denny went on to Johns Hopkins, got his degree, and wound up being a full-time psychiatrist, a full-time teacher, and a full-time performing, recording musician. And it's true, and I've seen him and I ask him how he does it, and he says it just seems to balance. But he, you know, had one of these off the charts IQs. But he was a dazzling performer.

Ron Dewar, you know Ron Dewar, he was, he was here. Uh...oh, gosh. All kinds of people that I played with. Good trombone player named George Harvey. Oh, man! Joe, Joe, what's his name, trumpet player, good trumpet player. Names are coming right—I can't think of his name. He's from Memphis. Joe Cannon. Good trumpet player. Uh...oh gosh, uh, the ones that were really good that influenced us, though, influenced me, it wasn't the dance bands that influenced me. I mean, they were fun. I enjoyed playing in dance bands and I still would, you know, if they had 'em, they don't have 'em anymore. Well, they might have a few, for, you know, but they don't have very many. And they might resurrect. But, I like to play jazz and we used to go down to AmVets, the black AmVets, and the black Elks. The black AmVets on the weekend, they had a wonderful combo there. Uh, the leader of that combo was Count Demon. You ever heard of Count Demon?

SS: Uh-uh.

DH: Count Demon was a giant, giant, kind of a wizard, great—I tell you what. The Queen of England would like Count Demon.

SS: (Laughter)

DH: I-I, you know, she would! She'd love him! He was a drummer, he was a bad but great singer. Not a bad singer, he sang all right. They say he had beautiful hands, great entertainer. Just played, made music, it was great. Had a wonderful piano player, you know, he's been recorded some. Joel Bradley, uh, on piano. Punchy Atkinson. Oh, wonderful tenor player. Wonderful, wonderful tenor player, this is, yeah. As good in his day as anybody we have here today. Joel Bradley, too. Denny was as good as anybody, you think Chip Stephens is good?

SS: Mm-hmm.

DH: Denny was pretty good.

SS: (Laughter) Well, we gotta...

DH: You know, I'm just saying, they're apples and oranges, but I'm just saying. But that black AmVets, really. We used to go, oh, used to play a lot in Danville, go over to the Danville AmVets, I played in those clubs. All those clubs—my fun was playing with the black bands. That was the fun for me, and still is.

SS: So tell me, what are the tunes? I mean, what are they playing that's different from the dance bands, give me a sense of—

DH: Oh! Well, they're playing the bop tunes, like Scapple from the Apple...

SS: Got it.

DH: They're playing, uh, Confirmation...uh, (Jordu?)...Bernie's Tune, uh, you don't play that on the dance jobs.

SS: No no no no. Too hot.

DH: Well...you play, uh, dance music. You know. You play, you can All the Things You Are as a dance tune. When I lived out east we, it was, they were, dances, we were a little different, the tempo was a little different. Uh, you'd play medleys out there, I'd love doing that. I used to play at the Pierre Hotel in New York and I had a trio, and uh, high society would—you know, these medleys would last 10, 15 minutes. (Taps on table) That's about the tempo. They loved to dance at that tempo. Now, out here in the Midwest they don't dance like that.

Uh...I mentioned Denny, I mentioned, let's see...good musicians. I'll forget somebody that should be remembered, I know that. Well, along the way I got to know George Shearing but that's not our local jazz scene.

SS: Well, but George came here. I mean, you know, worthy—

DH: George Shearing came here, he called me--one time he couldn't come here, he called me up, we had gotten to be good friends, he called me up and said, "Tell the people at Star Course that I'm stuck in Chicago, I've got the flu, I can't get out of bed."

The guy that played—and the Australian Jazz Quartet subbed for him that night at the University Auditorium, that's a fact. And the other, the other, the other act on the bill was Miles Davis. Miles Davis with, uh, well, Gerry Mulligan. Miles Davis with Gerry Mulligan and Ken (?), was it. You know, when they send, when they send out these groups they have a bunch of all-stars. I don't know if you've ever heard of Jazz of the Philharmonic.

SS: Oh yeah. Oh yeah.

DH: Well that's Norman Grantz, see that's his stuff. And George Wein got to doing that stuff too. Another producer. Uh, uh...yeah, George Shearing did come here. He, he had to do--they had to do two shows for Shearing. He packed the house. Erroll Garner. Couldn't get a seat. Dave Brubeck. Uh...it was, it was, it was very active. I mean, we had a lot, we had a lot, and we had a lot of inspiration around us, too. I mean, there was some good talent here.

SS: Talent that would come though, play gigs.

DH: You had talent that either lived here, went to school here, or...that I played with. Yeah, come through, that would come through school. Guys like Jim McNeely comes to mind, he's made a good name for himself, uh, in the music industry, and uh... He's younger than me, but he's a real good example of people who have grad—Kim Richmond came out of here, he's uh, friend of mine saw him just recently, he's back along the west coast. So there are people that have come out, done pretty well, and gotten a certain amount of notoriety. Others have remained here and where they might have remained local and not noted nationally, still in all, some of them were very good musicians and so it didn't make any difference, you know. They just happened to be here. I know, now one, Wes Montgomery used to come over here, before he was known. Before he was known he came here. Ah, in fact, one of, well when he was just getting known, I heard him play in the ballroom of the Illini Union. Imagine that? Yeah, Wes Montgomery, swingin' in the Illini—yeah, isn't it?

RG: Wow.

DH: But we used to hear him at the, uh, he used to come over here at the Elks Club from time to time. Another one was a trombone player named Benny Green, a great trombone player. But Wes, practically every Sunday, he would come from Indianapolis over to these clubs in Danville. And we'd go over, if we weren't playing, we'd hear him, we'd either listen to him. You know, I worked a lot of Sundays, the late night, I mean, we--they had strip clubs, you know, they...and then they had these supper clubs. Don's Supper Club. They don't have things like that anymore. In a way it's kind of a shame but they don't. Uh, they don't have quiet restaurants anymore. Everything has to be noisy. They build—they want everything to be noisy. They don't want it to be quiet anymore.

SS: Well, they don't want to hear each other.

