



Arnett Cobb playing his tenor saxophone.

## A Feeling for Jazz: An Interview with Arnett Cobb

*Arnett Cleophus Cobb (1918-1989) made his own distinctive mark in the Texas jazz tradition. From his early years with Milton Larkin's band in his home city of Houston, Cobb moved on to a featured place in Lionel Hampton's group in the 1940s and then established his own band in the late 1940s and early 1950s. He returned to Houston after being severely injured in an accident in 1956. He continued to perform both in this country and on international tours until his death on March 24, 1989. Known as "The Wild Man of Jazz," Cobb brought an individual style to the tenor saxophone. Together with other Houston jazz greats such as Milton Larkin and Illinois Jacquet (whose family moved from Louisiana to Houston when he was only six months old), Cobb helped develop that special quality of jazz which came to be called the "Texas Sound."*

*Cobb's path to musical greatness was hampered by physical hardship. An accident when he was ten years old left him with spinal problems that caused him pain and difficulty in movement, culminating in a series of operations which sidelined him soon after he had formed his own band and begun to record under his own name. The severe injuries he suffered in a car accident in 1956, from which he never fully recovered, effectively curtailed his New York career. In his later years, fans grew accustomed to seeing him supported on crutches while he played his concerts. Despite his ordeals, Cobb's dedication to jazz never flagged. He once admitted that only when he played did he truly forget his disabilities. And although he never reached the superstar status he seemed to be headed for in 1947, Arnett Cobb nonetheless achieved a national and international reputation and added his own dimension to jazz.*

*One of his last contributions to the music he loved was the creation of the Texas Jazz Heritage Society, and through it the establishment of the Texas Jazz Archive in cooperation with the Houston Metropolitan Research Center of the Houston Public Library. In this archive, documents, photographs, and oral histories detailing the careers of prominent Texas jazz musicians help to preserve this important heritage.*

*The interview presented here is condensed from two separate oral history interviews which took place on February 11, 1988, and on April 21, 1988. Dr.*

*Louis J. Marchiafava conducted the interviews, assisted by Charles Stephenson. Full transcripts of both interviews are located in HMRC's Texas Jazz Archive. The edited version which follows is a tribute to Arnett Cobb as a man and as a musician. In it, Cobb talks about the personal aspects of his life and career, the ups and downs of his days on the road, and behind-the-scenes details of the music business. His enthusiasm shines through in everything he discusses: the same zest and spirit which caught up his audiences wherever he performed.*

LJM: Mr. Cobb, I'd like to begin by getting some background information. When and where were you born?

AC: I was born in Houston in 1918 on August tenth.

LJM: Where did you go to school?

AC: Phyllis Wheatley High School. Boosey Elementary.

LJM: Were you introduced to music at an early age?

AC: Yes. My grandmother taught piano, so I had basic piano. I was around it all the time. My mother, an aunt, and two uncles played piano. When they got off the piano I wanted to play it myself. Then I went into violin. The lessons every Saturday were a dollar; I got the violin free. I was the only violinist in the Phyllis Wheatley band, an eighty-piece brass band. The instructor told me, "Son, I can't hear you!" I said, "I can't hear me either." He said, "Would you like to have a horn? I have one horn left: a C-melody saxophone." It was strictly a band instrument, but I was happy to get it. I had to bring a note from my parents that they would stand for it. I asked my mother. She sent the note, and I got the horn. The main thing I had to learn was the fingering of the horn. I knew the notes. I just put the two together.

CS: So, reading music was no problem.

AC: No. Learning the horn was the problem, and that wasn't too hard. With the saxophone everything is set under your fingers. It's just a matter of knowing when and how many keys to press at one time, which is coordination, you know. It's not as hard as the trumpet, which has only three valves. On trombones you've got seven slide positions. With the saxophone everything just sits under your fingers, so it is easier. But all the keys fight you. You think it's a hard instrument, but it's not. It's the easiest.

LJM: Was your father involved in the music profession?

AC: My father passed away when I was about six years old. He was the man that invented a money changer for streetcars. He gave my mother the thirty dollars to send the blueprint in for the patent. She sent the

blueprint in but took the money and bought a dress, hat, and shoes. The patent didn't go through. Somebody else got that so he lost it!

LJM: What was his occupation?

AC: You are the first person who ever asked me that. I don't know what he did. I knew I was six years old, and he was good to me. The last thing he got me was a gray chesterfield overcoat with a velvet collar. I was proud of that coat! And a pair of shoes. My mother had to take me outside and kind of tan me a little bit because I'd go around and say, "See my new shoes? See my new shoes?" I wanted everybody to see that I had new shoes.

LJM: Did you have brothers and sisters?

AC: I was the only child.

LJM: Where did your uncles play?

AC: They played professionally in speakeasies. One uncle played in a speakeasy after hours where they'd sell whiskey and that liquor they called "white lightning."

LJM: When you went to school, was the music program something that you sought out?

AC: Not in elementary. When I first entered high school in 1931 nothing really interested me in music until finally they got a little band together. That's when I first became interested.

LJM: Whose music did you find particularly enjoyable?

AC: Duke Ellington. He was the greatest band leader. I didn't know anything about Jimmie Lunceford; nothing but Duke Ellington.

CS: How did you learn about Ellington?