DH: You go into a restaurant in Chicago, one of these popular like Francesca's? And I mean, you can't hear yourself think. You gotta yell to the waiter, you can't talk to your—I don't know, I don't know how, I don't know why they do it. But they thrive and they're popular. People love it. I, you know.

SS: What would you say in terms of your influences? All right, I mean, you got Stanley, clearly an influence. Who would you, if you were to look, in terms of your playing—

DH: You know, George Shearing, George Shearing and I became friends, and I'll tell ya, I always—one thing that George can do, one of many, uh, he's a great harmonizer. When you listen to his music, boy, those harmonies. So I tried to latch on to that, even today. I mean, when I play a tune, I don't gimmick it up, but I try to make it interesting, harmonically, uh...you know. Now that's, those are all seat of the pants judgment calls. Well, you know, you work out a piece, but, yeah, George Shearing, definitely. And when you listen to Art Tatum, Bill Evans, Cedar Walton, Cedar Walton, I love Cedar Walton. They all influence you. I mean, I don't know what they inf—I know Shearing has influenced my harmonic approach. I think a little bit of all of them, influences how you use your linear approach, uh...I think you get a little bit from all of them.

SS: You're talking about the linear approach in terms of harmonies—

DH: Well, no, no, linear meaning playing the lines rather than the harmonic. Linear, linear, yeah, yeah, playing the lines, like a bop line, a jazz line. Uh. Oh yeah, Shearing was good at that, a lot of people were good at that. And of course you can't forget, every kid listens to Art Tatum, as they should. You know, he's God. What do they say, God just walked into the room? Well, yeah, I never got a chance to hear Art Tatum, he died. I never got a chance to hear him. But I got to know George Shearing really, really well. I got a couple albums out with him. And uh...but I think you're talking about the local scene here.

RG: Well, you're the local scene. You're local, we can talk about you.

DH: Well, yeah...it's just who was here and uh, I'm trying to think...I think if people think we're living I the golden age of jazz now as opposed to how times used to be, I don't think that's right at all. I mean, I'm not one for any kind of match for match competitive, but in our day we had very talented musicians around, that—

(Phone rings)

DH: Well, that's gonna be Morgan.

SS: (Laughter) Musician's conference.

RG: Right on time.

(Phone conversation)

DH: I gotta see a guy in about ten minutes.

SS: Sure!

RG: Okay.

SS: Okay. That's okay, Donnie. I mean, can we come back another time because this is good information you're giving us.

RG: It's just getting started.

DH: Uh...I'll tell you what. If you hold tight, I'll be up, uh, I'll come down, soon as he comes by, I'll see him, and then, uh, I'll come right back up here. Is that fair enough?

SS: That would be, I mean, we have to get back at four, um, because I'm losing my student who's gonna leave us. I could call her to stay if you think that—

DH: How much more do you want to talk?

SS: Donnie, we could talk for hours.

RG: I think we—yeah—

SS: You've got so much information here, that, you know, I don't think we've even scratched the surface.

RG: I'm writing down questions as we go.

DH: Well, I don't know how helpful—I do think that there are few people around who were as much into the situation, into the scene...you know, I can't think of anybody. They've all died off or moved away. Uh...

SS: Well let's, let me suggest this. 'Cause, uh, you know what I'd really like to do, you know, musicians, when you talk to them, can talk, but the real voice is the music. And you know, I'd like to—basically, you talk about George and his influence, it'd be real nice to capture that at the keyboard, if you've got—

DH: Oh I'll come over here to the piano, and show you.

SS: Well yeah! I mean, but we, we, I don't wanna, I don't wanna rush this, because it's important, you know, I remember when—

DH: I gotta, this, yeah, this guy, he's kind of a busy guy, so I got to kind of take him when I can get him.

RG: Okay.

SS: No, no, no, no—

RG: Well, we can—

DH: Well, he'll be here—if you stick around, the soonest—now he said ten minutes, so it's not ten minutes yet, so...but then he'll be here, and he'll come and go, and I'll come right back up.

SS: Well-okay, let me call my student assistant and see if I can get her to stay an extra hour. I mean, we'll definitely—I will definitely then have to get back at five.

DH: Well, do you wanna, do you wanna go until 4?

SS: Uh, if we can, if that's...?

DH: Well, let's just do it!

RG: Okay!

DH: As soon as John, as soon as my buddy comes by, uh, actually. He's bringing me some cigarettes.

RG: That's important.

DH: Well, I tell ya, I can't get out in this cold weather. I can't get out in this cold weather. And so, uh, that's, he's gonna help me out there.

SS: All right. Well, that seems fair.

DH: Just shows you what you'll do for a smoke.

RG: Right?

SS: If I'd known that, man, I could have picked some stuff up for you.

RG: That's right.

DH: Well, that's all right. That's all right. You told me. I'm gonna, I'm gonna, I'm gonna—well, let's, what do we got, when did he call, five minutes ago?

SS: Yeah, about that.

RG: Maybe less.

DH: You wanna, is there anything more while we're talking? I'll run down, but stick around 'cause we'll carry this on till 4 o'clock, you know.

SS: All right, fair enough, Donnie.

DH: I mean, I'd like to—if you want me to show you what, uh—

SS: Yeah! I mean, you know--

DH: I got, yeah, I just, yeah, I just bought this new, uh, I just bought this new piano.

SS: Yeah?

DH: Yes sir, man.

(Clock announces it is 3 pm)

DH: How do you like that?

SS: I like that!

RG: It's handy.

DH: This what you want to do?

SS: Yeah, we're just, we're still recording, so...

DH: Okay, let's do that! All right? Now, uh, I'll show you how George Shearing's harmony—uh, I'll give you an example of a tune called "East of the Sun and West of the Moon." Now this will show you the harmonic—I'll just play the tune right here, uh, just as you would find it on the sheet.

(Plays piano)

DH: Okay, now just take that phrase. Ready? Now here, I'll show you how George Shearing would do it.

(Plays piano)

DH: It's uh, he did a couple encores.

(Plays piano)

DH: That's George Shearing.

SS: Mm-hmm.

(Plays piano)

DH: Now I'm gonna run downstairs, he should be, he'll be here.

SS: Okay. Now I'm gonna put this on pause—

DH: Put it on pause, stick around.

(Pause)

DH: When I could get out in the elements, a little better, uh, I remember one time we were having a blizzard. 5 above zero, God that was cold. And I walked three or four blocks to get a pack of cigarettes. You guys don't smoke.

SS: I smoke cigars.

RG: Not anymore.

DH: Okay.

SS: I understand!

DH: It's, it's, believe me, it's not good. It's not good, boys. Now what do you want from me now? Okay, go ahead.

SS: Let's talk, let's talk about venues. You had stepped out, and we, you know, just kind of all, what were the hot jazz venues in town? Um, you mentioned a couple.

RG: You talked about the Capital Restaurant, you talked about—

DH: Well yeah, now we, well, of course—

RG: Kam's, of all places—

DH: Well, yeah!

RG: Which is not— has a very different reputation now.

DH: Well now, over the years you've had several places. You know, you'd be surprised how many great acts have been brought to the Red Herring.

RG: Okay.

DH: Right over—listen, they've had Chick Corea there. They've had Elvin Jones.

SS: They had Chick Corea at the Red Herring?

DH: They sure did, and the Return to Forever band, I've seen 'em! Can you believe that? Channing-Murray, they sure did. Now, look at, that, why, I'm referencing when I went to school and around those times, now, after that time, uh...they had Nature's Table, of course.

RG: Of course.

DH: Now, I played a lot at Nature's Table. That was, that was...oh gosh, I don't know how long that was—15 years? How long did that go, I don't know. Uh...I don't what to say about Nature's Table. Do you guys remember Nature's Table?

RG: Before our time. I know there's been a book since then, but...

DH: Uh, oh, has there? I've not read, I've not read it, I didn't know that.

RG: Self-published on the internet by a guy who used to work there.

DH: Well, Nature's Table was a, was a jazz venue, right across from Krannert, uh, and all sorts of people who played here, played there. Oh, I'll tell you one I can't forget. The Autumn Tree.

SS: Now that's one that I've not heard of.

DH: The Autumn Tree. We used to, Rachel Lee used to sing up at the Autumn Tree.

SS: Where was that located?

DH: That was at--on the top of Huntington Towers, which is at the corner of Springfield and Randolph.

RG: Still is.

DH: That was 1976 to maybe 1988. I played there four nights a week. With a singer and a drummer. Yeah, it was a good restaurant. Good bar. Oh yeah, that was good. Uh, that was—I'd say we did our share of jazz there, for sure, good jazz singer. Places where I played like the Western Bowl, Town and Country, they weren't—

RG: Really?

DH: Yeah, do you remember Town and Country?

RG: No, the Western Bowl.

DH: The Western Bowl, believe it or not, one time was a prime dining room. It was the best dining room we had in town.

SS: But not, not a popular jazz venue?

DH: Wasn't, no, no, no, it was commercial. You're not talking about jazz, we can't talk about commercial things.

SS: Yep, no, that's true.

RG: That's true.

DH: That's true! No, that's right.

SS: So we got—

DH: Nature's Table, uh, uh, Caputo's, you remember Caputo's?

SS: I know the name.

DH: At Fourth and Green? Uh...oh, they had Bill Evans in there, they had Mose Allison...

RG: Really?

DH: Yeah, they had. They had, I'll tell you what, used, they used to have them in there, and WEFT used to broadcast it.

RG: Really.

DH: You could listen from this room to a live broadcast from Green St. of Bill Evans at one time. You can't do that today.

SS: No! No.

RG: No.

DH: Now...clubs. Uh, that was one, Caputo's, uh...you know, all the other clubs like Chances R, The Red Lion, they're all rock and roll, or they're commercial places. They're not what you're looking for. They're not what you're looking for. You're looking for jazz spots.

SS: Mm-hmm. We were just talking, um, the only jazz spot, per se, right now, is the Iron Post.

DH: That's about it.

RG: Yeah, that's about it, lately.

SS: I mean, so, it's a very different—

RG: Well, Zorba's, are they having acts at Zorba's again?

DH: Do they?

RG: Yeah, I think that they do.

DH: They don't do it?

RG: I think that they do again.

SS: Did you play Zorba's at all, Donnie?

DH: Uh...couple times.

SS: Mm-hmm. But it wouldn't have been one of the hot jazz spots.

DH: I think it was for some people. Wasn't for me. I didn't, I didn't, I didn't, uh, I didn't play there much.

SS: Mm-hmm. So, what was the style of that space, I mean, 'cause each space will have a distinct feel to it—

DH: Well, I don't know, it's just that, no, you go in and play what you play, you know, it just happens to be you're in a different space. You're in, you're, you're, you're in Zorba's. So, whatever your product, or brand, or whatever it is that they're buying, you--that's what they want you to present to them. So, you know, uh, I never played much over there. Uh. Oh...

SS: Who would have played at Zorba's--

DH: Oh, god, I don't know...people that I wasn't in the loop with, particularly—I don't know, oh I guess Jeff Helgesen's played there.

SS: Oh, okay. All right.

DH: Oh, they, they've, I don't know who all's played there. You know who the guy, you know, I'll tell you who to talk to about Zorba's. He booked 'em! And that's Jeff Machota. Jeff Machota will do—he has the CU Jazz site. CUJazz.org. No, that's—no, is that Jeff Helgesen? But if you, but, Jeff Machota, now, you, he's got a Wednesday morning radio show at WEFT, if you wanted to call him you could call WEFT in the morning and arrange to talk to him, 'cause he could talk to you about Zorba's. I can't talk to you much about Zorba's.

SS: Okay. In terms of Kam's, Red Lion, Capital Restaurant, and so forth, all of those--

DH: Red Lion didn't do any jazz.

SS: No, okay. Oh, I got Red Herring, sorry. Can't read my own writing. Um, most of those focused on what you would refer to as that bop style which you were listening and enjoyed playing?