AC: We had his old records. My mother used to play them and dance around the house. We had an old gramophone with a speaker. I got pleasure out of winding it for her.

CS: How old were you then?

AC: I guess I was around nine or ten years old . . . just a little "squee-wee."

LJM: Did you play in any groups outside of school?

AC: I had been in school a couple of years when things began to unfold about what was going on outside. My mother would let me go see bands that came to town, like Louis Armstrong. I would stand in front of the bandstand all night long just to listen. That is how involved I was in music. So, at least once a month I caught the big bands that came to Houston.

LJM: Where did you go to hear them?

AC: Puritan Temple and, at one time, at the City Auditorium downtown. Other times, they brought them in to the Majestic Theater or they would open Loew's Theater for these stage shows. They never did have vaudeville shows at the Lincoln Theater, the major black theater

in town, but the Lincoln had a pit trio that played music during the pictures.

LJM: Did you ever get involved in that phase of it?

AC: When I started to play, they didn't have that. The only thing they had was amateur night on Wednesdays, and I didn't get involved in that.

LJM: Did you have any idea what you wanted to do when you were in high school?

AC: Not really. I don't think I was even searching for what I wanted to do. I made my first money at fourteen years old at a picnic the nineteenth of June in Humble, Texas. I played an intermission at the barbecue and drinks. Strawberry soda! I had a ball. I was the youngest member of the band. I made four dollars on that trip and put the money in my shoe. Coming back on the truck I was tired and went to sleep. When I got home my shoe was untied and the money was gone. Somebody got me while I was asleep. I watched my money very closely after that. Four dollars. That was big money in 1931.

LJM: What was the most important take-off point for you playing professionally after high school?

AC: Well, the first thing that really excited me was just playing locally with the Phyllis Wheatley Orchestra, playing at school functions. On Saturday nights we would play at the Ethiopian Cafe on Milam. We had purple and white blazers, dark trousers, and bow ties. We thought we were something else! We stayed there about two and a half months. I was sorry when they closed that down. It got to the point that they couldn't pay the band. They weren't paying the band that much. It was just a matter of drawing people in to eat.

LJM: How much money are we talking about?

AC: Four or five dollars for musicians and eight dollars for the leader. That was good money! You could buy a lot for four dollars. I could get pan sausages for four cents a pound and a loaf of bread for three cents. I could take two pieces of bread and put a couple of sausages in and fill myself up.

LJM: After you finished high school, were you interested in becoming a professional musician?

AC: I don't think I had my mind on it as a profession. I was just enjoying what I was doing.

LJM: Was there a point when you made a conscious decision?

AC: Frank Davis, from Louisiana, wanted to form a band for the summer. I was working with the school band, and he heard me play. When school let out, he hired me for tenor saxophone. I was the youngest one in the band to tour with him, with guys from Louisiana, Houston, and different parts of Texas. It was a mixture. One of the

trumpet players in that band was Chester Boone from Houston. After that tour in 1934 he formed a band and hired me.

CS: He asked you to come with him?

AC: Yes, he did. There were two of us out of the school band that he asked: Eddie ["Cleanhead"] Vinson and me.

CS: What school did Eddie attend?

AC: Jack Yates. I was at Phyllis Wheatley. There was a rivalry between Yates and Wheatley in music and football. Booker T. Washington had a bugle corps, but the competition was between Yates and Wheatley who were hustling and practicing to be the best. It gave us something to shoot for. A few good musicians came from both schools because of the contests.

LJM: The Louisiana trip was your first professional trip out of state?

AC: I came back and told everybody, "I have been North!" You would have thought I had gone to New York . . . all the way! We played Louisiana and a few dates in Mississippi. We played in places that were too small to remember, but Biloxi I remember very well.

LJM: How long were you gone?

AC: All summer. In fact, I was late getting back to school.

LJM: When you returned, did you have a clearer view of what you wanted to do?

AC: I had a clearer view that I wanted to play with that type of band away from school, and I got it. They called me to change my schedule. I was taking Latin and, oh! I tell you, I hated it. I went to my principal and asked if I could come in second period because I was working. My mother was making a meager salary, and I was taking the weight off her. He granted the privilege. I made my own living and bought my own clothes. I could dress for twenty-five dollars and have some change left. That's the truth.