DH: Oh, it was, what, it could be bluesy jazz like Russ Cheatham, you know Russ Cheatham, organ player?

SS: Hm-hmm, no.

DH: It would just be, uh...it would just be whoever's playing! You know, uh, wouldn't be any particular—it would just be them playing the way they played! If it was Dixie band you'd hear Dixie music.

SS: Sure. Well, let's—the Medicare group, um, um—

DH: Oh, I played a lot with them.

SS: Yeah, yeah, tell me about that.

DH: Ooh, I played a ton with them. Oh, well, it got the support of the university, you know how they—it got started because of the campus unrest, and you probably know the Medicare stories so I won't have to go over that, but, uh, it became very popular, and the alumni and the foundation found that, uh, if they'd send these Dixie bands around, it would be a good way to get their membership, it would be a way to, uh, engender new interest in local meetings, for instance, whatever they do, just—they would plan, they'd send Medicare band out to play for 'em, we went all over the state and all over the country for 'em, as that goes, and we were supported by funds from the Alumni Association and the Founda—I guess the alumni, but I know that it was successful in garnering funds for the university because, uh...I don't think the alumni would have done it, first of all, if it wasn't, if it didn't pay off. They're not gonna throw—they're not gonna send a Dixie band out just to play Dixie tunes, there's a, they wanna get in your pocket.

(Laughter)

DH: And, uh, I remember one time, we were, where the hell were we, we were in Baltimore, maybe? I, I think, I think so. We went all over the country, East Coast, West Coast, and I, well I can sure thank Danny, God rest his soul, and everybody, for all those memories, traveling, and they were fun experiences. And I think it was effective. I mean, we'd go to these places and the places would be packed. I remember in Baltimore, though, one time, we thought we hadn't—oh, we didn't get too many people here tonight. You know, we got about 12, 15 people, Baltimore, we thought, well, oughta be more people than that. Well, next morning Dan gets a call from the foundation, foundation said, you know, "What happened?" Says, "One of your, one of the people that was at the Medicare concert last night just gave us \$250,000."

(Laughter)

RG: I guess as long as it's the right twelve, it's okay!

DH: That, that'll pay, yeah, that'll pay for a lot of Medicare trips.

SS: It will.

DH: Yeah, it will.

SS: How did you meet Danny? I mean, how did you two connect?

DH: I met him on Johnny Bruce's band. Danny was on that band, I forgot to tell you! Danny was on Johnny Bruce's band, when he was teaching at the—hell, I knew him before he even got into—I knew him at, he was teaching, like, at Urbana High School.

SS: Right, he was their band director.

DH: Yeah! You know, that's when I knew him, but then went, he got into...he came over to the university and got involved in, uh, continuing education. That started his career at the university. But that's how I got to know him. Oh, we were lifelong friends. Danny was real good to me, he was a great guy, boy, he, you know, he's the kind of guy—well, when my mother died, he's the guy that took me from the nursing home, home, you know, 2:30 in the morning, it's raining, mother had just died, he said, "I don't care what time it is, if she passes tonight and you need to get home, call me." Got up at 2:30 in the morning to do that. That's the kind of person he was. You remember that celebration they had for him this last September?

SS: Yeah, the, uh—

DH: It was unbelievable.

SS: Mm-hmm. It was.

DH: It was unbelievable!

SS: He was a character.

DH: Everybody loved him! Listen, it took, it took 45 minutes to walk down the quad! Oh yeah, oh yeah, oh my God, yeah. Well, what else we got going here, boys?

SS: Oh, I mean, just--so you meet Danny when he's still playing Johnny Bruce's band, when was that? Do you have a sense?

DH: I'm guessing it was '57. It was '57. 'Cause I, I started work for Johnny practically as soon as I got here. And we were working every weekend.

SS: And Danny was playing the tenor sax at that point?

DH: Sure was.

SS: Okay, never played—I've never seen any pictures of him with anything but the tenor.

DH: That's it.

SS: Yeah? So he only played the tenor.

DH: Only played tenor.

SS: That's interesting. Shoot. I've never, never had a chance to ask him why he didn't play the alto. He always struck me as an alto player, but you know, that's just my bias.

DH: I don't know.

SS: So, in terms of working with Johnny Bruce's band, working with the bop style? I mean, 'cause I never thought of Danny as playing bop.

DH: No, it was dance band music. No, this wasn't, this wasn't bebop. Mm-mm. No, that was mostly in the clubs, I mean, when I was working at restaurants, I wouldn't get to—I always had jazz, I could always put jazz overtones in my playing, and I still do. Uh, I, I, I hope that I make, uh, my playing interesting to the point of where a diner would say that they could talk to one another but they could listen to the music with some interest and they wouldn't have to be totally--I don't want it to just a Muzak-type thing, so I incorporate some jazz stuff when I play, no one's ever slapped my hand for doing it.

(Laughter)

DH: It depends on how you do it, now if you, you know, yeah—

SS: Now right now, you play, what is it, The Great Impasta, regularly?

DH: I play at The Great Impasta, and Minecci's on First Street, and Minecci's at the Crossing, and at Silvercreek.

SS: And you play these all regular...

DH: Wednesday at The Great Impasta, Thursday at Minecci's, First Street, Sunday and Monday at, uh, Minecci's at the Crossing, Friday once a month at Silvercreek, uh...

SS: And always as a solo act?

DH: Uh...two Tuesdays a month I play in Springfield, uh, I'm gonna be playing at Schnucks this weekend, I got a busy schedule this weekend.

SS: You're playing at Schnucks?

DH: Oh, listen man, it's great. It's the best job of the year for me.

SS: Really?

DH: It's the best job there is. It's the best there is.

SS: How so?

RG: It's an event!

DH: Just playing in a grocery store, you're gonna see people who don't get out, see people who do get out, people shopping for groceries, they're having a good time, you're playing Christmas carols, it's great. It's more, it's fun, it's more fun than just playing for a bunch of people that are sitting down to dinner.

RH: Right.

SS: Mm-hmm. And the focus at Schnucks is always holiday music?

DH: Ohhhhhh, yeah, I mean, that's why they have me there...but I can play what I want.

(Laughter)

RG: Not gonna slap your hand.

DH: No. No, not really. Well, you know, you gotta be—no, they're not, they're not going to—I could play whatever I wanted to play. But they like festive tunes, so. But I'll put, uh, I'll play some other tunes, maybe.

SS: Cool.

DH: Yeah, it is!

SS: Shoot, you know, never would've thought, playing in a grocery store.

DH: Oh, it's wonderful, man. Uh, fellow by the name of Amar got that started about six, seven years ago. He's since gone to manage a Schnucks over in Iowa somewhere. It was more of a production when he did it, now, the present manager, who was the manager then—Amar worked for him. Amar had these marketing ideas, you know. He'd get a grand piano in there and some furniture from a furniture store and a Christmas tree and make it look like real, you know, it looked good!

RG: Okay.

DH: But, Amar left and so Doug, to continue it, he said, "Well, why not just come over and play some, play for us," so I've been doing it every season. I love it! It's wonderful, man! You playing—oh, it's great, people--oh!

SS: Just not expecting it.

DH: It's a nice little touch. Coming in there with a grocery cart and a guy's playing piano. It's pretty nice!

RG: That would be nice.

DH: It's nice, yeah! We, we get, yeah, it's great, it's great! It's wonderful, I feel blessed. I do.

SS: Excellent. I have a question related to your Braille. Um, in our collection we have a, we have Herbert L. Clarke's Braille book. Um, Herbert L. Clarke was a cornetist, 19th century, and their, his entire trumpet exercise method for playing trumpet is in Braille. And it was the first time I ever encountered musical Braille, and when I did some research, uh, musical Braille precedes the use of Braille for regular notations.

DH: Literary Braille?

SS: Yeah. And, um, so the question is--

DH: I wasn't aware of that. But I don't question it.

SS: But the question is, I mean, did you find it hard? 'Cause for me, as a sighted musician, to use Braille to learn a line—

DH: Oh, I'll tell you what that's like, it's like chewing off a piece of spaghetti.

SS: Okay.

DH: Really, that's how you can look at it. You got the Schumann Piano Concerto, uh...you've got, they've had various styles. Now, if you're talking about the 19th century it might be—there was a, there was a type of literary Braille called “moon type.”

SS: Yeah, yeah.

DH: Uh, I can't read moon type, moon type is gibberish to me.

SS: Mm-hmm. It has to do with the number of...I don't want to say lines, but it's how many dots—

DH: No, no, no. Music—Braille, Braille is simply six dots to a cell, and the number of combinations that can be derived from that is sixty-three. So you can combine them in sixty-three different ways to make a symbol. Course, if you make a symbol and pair it with another symbol it makes sense. Uh, give you an example: the contraction A-R is the same, it looks the same in literary Braille as the right-hand sign would be in music Braille. So you have to, uh, all of the--all of the characters, like a D, a letter D, would be “C 8th note.” And then you add—by adding a dot you can make it a quarter, another dot, you can make it a half, and so forth. Or a whole note, by making the, yeah—it's a very qui--it's a very...once you start learning this stuff it's like eating peanuts, it's really a good system.

SS and RG: (Laughter)

DH: Yeah, it is. Uh, I...

SS: So your early piano lessons were basically learning how to read the notation—

DH: Oh yeah, read and write Braille. You would read a measure and play it. Left hand, read a measure, play it. Put the two together. It was slow.

SS: Mm-hmm. Okay. Now, that—you used that predominately to learn classical technique. I take it that you also used it for your jazz?

DH: No, I don't use it for jazz. I just pick it up. I just pick it up from what we've—you know, you listen to records, I just pick it up. That's what you do. Jazz, you're just playing a tune. You learn the tune, and then you play it, and you improvise on it.

SS: Do you do much reading of classical music currently?

DH: Not now. Huh-uh. I've thought about doing it, you know, Ian Hobson, one time talked to me about doing a program, I never pursued it with him.

SS: Mm-hmm. Interesting.

DH: Yeah, I thought, I thought so too. I thought, I asked him what we do, he said, "Well, we would do some Gershwin." Well, that's true, you know, you got the Gershwin preludes, you can get some—I suspect there's some two-piano stuff, he would know about it. But we never did it. It'd be fun to do, it'd be a little work.

RG: Sure.

SS: Can we—curious, I'd like to come back to your mom, um...you stayed—when you went to school, she stayed in Pekin and you went to Jacksonville—

DH: Yeah, Mom. You know, Mom was a, really a tremendous gal. She, uh, she and Dad's marriage went south early. We were the only child. I do have half- brothers by another marriage of Dad. Anyway, but she never remarried and she had my grand—she had her father and me. Course, when I was growing up I went, I went to Jacksonville, I was at school most of the time but I was home in the summertime. But she had to take care of my grandpa and he was—I don't think he was easy to live with in a lot of ways. He, he could hit the bottle pretty good, you know. And he—that, that, that was—that caused some situa—you know, and Mother, but Mother had to make—Mother worked six days a week. Uh, she commuted to Peoria, she commuted to Peoria, she worked five and a half days a week. She worked five days a week and Saturday morning.

SS: What did she do?

DH: She was, uh, she worked in an office. Insurance—she worked for two companies, one of which was an insurance company, they were—they sold insurance, and the other company was in the pipe-fitting business, very successful industrial piping. Caterpillar, Iron Walker, and stuff like that. They made a lot of money. Uh, and she, she did whatever needed to be doing in the office, I guess you'd call it an office manager. It was a small office, didn't have but a couple people. She worked there, and then she would come home, she'd have to clean the house, fix my grandpa's meals. You know, she canned food, painted the house in the summertime, I don't know how she did what she did. You know, you take a pretty hard working person, Mom worked hard every day.

SS: Mm-hmm. Was she a musician at all?

DH: Nah, she liked music.

SS: She didn't?

DH: She did! She liked music.