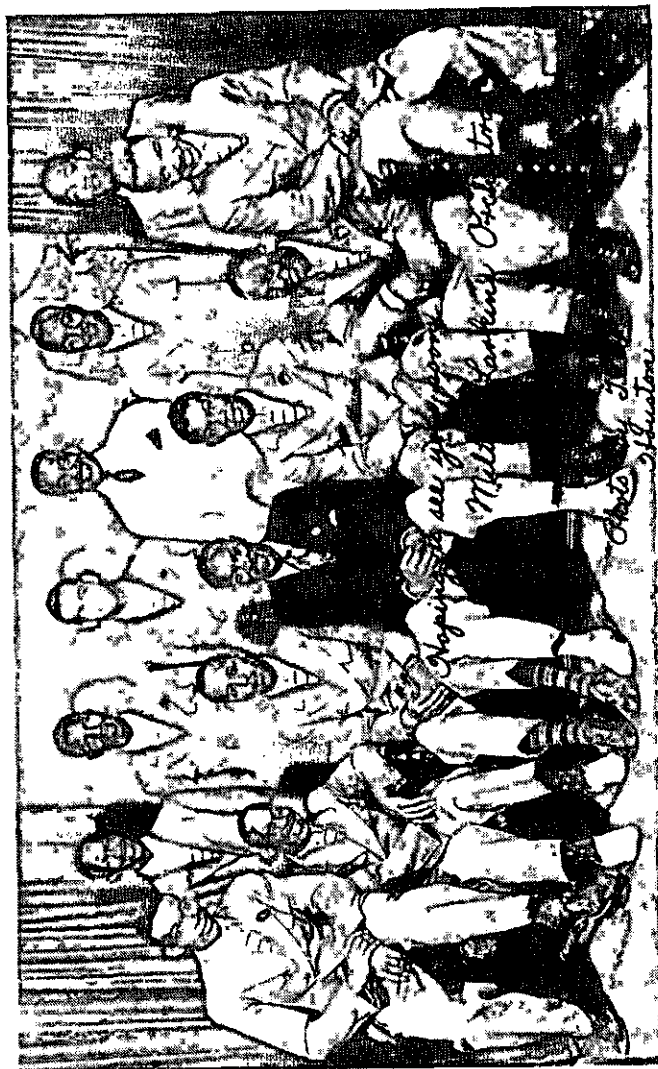
I was playing in town six nights a week at the Harlem Grill in the Fourth Ward. They finally put in Monday, so that filled the week. We weren't getting a salary. We worked for fifty percent of the door. On some occasions, the band took sixty percent and others forty percent.

CS: Was there a cover charge?

AC: We called it an admission. This guy never charged over ninety-nine cents to keep from paying that government tax. We would work "on the door" with him and made more money than if he had paid us a salary. He didn't have the foresight to see that it could build. It was good just exposing our music to the public.

LJM: Did you play in only black clubs or also in white clubs?

AC: No, no, no. We played both. We just had a dressing room where we stayed during intermission. There wasn't any problem. We did that



Milton Larkin's band circa 1937. Standing (left to right) Lonnie Moore, trumpet; Eddie Vinson, alto sax; Arnett Cobb, tenor sax; George Lane, vocalist; Clifford Mitchell, trumpet; Lawrence Cato, bass. Seated (left to right) Lester Patterson, trumpet; Cedric Haywood, piano arranger; Willie Lott Thomkins, trombone; Milton Larkin; trumpet, vocalist, leader; Charles Gordon, drums; H. S. Sloan, trombone; Frank Domanguex, sax.

all through the South in the early thirties.

LJM: You joined Milton Larkin's band in 1936. Where did the group play?

AC: The Harlem Grill, where Chester Boone played. Milton took over the house band because he had the musicians and a fresher band. People had nowhere to go. We had matinees on Sundays and Mondays so there was somewhere to go for entertainment and to dance.

LJM: How did you get into Larkin's band?

AC: There were four of us [at first]: Sam Harris and I at Phyllis Wheatley High School, I. H. Smalley at Booker T. Washington, and Milton Larkin. Smalley had a car. He would pick us up and we would go out with our horns and practice. We would get music from the store and just practice reading music and playing harmony. That was our kicks. Everybody else played mostly by ear. We got music so we could hear the harmony perfect. We had a great time!

LJM: Did you play at any private parties in Houston?

AC: Yes, we were asked to play at parties, and we started playing some white jobs. They would hear the band and say, "Can a few of you play for a party?" We told them to talk with Milton Larkin, and we'd play the house party.

LJM: So, Milton Larkin made the decision on who was going to play?

AC: Yes. There had to be a rhythm section. Milton would be one of the horns and I would be the other. I was the one getting most of the "taking off" in the band. Milton played a beautiful, straight solo and melody. Everything was light.

LJM: How long did you stay with Larkin?

AC: Six years: from 1936 to 1942. I joined Lionel Hampton in the Golden Gate Theater in San Francisco.

LJM: Was there a particular reason?

AC: No. Just to improve and see some of the country; to see if I would be accepted. I had turned down one job with Mary Lou Williams in New York City. I was afraid of it because I had never been there and didn't know if I'd be able to make it. The deal came through Ken Bluitt, manager of the Regal Theater in Chicago, who wanted me to join Hampton's band. He offered me a salary and asked if I'd be interested. I told him yes.

CS: Apparently Hampton himself had heard you.

AC: He became interested when he heard me in Houston with Milton Larkin's band at the Eldorado Club. He liked the bigger Texas sound. I used to practice in an open field in the fifth ward. In an open field you can hear yourself. Things are quiet. There's no traffic. So that's where I would go to practice.

LJM: Was the pay much better with Hampton?

AC: Well, a little. I was making \$60 at the Rhumboogie [Club, in Chicago], and I took \$75 and prevailing scale. If I were going into a club it might be \$135 a week, but \$75 was for one-nighters. Instead of paying me by the night, Hampton paid me by the week. He got me there, because they made more money on one-nighters than they did in clubs. I was on a two-year contract, but I was pretty wise when the next contract came up.

CS: Where was your first recording made?

AC: It was in the Hollywood Studios for Decca Records. We were playing at Trianon Ballroom in Southgate, California. We recorded on our day off.

LJM: Did you get more money out of the recordings?

AC: I got whatever the scale was.

CS: Were you paid only for making the record?

AC: That's all. The leader got the difference in the royalties and a leader's fee. Hamp signed a contract with Decca for \$75,000 a year for himself. That was his salary. The record company would pay the band members scale salary.

CS: Did Hampton get a royalty on the recordings that were sold?

AC: Right.

CS: Is this what led to Caesar Petrillo's ban on recordings?<sup>1</sup>

AC: Yes, it was. After December 31, 1947, you couldn't record in New York, but we did record in New Jersey. Then we went through the union and got paid on the spot.

LJM: Were there significant influences in Hampton's band that you later incorporated in your own?

AC: I liked his style. He was a hard driver. Of course, I was a driver before then, and he had me driving more. . . just punching. He would blow you to death. I had to learn to start off not-too-strong because anytime he might say, "One more time." I didn't know what height I could reach just blowing. So I would start off slow and build gradually. I'd go offstage huffing and puffing because he wouldn't know when to quit.

<sup>1</sup>James Caesar Petrillo, president of the American Federation of Musicians, banned all recording activities by union members "once and for all" as of December 31, 1947, on the grounds that radio broadcasts of recordings instead of live musical performances would put musicians out of business. The controversy dated back to 1942, but in 1943 Petrillo negotiated a contract with record companies giving a percentage of sales to a union "unemployment" fund. The contract was set to expire at the end of 1947, and federal legislation earlier that year prevented the renewal of such a royalty agreement.

CS: Does that explain your sound being described as a squealing sound? Weren't you over-blowing the instrument?

AC: Sure. My lips would be sore and tired. You had to over-blow it! What else could you do? You'd take the climax to its peak and then he'd say, "One more time!" It catches you off guard, so I had to learn how to start off with him because I knew what he was going to say.

CS: Were you involved in those performances of "Flyin' Home" that lasted as long as an hour?

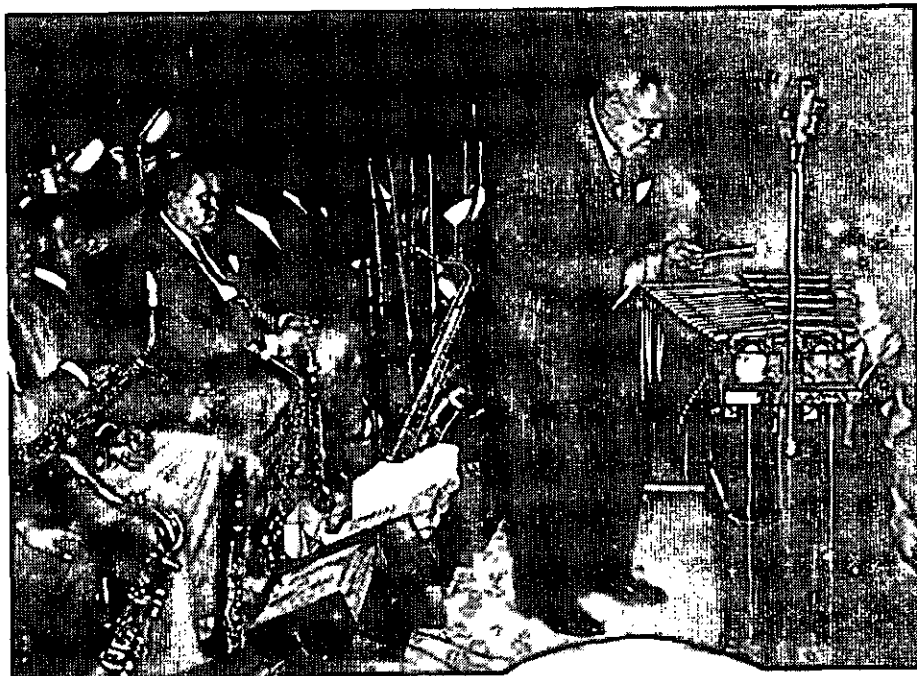
AC: Yes, sir. I'd be on the stands playing while the band was marching around the theater. On single things like "Flyin' Home" it was me on the mike. Then he'd get the bright idea for the brass and reed sections to march around the theater, and I'm still up there blowing. He'd stop and play with people and beat on the seats. Oh, boy! And I am up there getting out of breath. So, I learned how to relax and "cheat" while they walked.

LJM: How much did Hampton himself contribute?

AC: He worked hard and would have to put on fresh clothes after every show. Hamp couldn't keep a show on time. We had to limit the show to thirty-five minutes because of the movie. If we ran too long they had to pay the stagehands overtime, and they were trying not to get above that budget. He would go over time terribly. At the Capitol Theater on Broadway they asked his wife, Gladys, to see that he got off. She asked me to clock it and tell him when it was time to close. Ten minutes prior to closing time, the time to play "Flyin' Home," I told him. It didn't make any difference. He was just a hard guy to get off the stand.

I saw some rough days that were hard on the musicians. One time, we had traveled from Denver with no sleep. We finally got in [to New York] and rehearsed upstairs from midnight till 2:30. My wife didn't sleep so she could get me out of bed again after the rehearsal in time for the show at the Strand Theater. The first show went on at 10:35 and seven members out of an eighteen-piece band showed up. The theater manager, the union man, and Hamp's wife were saying, "We can't have this!" But they didn't know what our boss had done. If it hadn't been for my wife, I wouldn't have been there either, but everybody didn't have a wife.