SS: Oh, good. So she very supportive of you—

DH: Oh yeah, sure, sure. Sure. She bought me a piano, that was a—she didn't make much money. So she had to be careful. And she was. And I admire her for her just how she kept everything together. Yeah, she's...quite a gal.

SS: And did she have any particular styles of music that she'd ask you to play?

DH: Nah, not really, no, no.

SS: No? Shoot...well, I've been occupying all the time, Rory—

DH: No, no, no, no.

RG: Um—

DH: I mean, I don't know that much—you know, I played in Nature's Table, but you know who you could talk to about Nature's Table is Shelley Masar. Shelley, I mean, she and Terry ran it, I mean she was married to Terry. If you can, if you can get her, sit her down and talk to her, uh...she might have some stuff to tell you. Are you gonna talk to anybody else outside of Morgan and me?

SS: oh yeah, yeah, yeah. People you keep mentioning--

RG: Oh, certainly. Certainly. You're helping us out, right now! Uh, let's go back, let's go back to U of I in the '50s. Well, you did graduate?

DH: Yeah, I did! Uh-huh!

RG: Okay, what year was that?

DH: Uh...'59 and '60. I got two degrees.

RG: Okay. In what?

DH: I got performance degree, and a music ed degree.

RG: Music ed.

DH: What do they call that, is that a bachelor of arts or a bachelor of science?

SS: It's both, as far as I'm concerned. (laughter)

DH: Well, yeah.

SS: Which came first, the performance or the education?

DH: Mm-hmm, the performance degree. Then I got, uh...mm-hmm.

RG: Then what'd you pursue after that?

DH: I just played.

RG: Around here?

DH: MM-hmm. Well...oh, I've played everywhere. When was it that I got, I went away for my first—1967. Uh, I got a chance to work at a resort in Arizona.

RG: That was while you were living here?

DH: That was while I was living here so I worked the winters in Arizona for a while. Came back here and worked through the summer.

SS: Where, uh, it was Tucson? Phoenix? Scottsdale?

DH: Scottsdale.

SS: Oh really? What was the resort?

DH: Oh, it was a wonderful, uh—it doesn't exist anymore. Casa Blanca Inn. Boy, that, you know, that was one of the nicest jobs I've ever had. Ohh...

SS: Well, my wife is from Scottsdale, Arizona, so I would be interested to hear if her mother remembers Casa Blanca Inn.

DH: Uh...she'll know of Casa Blanca Estates, they still, it's still there, to the north of what—of the hotel. The hotel was subsequently bought by a fellow from Parkersburg, West Virginia, by the name of—the owner of the hotel when I played for them was a fella and his wife by the name of Royal and Patty Treadway, no relation to the Treadway Inn out east, uh, but they were wonderful. And their clientele was very exclusive. Very exclusive clientele. I mean, it was really, it was not cheap to stay there, it was pricy. But that's what, they, they, those people didn't want grocery clerks in there, you know.

(Laughter)

RG: I don't even know what that means. (laughter)

DH: Uh, you know, we had, we had, we had people like Hoagy Carmichael stay there. I played for Hoagy.

RG: Wow. (unintelligible)--

SS: Really. So Hoagy's—

RG: Two questions—

SS: Well, yeah, well, no, no, did you get a chance to play with Hoagy at all?

DH: Oh, no. Everybody was saying, "Now when Hoagy comes in, play 'Stardust'," and I knew that's the one thing he wouldn't want to hear—

RG: Of course he wouldn't, yeah.

DH: So I played "I Get Along Without You Very Well." I played a couple other tunes, too. "One Morning in May," just to let him know I knew a few of his tunes. But he was pleasant, he was there, uh, for the Phoenix Golf Tournament. They always have a pro-am there. These big tournaments have pro-ams, they call them pro-ams, and they have amateur golfers who are celebrities that come the day before. And they may do it for charity or what the hell they do it for, you know, before the main event starts. And that's why he came. He was, he lived in Palm Springs. So I worked there, I worked the, oh, I worked the hotel, I worked a lot of nice—I worked the Hollywood Playboy Club.

RG: Oh yeah?

DH: Yeah, I did.

RG: How did that gig come about?

DH: Well, actually, from a guy who used to...oh, the guy that--Dick Holloman. I, uh, uh, I didn't play with his band much when I was here, when he was here, but he was very successful dance band and had a lot of people who played jazz or whatever you played. I mean, you played in a dance band, it didn't mean you didn't play jazz, but it didn't mean you did, either.

(Laughter)

RG: Okay.

SS: So when did you do that?

DH: Hmm?

SS: The Hollywood Playboy Club.

DH: Oh! When the hell did I do that... '68? '69? I worked at the Casa Blanca, I worked...then I moved to New York. I worked a lot of spots in New York, I worked a lot of the, you know, Plaza Hotel, I worked at the Waldorf, uh, many—some of the Pierre hotels that you'd know the names of them, I played there.

RG: When was that?

DH: Oh, that was in the '70s.

SS: What, what brought you to New York City? I mean, what was the draw? Just, I mean, did someone invite you out and you stayed put for a while, or was it just—

DH: Well, you know, everybody wants to go to New York one time or another.

SS: Mm-hmm. So how long were you there?

DH: Oh, about four, four and a half years.

SS: So about 1970 to seventy—

DH: Noo, I--yeah but this is, what, this is not the local jazz scene, my friend.

SS: I know, I'm just trying to get the broader picture.

DH: See, this is not, yeah, this is not—we are not—I thought you wanted to talk about local.

SS: I do. I want, I want to—you are the local scene.

DH: Yeah, but that's—New York isn't.

SS: Yep, that's true. So how—I mean, how, given our scene and the New York scene, you know, it's obvious in some levels, where--are there similarities between the two, or are they totally different?

DH: Well, one thing, if you get it down to bare bones, a gig is a gig. A gig is still a gig. It doesn't make any difference whether you're working at The Great Impasta or the Hotel Pierre, it's a gig. Doesn't feel any different. I worked Las Vegas, played Don the Beachcomber's, played Sahara Hotel. Now, I must say, you

know, the, the—it's just a gig when you're doing it, but, you know, knowing that you're in New York or Las Vegas does make it different. I mean, I'm playing at the Hotel Pierre in New York, that's a nice place to play, sure was. Beautiful.