Hampton would call a rehearsal regardless of how tired we were. After travelling, he would give us about an hour, then call a rehearsal. We would get there and do another version of "Flyin' Home," to "dress it up," and then perform the same version that we'd been playing all the time. I found out why he did it. The idea was to keep you awake to be sure you'd be there for the job; so he wouldn't have half a band.



Lionel Hampton performs a solo on the vibraphone while his band members watch. Arnett Cobb is third from right.

LJM: When and how did you organize your own band?

AC: In Philadelphia I talked with a guy from the Watt's Zanzibar who knew the band would have sixteen days off during the summer. He asked if I could play at the club during that off time. He told me what he would give me. So, I would make a little money while I was off and have a few days left before going back to work. But he went to Gladys Hampton and asked, and she told him I couldn't do it. Then he came back to me and said, "She wouldn't. . ." I said, "What do you mean, she wouldn't? That's my own time!" So I took the job. She wanted to book it and get her cut, whether you did it or who did it, they wanted the money off of it.

The Gayle Agency came to Philadelphia to see what I had. They wanted me to sign with them. I told them I wouldn't sign with anybody for over a year. If we couldn't understand each other in a year we wouldn't ever understand each other. If they wanted me they were going to take care of me by keeping me working.

LJM: Describe your band's musical style.

AC: I'd clock mine as just straight-ahead jazz with melody in it. You'd know what I'm playing, if it's a standard tune.

LJM: Was there any kind of Texas quality to it?

AC: I guess all of it was Texas quality because that's all I knew: how we played here in Texas.

LJM: Would your audience know that it had a Texas sound?

AC: Yes. We were different.

LJM: I'd like to ask some questions about the business side: dealing with promoters, arranging concerts, and so on. Did you have a manager in the early period?

AC: Yes. My wife was my manager. I started off with my godfather. He couldn't be on the road with me so he trained my wife. Of course she traveled with me and that was a great deal of help, and she learned the business as she traveled. My godfather kept her informed. In fact, he worked in the office that I was booked out of. I got him the job there, so that put him closer to what was going on.

LJM: What year did she assume the responsibilities of manager?

AC: The very beginning of my band was 1947. We brought her in about seven months later.

LJM: How were the tours arranged? Did she deal with promoters directly?

AC: I was working for Ralph Cooper in a restaurant. I went in for one night and stayed with him for over a month. He set me up in a lot of things during that month's time to really get me started. He was working for the Gayle Agency in New York. That was right after I left Lionel Hampton's band. That set me up in my own situation.

- LJM: Did your wife remain your manager throughout your career?
- AC: She remained with me until I gave up the band. I decided to leave just before I moved to Houston. I had gotten tired of running up and down the road and going through the headaches you have with the guys in the group. So I just decided to come home.
- LJM: What kind of headaches?
- AC: Well, children's headaches out of grown men. You can imagine what that is. They don't know which way to go. They wake you up at four in the morning to ask what time we would hit town the next evening. Real simple things. They couldn't wait to wake me up in the morning.
- CS: How many nationwide tours did you make?
- AC: Oh, my God. Over a period of years I couldn't count. I always wanted to be on one and after I got on one I got tired of the traveling right away. I used to do local work. I wanted to get on the Pennsylvania Turnpike. I did. I never got off of it. I was so happy when I'd come home, I didn't know what to do. That road!
- CS: Did you schedule your band to provide time for people to rest after they had traveled?
- AC: Yes, if possible. Now I got caught in my own tiredness, and they had to come and wake me up. You can only take so much. . . your body. Besides that, you're going through these changes and you don't be late, leader or no leader, side men or no side men.
- LJM: How formal were the contractual arrangements with the agents?
- AC: Mine weren't too formal. In fact, I didn't have a signed contract with my agent. My booking agent was Universal Attractions out of New York City. They had Dinah Washington, The Ravens, and quite a few attractions at that time. Ben Barnes was head of the whole operation. They arranged for all the tours.
- LJM: Wasn't not having a contract rather dangerous?
- AC: Not really. That left us both free. It was a matter of being honest. He said, "If your word's no good, you're no good to me. I take a man at his word."
- LJM: Is this the sort of arrangement you had throughout your career?
- AC: No, no. Only with Universal Attractions and Ben Barnes, who has done a lot for me. We had a close relationship but my contract was with the Gayle Agency.
- LJM: How is the agent's fee determined?
- AC: Let's say I was making \$400 a night, which would be \$400 guaranteed to a split over \$800. That means I would get my \$400. He would get equally as much, and after it balanced off for both of us, we'd split fifty-fifty or sixty-forty. Of course, the band always favored the largest

- percentage. They're out there on the road and had more to take care of.
- CS: What did your first band cost when you played in Philadelphia on your two-week vacation from Hampton? Do you remember the contract amount?
- AC: I think it was \$1,750.
- CS: For how many musicians?
- AC: I had a group of seven musicians: three rhythm and four horns including myself.
- CS: Did they all receive the same amount of money?
- AC: No. Some guys were more of an asset than others. I needed help, and where I got the help, naturally they got extra money. It wasn't the same salary all the way around.
- CS: Did you have any problems with musicians leaving your band for another?
- AC: There was no sense in jumping for a few more dollars. Of course, the money was not that much, but if you were satisfied, you'd stay there.
- CS: Didn't they get tired of playing the same arrangements over and over again?
- AC: I doubt there were any cases like that. The main thing was centered on money. If you were with a band any length of time you appreciated being able to play without having to look at new music. I'd memorize all my stuff with Hampton. We'd play in the theaters, and I could look out in the audience and play with the chicks. The only thing I had to read was the show music.
- LJM: Was there an accepted salary scale or was this done on an individual basis?
- AC: There is always a base scale, and I always paid above scale, but there were individuals in the group that would get more money. I had a man who would take over if I left the bandstand. He was paid more and was what you call a "straw boss." When I was playing in Lionel Hampton's band, he'd leave the stand and I'd take over. I did a lot of things for that man. I took over the uniforms: saw that they were cleaned and pressed and ready for the next theater engagement. We had theater uniforms. We had night uniforms. So, that was my job.
- LJM: What about ordinary things such as publicity and news releases? Who handled that?
- AC: When I had my group, I had an advance man that I paid \$150 a week to set up the publicity. He'd stay ahead of the group carrying our placards from city to city, driving.
- LJM: Was that satisfactory?
- AC: Oh, yes. Sure. He got \$150 a week and transportation costs. He didn't have to go in his pocket. He had his own car, and I had the privilege



of using it. He wanted to go anywhere. . .to be out there; so I just took care of his car transportation so he could. Incidentally, he didn't have but one arm, and he was a powerful guy with that one arm. Very neat. He was immaculate all the time, which was very striking to a lot of people. He made a good front man. He represented well. His name was Joe Turner. He was with me about six or seven months. He didn't stay long because I sort of broke up the band and got off the road. I had him around the latter part of [the time I had] the band; I wish I had had him in the front part. I did need him, but I got him too late. He was tied up otherwise prior to the time he came with me. But I met him when I was in the Lionel Hampton band because he did work for Hampton.

CS: Besides getting off the road, why did you give up your band? Wasn't there a problem with your back?

AC: I was hit by a car when I was ten years old. I never told my mother about it. I had slipped off from home to go to the movies. During the world news between shows I would go across the street to get a sandwich. Rushing back I ran against the light. Being small, the man didn't see me and hit me while I was running. When somebody wanted to call an ambulance I got up and ran into the theater. I didn't want anybody to know that I had been hurt, especially my mother. But I suffered from it. I never did tell anybody how hard it was for me to get out of bed and straighten up. Once I straightened up I was all right for the rest of the day. I ended up having two operations on it. I had spinal operations in 1948 and 1949 and a hip operation in 1951.

LJM: Were you involved in other accidents?

AC: Yes. In Connecticut. I was running this staggering system of lights. I blacked out while getting ready to hit the Merritt Parkway and ended up in a filling station. The center of the license plate hit that tree. When I did come to, it felt like my legs had gone through the floor. I was asking them what was wrong. My wife and daughter were with me. My daughter was crying. She was three months and twelve days old. All she got was a bump on the head. My wife and I got the worst of it; they kept my wife under observation for forty-eight hours. She had a broken arm. I was in the hospital and then transferred to the hospital for joint disease. I had a double-spiked collar from the ankles up to my chest to protect me. They could roll me in it, rub my back, oil me down, and that sort of thing.

LJM: When did this occur?

AC: The spinal operation was in 1948. The accident was June 26, 1956.

LJM: Did that accident severely damage your career?

AC: Well, maybe in the beginning because I lost my teeth. I wore a plastic brace to pull my jaw in line, but, surprisingly, it didn't damage it. It

took me about three months to get acclimated to blowing with these teeth.

LJM: Anyone watching you would never suspect that. What brought you back to Houston?

AC: Well, after the accident, I tried [to resume my career in New York]. It was all right until the snow. I couldn't lift my legs. I would get snow in my shoes, and sometimes the snow was so deep it would get inside my galoshes. So I said, "This is a pretty rough way to try to make a living in my condition. I've just had enough of it. I'm going to go where the weather don't snow," and I came home.

LJM: What did you find here professionally?

AC: Not too much of anything. I formed a band here and went into Ebony as the house band. I ended up managing the club. After starting the band in the club, I had a joint downtown, a strip joint. I was making it pretty good, but I got sick of it. One night Paul Fenwood came in and asked what I was doing in such a place. He said, "You need to come and work for me. I own a cafe." I thought he was kidding. He opened Paul's Sidewalk Cafe on Main Street, then moved to Holcombe Boulevard, changed the name, and I went over there. I worked with Bobby Doyle's trio over there. Kenny Rogers was in there playing bass and Russell on drums and Bobby Doyle on piano.

LJM: When you came to Houston your [New York] band broke up?

AC: Yes. I disbanded in February and came home in June.

LJM: Did Larkin have a foothold when you came back?

AC: He was still in New York. I came back before he did.

CS: Do you go back to New York to perform?

AC: I'm going back to play in a new club in the Village called The Locust.

LJM: Do you play often on the West Coast?

AC: Not too much.

LJM: Is there any particular reason?

AC: Well, you just don't get too many calls from the West Coast. When you get out there, everything is such a distance away. The nearest place you would play close to Los Angeles would be San Diego, which is ninety miles away, and everything else is far away, like Oakland and 'Frisco. Everything is so far apart. So, I've never been too anxious for the West Coast.