SS: Uh-huh. So, we're just talking, a gig's a gig.

DH: A gig is a gig. They can glamorize it all they want to—

SS: Eh, I'm really just trying to get a sense of—

DH: --it's just a— it's a gig. You go over here to Krannert, basically the way you have to think about it— you don't want to get too jumbly and nervy, too intimidated by that stuff, just remember you're doing a gig.

SS: Mm-hmm. Okay. Much like what I tell my daughter, you know, don't worry about who you're playing for, or where, just, just, play.

DH: Well...yeah, I suppose, sure. You know, I mean, that's, you know, the idea behind it all, I suppose, is to be able to present it to somebody, or you hope you can.

SS: And there's some, coming back to our community, what would be your favorite place to play, if you were to just rank it. You know, right at the top, the place you enjoy playing the most.

DH: (Pause) Hmm, well...I'm not sure. Nothing sticks—they all have, you know...I enjoy, uh...for different reasons, I like, I like, I like the intimacy of Minneci's over here on First Street. I like The Impasta. It's a nice little venue, I play in the bar there, it's a nice little venue. And we have our, we have our following, we have a group that comes pretty much on every Wednesday, that bar is gonna be full. Uh...I'm not crazy about playing at the Post.

SS: Mm-hmm. Is it because it's so small?

DH: Oh, it's funky, it's just...I don't know. It's all right.

SS: In the 1950s, let's take it back, early years. What would be, I mean—here you were a college student, playing a lot of gigs—

DH: Well, I was young then, I had a lot of fun playing at Kam's. (Night special?) at Kam's. I remember the piano, it was a blue piano, it was great. It was sticky, it had beer on it and stuff.

(Laughter)

DH: Yeah, they had pianos, they had a few pianos around. Now they don't have any, you gotta bring your own piano. But that has gotten to be easier, too. I bought four pianos this summer because I was playing in these restaurants, and this friend of mine says, this guy—I thought, 'How in the heavens can I haul a piano around.' I have to have somebody haul it for me. So, even now, I get a ride with somebody to the places where I work. I have a lot of support. I couldn't do it if I didn't have the support I've got, I mean that. Rich Palmer, John Dahlstedt, Lou Skizas, my friend Alice, they all help—you know, they drive me to gigs, or they do this, or they do that, uh...

SS: Let's go back to the blue piano.

DH: The blue piano, man, that's great!

SS: Yeah, tell me about this blue—do you remember what type of piano, was it a Baldwin?

DH: Oh hell, I, no. I think it was a Schlitiz.

(Laughter)

RG: It was when they took it out of there, yeah.

DH: I don't know what it was, but I don't think...you know, these club owners, boy, they're wonderful. They'll, they'll just—I went into a club one time, the guys says, the guy says, uh, "Got you a new piano here, man." This is a green piano. He says, "I painted it." He says, "It's great." Says, "I paid ten bucks for it."

(Laughter)

DH: Oh, I'm glad to have electronic—but I bought four pianos this summer, I bought four of 'em in August. So I have a piano—

SS: Do you store it?

DH: --I have a piano at the Impasta, a piano on First Street, and a piano out at The Crossing, and I bought a new piano for me.

SS: Oh, okay. Well, that makes it convenient, you just walk in, sit down.

DH: Oh, that's the way it's gotta be, man.

RG: Nice.

DH: That's the way it's gotta be.

SS: Do you miss the, you know, the beer-flavored kind of keyboard?

DH: No. No, because most of the time they weren't in tune. They weren't in good shape, they weren't in good shape. You'd go to a, you'd go to the Urbana-Lincoln, play a piano, you'd have to take what they get, what they give you. And whereas the Urbana-Lincoln at one time was a beautiful hotel, uh...they didn't translate to their pianos, necessarily, you know. Or any other place, you know, they just...yeah.

SS: They have a, um, they currently, um, a, um, oh shoot...late 18th century piano...pianoforte, there we go. It just, since it's largely just a piece of furniture—

DH: Where is it?

SS: Um, it's in the—well right now, it's just off of where the hotel desk check-in is, it's kinda tucked toward the corner, um...and um, I mean, it's, it looks more like a piece of furniture than a musical instrument.

DH: I'm sure it is. Sure it's a piece of junk.

SS: I, uh—maybe when it was new it might have been adequate, but yeah, it's probably...

DH: It's probably a piece of junk. Jumer's [Urbana-Lincoln Hotel]--I remember one time, my friend Harry Rudy, rest his soul, came in there—I used to play at Jumer's a lot, uh...were, they had a string of managers, I couldn't, I couldn't count 'em all, they came and went every other week. But the one that was the best one of the lot was a fellow who runs the, uh, Bayern Stube out there in Gibson City. Uh, Peter Schnabel. Great guy, he could scare you to death, he had that German accent, man.

RG: That's right.

DH: Oh listen, he could—when he got authoritative with that German accent, are you kidding me? Oh yeah, he could get, he could raise the hair on your neck. I remember one time we walked into Lincoln Room, my friend Harry Rudy, Harry was in the clothing business. Harry liked style, he's always been meticulously dressed, looked like he came out of a bandbox. He said to Peter—and the curtains, I mean, I don't know whether you've been in that room, I don't know, I haven't been in that place in years, and he said to Peter, he said, "Peter, when are you gonna wash the curtains?"

(Laughter)

DH: I tell you what, I think if you touch those curtains in there, they'd fall apart!

(Laughter)

RG: Bayern Stube? Maybe.

DH: Oh no, no, no, the, the—

SS: Oh, this would be at Jumer's?

DH: Yeah, the Urbana-Lincoln.

RG: Oh.

SS: I think they're gone now.

RG: Hopefully they got some new ones.

DH: I don't know. I don't know.

SS: We just had the Roots Festival there, I sponsor the children's program.

DH: Oh, Jesus.

SS: It's the big hall where the restaurant used to be, it's, they've got that cleaned up pretty well, so...

DH: Do they?

SS: Yeah. There's some significant improvements, um...

DH: Well, hell, it's gonna take that guy, that guy's never gonna get it open!

SS: Oh, he's got people coming in and staying, I don't know if he ever had it fully loaded, but, um, lot better than what they had about two years ago, which was vacant space--

DH: Ohh, okay, whatever, I don't know.

SS: Tell me about Morgan. I mean, Morgan, when I asked him to come here--and I'm gonna have to call him and bust his chops for not getting here—said, you know, when he first came here he was more interested in the straight music scene, um, and, even though he played jazz. But you know, the question is how did you and Morgan connect?

DH: With the Medicare, I think that is how we met.

SS: Okay. Did you do much playing with Morgan?

DH: No. Not a lot. Not much. He had a group called The Boneyard, I subbed for them when—once in a while, but uh...nah, we don't play a lot together.

SS: Hmm. Okay. That's interesting, I'd think that you would've played a little more frequently than that with the jazz...

DH: No.

SS: And we've already talked about, you know, John Garvey, and the passing when we were heading upstairs, and your description of him—

DH: You know, the guys that should, you—guys that were in his band, Morgan might be closer to that than me.

SS: Yeah. Mm-hmm. But you weren't quite sure if he was a true jazz musician? I mean, I can't remember how you described...

DH: He had a way of getting things across, I suppose. I don't know, I just wonder how much, how much he really knew about jazz.

SS: Mm-hmm. That's, yeah—

DH: Yeah I know. But he wanted to run a jazz band. He had enough clout because he was a respected member of the faculty. That got him in some doors that otherwise, he might not have been able to open. And he was, I suppose, the vanguard at that--well, I suppose we were! We were here before John's jazz band and if you talk, if you talk to people in the Medicare, uh, that went to school here in the '30s and '40s, they had their own scene too. I don't know anything about it. I don't know anything about that, but...

SS: Hmm. I don't know, do you have anything else to ask, Rory, at this point?

RG: Yeah, I, uh...something I sort of ask everyone, but in your case especially. You grew up in Pekin and Jacksonville and you've been all over the country and you keep moving back to Urbana. What is special about Urbana?

DH: Well, one of the reasons that I came back here was, at the time, was that my mother was living and I, you know, when I was living in New York, I kinda got homesick for her, and I should have—I think a good talk, I mean, at the time I played in New York you could get Ozark Airlines from New York to Peoria, I don't know, wasn't a very long flight, hour and a half? Hell, it's a two hour bus ride!

RG: Right!

DH: But I'm—but my thinking was, you know, I can take, I can be geographically—but in truth I could have maybe stayed in New York. I had a chance to go back, too! Yeah, I had a chance to go back and work the Marco Polo and Waldorf. Men's clubs. A men's club. I'm sure it's still there. Uh...good, good, good gig. Real good gig. But I didn't take it, I just...uh...I wanted to be, if Mother was, needed me, I wanted to be where I could get to her.

RG: Was she still in Pekin at the time?

DH: Yeah. Mm-hmm.

RG: So Urbana was close enough to Pekin but you could still—

DH: Well I had gone to school here, you know, I knew people here.

RG: So you could still—

DH: Champaign-Urbana is, is not terribly exciting but it's comfortable.

SS: Mm-hmm. Interesting. That's the first time I've ever heard it described that way.

DH: It's comfortable. Not terribly exciting.

SS: In terms of the music scene, or...

DH: In terms of much of anything, really. It's not an exciting place. It's just Champaign-Urbana, it's just people going, you know, got school, you got school here. I mean, you don't have excitement here, like in the city. You know, it's not a city.

SS: Well I confess, I left Washington DC to come here because I got tired of that excitement.

DH: Well, you know, sure. I can understand that, too.

RG: One man's excitement is another man's noise.

DH: Well, I liked, I liked New York, I did like it, one thing about New York is that, uh—I always woke up at 7:30 every morning in New York and I think, I think that's attributable to the sheer energy. You just pick up on it. And then when you step outside into the street, man, you really get it.

SS: Everybody's in a rush to go someplace.

DH: You don't get it in Chicago, you don't get it like that in Chicago.

SS: I remember the first time I—when I was working in DC I worked at the Smithsonian, took care of the jazz collections, you know, Benny Carter, Duke Ellington, (unintelligible), uh, Bill Russo's papers were in Chicago, I remember flying out to Chicago to pack up the materials, and um, you know, in DC when you drive the streets, you know, you basically put on the turn signal and you just go. You know, you don't wait, you just, you just do it and people just get out of your way. In Chicago, I was continually dumbfounded by the fact that people will actually make room for you to move your car from one lane to the other, they actually kind of let you share the road.

DH: Oh yeah, man, the way these people drive around here, if they were in New York they wouldn't get off the curb.

SS: (Laughter) No, they wouldn't.

DH: No, they wouldn't.

RG: Yeah, I can imagine.

DH: No, they wouldn't get off the curb. And that's true.

SS: Well, I think, yeah, we've covered a lot of--

DH: Well, if you need me for another chat, you know, if I think of anything, we can, you know, you're, I'm in town here, you know, I'll talk with you anytime you want. I don't know how else I can illuminate or eliminate or ruminate, whatever...but I've enjoyed sharing with you guys.

RG: Well, good.

DH: Hope it's been helpful to you.

SS: It's been extraordinarily helpful.

RG: And entertaining.

DH: I hope Morgan will look at his calendar and tell him that he didn't get to his appointment!

SS: Well, I will...I'm just gonna let him know he missed a great, great conversation.

RG: He's gonna be jealous.

DH: Well, he'd a been, he'd a been, he'd a been--(machine states temperature outside)—thank you, dear.

(Laughter)

DH: Do you know what anthro—anthropomor— anthropomor--

RG: Anthropomorphism.

DH: You name an inanimate object?

RG: Yes.

DH: That's, George is my calculator over there.

RG: Yes.

(Laughter)

SS: Love it.

DH: Now do you got a class at four, or do you--?

SS: I've got a, I've got a, um—

Audio ends