LJM: When did you start going overseas?

AC: 1973.

LJM: How did that come about?

AC: Well, I had turned down Europe for quite a few years because I was just afraid to go over there by myself. My wife's mother was kind of ill at the time, and [my wife] didn't want to leave her. So, I just turned it



down. Finally, my mother told me one day, "Baby, if I were you I would go because they're going to stop inviting you after a while if you keep turning them down, and when you want to go, you won't be able to because they'll stop inviting you." So I took heed to that. In 1973 I accepted and have been going ever since.

CS: Where was your first European performance?

AC: Paris. I worked for "Black and Blue," a firm out of Paris.

CS: What other places in Europe have you performed?

AC: Well, I've been to Italy, Belgium, Holland, Switzerland, Spain. I've been to Sweden and to Oslo, Norway. I have only made one trip up there. It's very nice and I liked it but I never had the opportunity to go back.

CS: What about Germany?

AC: Oh, I've made many, many trips to Germany. My last trip was in Germany. I did quite a bit of work in Hamburg. There's a club there that wants me every time I hit that part of Europe. I was there three times on my last trip, and I was over there two and a half months.

CS: Did you ever play in the Far East?

AC: Well, yes, I have. I've been as far as Japan, and they love it there. Japan is beautiful.

LJM: Were these solo trips or did you take people with you?

AC: No, they were solo. I only carried my own group one time, but even at that, I left them, and they did a couple of jobs with Fathead Newman. That was the only time I carried a group. They're so expensive! You're not able to make any money when you carry your own group because you've got to pay them, and there's only so much money that you can get. So, it really cuts you down.

CS: Did you use a house band wherever you played?

AC: Yes. And they had good groups over there. To make a night, I could always make it with whoever it was as long as they could halfway play. I don't have any problems.

LJM: How long do your tours usually last?

AC: Anywhere from two to three months. I've tried on the last two trips to keep from staying over so long because you get kind of homesick. You want to come home. The last one was six weeks, and I like six weeks better.

LJM: In general, is a European tour more profitable than playing in the United States?

AC: You'd make more money over there in two or three months than you could make here because of being out of town. You're not local, and the money goes up, see?

LJM: How was the reception of jazz when you toured overseas?

AC: In Europe and Japan, better than here.

LJM: Is there a revival or is it new interest?

AC: It's been there since the Louis Armstrong days. They just love American jazz. They've got some good musicians over there playing like Americans. They copy the style.

LJM: Were there any particular European countries where you found more of an appreciation for jazz?

AC: France, they really love jazz in France. They love it in Switzerland, but they can take it or leave it. They're not like France. Spain was a pretty good concert. Italy is all right in its place. They don't knock over nothing heavy to get to you. In Germany they're more excited than a lot of other places, but France is the most exciting country for jazz.

LJM: How were you received on your first trip overseas?

AC: Very well received. I was well known over there, through my records and my reputation with Lionel Hampton's band, but I didn't know it.

LJM: You didn't know your records were being sold over there?

AC: Well, it was kind of a strange thing in those days. You got gypped out of a lot of money. I was with the Apollo Record Company at the time, and I never would receive a breakdown or statement from them. They did me in, too! I finally caught on to what was going on. Really, my agent was the one that told me about it. He brought it up at a meeting one day, and the woman was so mad at him she didn't know what to do. There was nothing she could do to fight him. She and her husband ran the company, but he was always off on safari, hunting in the jungles. That's what he liked to do and left all the weight to her. So that's who I had to deal with.

LJM: The selling of your records in Europe must have been going on for some time.

AC: Oh, sure. It had. I was well known over there and didn't know it. And they were making money!

LJM: Apparently they were making quite a bit of it.

AC: I found out, a lot.

LJM: Do you remember how your first recording transpired?

AC: Jerry Jerome, who used to be with Benny Goodman, was with the Apollo Company. He heard the group and heard one tune he thought should be recorded. I had an arrangement of "When I Grow Too Old to Dream" which was pretty long. He just flipped over it. He thought it would be nice to make Part I and Part II out of it, which we did. It turned out to be a big tune on record. Jerry was such a lively guy. He was very encouraging to me about a lot of things because he was a

well-experienced guy. He had been out there with Benny Goodman and Lionel Hampton during the early years, and he had come off the road and gone into the record business. . . or the cutting side of it. He was a saxophone player also. We used to sit down and talk about the sessions and playing and records and what-have-you.

LJM: Frequently we hear of record sales topping a million or so. When you were cutting records, what was considered a success margin? How many records had to sell?

AC: If you sold forty or fifty thousand, you were doing great. I got up to that one time, but never any more. I was doing good if I got twenty or thirty thousand. You get that much distribution of records, the rest of it is mouth-to-mouth, and mouth-to-mouth is better on any record.

LJM: How many records did you cut altogether?

AC: It's been so long I can't be accurate. The last time I counted, before I came home, was twenty-two sides for one company, and for Berkeley I cut, I think, sixteen sides, which means eight records. There were several companies. I can't remember all the names now.

LJM: And you have no idea how many records were sold in Europe?

AC: No, I really don't. If I knew the truth of it, I might get some more money!

LJM: Did you ever go back and get any reimbursements on those?

AC: Yes.

LJM: How did you go about that?

AC: Well, I was told I had some money spread out for me and who had it, and that's who I contacted. And sure enough, there was some money there, but I don't know how accurate it was, and you can never be sure. Money is a bad, tempting thing to a lot of people.

CS: Did you get any royalties from anything that's played on the radio?

AC: You get what you call five percent royalty on radios each play, but you don't get that accurate, either. In the first place, BMI [Broadcast Music Incorporated] clocks those things. Then you get the royalties from them. I'm with BMI. How do they do it? I don't know. See, ASCAP and BMI, those are the only two organizations you have for bands. Well, they're the same type of company.

LJM: When was the last time you cut a record?

AC: It was actually live at the Wortham Theater, ["Show Time"] was the last actual recording I did. It was recorded to benefit the Texas Jazz Archive. The last recording before that was "Keep On Pushin'" on Beehive records.

CS: Is it still in circulation?

AC: Not around here. Could be in other parts of the country. The guy that was handling the deal for me went out of business. His wife left him

and went to Atlanta, so he closed the shop up and followed her.

LJM: What stands out in your mind about the bands you've played with?

AC: Well, Lionel Hampton was the only band I was with other than the local band here with Milton Larkin. I had a lot of fun with [Larkin's] band. We had a good band, too. Sixteen pieces!

LJM: That's when you were playing for private clubs?

AC: Yes. One-nighters. Of course, the Eldorado Club was where we really housed.

LJM: In our research, we discovered that a lot of musicians who came through Houston had a "rough time of it" when Larkin's band was here. For example, Sy Oliver once recalled the "rough times" Larkin's band gave them whenever they came through Houston.

AC: Yes, our band was sounding as good as theirs. Their band was well-rehearsed and played well. We had a better band. We were interested in what we were doing. That made a good thing. I can look back and see how good it was, but I couldn't see it while I was in it. It was a fun thing for most of the youngsters in there.

LJM: Did you go on the road with it?

AC: Yes, we went as far as Virginia. We did about three months out of one year. We had to go out with somebody else because the band wasn't known yet. So, we went out with Lil Green, a singer who recorded "In the Dark."

LJM: Did you find that having a vocalist in the group added something to the popularity?

AC: That helped to rest you, take a load off of you. It was good. People like to hear a singer, especially a female vocalist. The men always loved it, so it all played its part.

LJM: Have you worked with Jewel Brown often?

AC: Jewel's been with me now off and on for about two and a half years. She had worked with me before. I brought her out to Paul's Sidewalk Cafe out on Main Street back in 1960 before she went out with Louis Armstrong.

LJM: So she sang with you before she went out with Armstrong?

AC: Yes. He got her from my band.

LJM: Did he pay her more?

AC: Oh, yes!

LJM: Did you ever play with Armstrong?

AC: Not in his band, but we played together at the Famous Door in New York. I was with Lionel Hampton and they had their opening. They had a bunch of celebrities in that opening night. They had Frank Sinatra, Benny Goodman, Jerry Jerome, and Billy Eckstine. They had the Lionel Hampton band, John Kirby, and Louis Armstrong

performing. Louis Armstrong and Hamp got into it on the stage, and they were singing, Louis Armstrong and Lionel. Neither of them could sing, but Louis was a better showman. That was a fun night!

LJM: What kind of individual was Louis Armstrong? Was he a good person to work with?

AC: I never worked with him. Everybody seemed to say he was a nice guy to work for. He don't get into your business. In fact, he never handled his band. His manager handled it. He stayed out of it. So, you didn't have a chance to get into an argument with him. He left everything up to the manager.

CS: He always seemed happy.

AC: Happy. . .and that's a good way to stay: to stay away from the band because you run into some headaches out there, man, with temperamental musicians. That's what it is: temperament. Just don't be the leader. Be one of the musicians.

LJM: Was most of the contention over the split in salary or other things?

AC: No, many things. It might be something on the dance stand or taking the spotlight away or something else. No one certain thing. You would never know when somebody would get upset. Not from the stand, you wouldn't. You'd know it if you came backstage.

LJM: One of your colleagues mentioned recently that there is a difference in the way bands operate or approach one another in New York City and the way they operate in Houston.

AC: Well, in New York musicians play one against the other, bandleaders against each other, and they're not sincere. It is a matter of dollars and cents, and they don't have that feeling of working together to make a good band. There were plenty of musicians around New York with that attitude. And the musicians' union! I guess they have 50,000 members and everybody's not working. You can [easily hire] a good musician in New York, but you can't do it in Houston. Most of the good guys are working.

LJM: Is there a revival or a continuing interest in jazz here in Houston?

AC: You're getting a continued interest now through the colleges. Lanny Steele at Texas Southern University helped build that interest. He taught there ten years and formed a good jazz band. It made a difference in what was going on in the Music Department.

CS: Do you think the institutions of higher learning have ignored jazz?

AC: Well, to a certain extent, but there's really nothing they can do to hurt it because what they say doesn't mean anything. It's what you do before the people that counts.

People accept you for what you can do. You've got a lot of self-made musicians that play better than some studied musicians. I think

it's mechanical if you don't have the "feel" for it, but if you have the feeling you can play it. I'm telling you from facts and experience. I don't care how much you have learned knowledge-wise, if you don't have it within you from the heart, you can't play. There's no soul, no feeling. Nothing. Just notes!