

Regional Oral History Office  
The Bancroft Library

University of California  
Berkeley, California

Ruth A. Felt

THE MAKING OF A MODERN IMPRESARIO: SAN FRANCISCO PERFORMANCES AND  
NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS FROM 1960s to TODAY

With an Introduction by  
Camilla Smith

An Interview Conducted by  
Martin Meeker  
in 2004

Since 1954 the Regional Oral History Office has been interviewing leading participants in or well-placed witnesses to major events in the development of northern California, the West, and the nation. Oral history is a method of collecting historical information through tape-recorded interviews between a narrator with firsthand knowledge of historically significant events and a well-informed interviewer, with the goal of preserving substantive additions to the historical record. The tape recording is transcribed, lightly edited for continuity and clarity, and reviewed by the interviewee. The corrected manuscript is indexed, bound with photographs and illustrative materials, and placed in The Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley, and in other research collections for scholarly use. Because it is primary material, oral history is not intended to present the final, verified, or complete narrative of events. It is a spoken account, offered by the interviewee in response to questioning, and as such it is reflective, partisan, deeply involved, and irreplaceable.

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Ruth Felt

Photograph by Terrence McCarthy





André Watts, Ruth Felt, and James Schwabacher, 1980    Photograph by Robert Messick



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## INTRODUCTION—Ruth Felt

How does music come to a community? Who engages and pays the musicians, picks them up from the airport and transports them to the hotels, provides the right pianos, the lighting, pays for the halls, pays for the advertising, sells the tickets, provides the programs, takes the risks hoping there will not be an earthquake or a war to dampen sales or cancel a program a year from making all arrangements? What kind of person would take on such a task?

In 1974, when my husband and I first moved from Manhattan to San Francisco, we were surprised at how little chamber music there was in the city. In New York we had been accustomed to hearing world-famous musicians on a regular basis. The San Francisco Symphony presented a few each year, but mostly local semi-professional groups played. Presenters seemed to come and go on a regular basis, going out of business shortly after they were established. We missed the Carnegie Hall Recitals of great musicians such as Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, Julian Bream, Andre Watts, and The Juilliard String Quartet.

Then, in the 1980s, things began to change. The musical offerings became much more varied, of higher quality, and not so inbred. We began to see concerts and recitals of people our East Coast friends had told us about or those we had read about in the *New York Times*. We did not know at the time that Ruth Felt was behind these new offerings. But we did notice that when San Francisco Performances presented a concert of someone unknown to us, the musician was usually outstanding. We became willing to take chances on newcomers making their San Francisco debuts and found that we could trust the taste of San Francisco Performances. We heard Anne-Sophie Mutter, Yo-Yo Ma, Manuel Barrueco, the Alexander String Quartet, Evgeny Kissin, and Lang Lang, all in their San Francisco debuts through the organization.

I joined the board of San Francisco Performances in the 1990s and became much more aware of Ruth Felt's role in the transformation of the music offerings in the city. She was dedicated to introducing new vocal recitals, and willing to risk giving young musicians of extraordinary talent a debut. She was one of the first arts presenters to fund (with San Francisco State University) a

resident string quartet, the Alexander. Other musical residencies were established and she set up a community education program, which covers the spectrum of ages and socio-economic groups in the Bay Area. Saturday morning and evening adult music performances with lectures and demonstrations proved successful in San Francisco and Berkeley, and other initiatives included conversations and performances in the low-income Mission District at the Community Music Center, presentations of music and dance in the poorest of public schools as well as at specialty music schools, and performances with African American community groups in Oakland which all introduced the Bay Area to music and dance of the highest quality.

As Ruth celebrates her twenty-fifth year since the founding of San Francisco Performances, she is honored nationally and internationally as one of the most respected presenters in the business. Her decency and dependability are well-known among the artists she presents and their representatives. Her business acumen is proven in her ability to keep such an enterprise afloat in both good and bad economic weather. She has done this without a safety net, whereas most presenting organizations have a university or other institution to pay for deficits or provide halls at reduced prices. Ruth has had to cover all expenses by raising the money to do so, either through ticket sales or donations. And the enterprise is still all about the music. Because of Ruth Felt, San Francisco is a richer musical community, a healthier place for performers, viewers, and listeners.

Camilla Smith

San Francisco Performances Board of Trustees

April 7, 2005

San Francisco, CA

## INTERVIEW HISTORY—Ruth Felt

In the summer of 2004, the Regional Oral History Office was commissioned by Camilla Smith to conduct a life history interview with Ruth A. Felt. The occasion for the interview was to commemorate the then-upcoming twenty-fifth anniversary season of San Francisco Performances, the nonprofit performing arts presenting organization founded by Felt in 1979. In the intervening quarter century, San Francisco Performances under the leadership of Felt established itself into one of the premiere fine arts presenting organizations in the United States. Moreover, San Francisco Performances has charted new territory by commissioning innovative musical and dance compositions, by developing an educational program for high school students, and by reaching out to diverse audiences around the San Francisco Bay Area.

The interviews were conducted from September through November 2004 during four separate interview sessions. Each session lasted roughly two hours. All interviews were conducted in the home of Ruth Felt in the Ashbury Heights section of San Francisco. Ms. Felt reviewed the transcript, making only the most cosmetic of changes, and did seal one portion for twenty-five years. Along with research into the history of San Francisco Performances, nonprofit arts organizations, and arts management, exploratory unrecorded interviews were conducted with Camilla Smith (San Francisco Performances board member), Marian Kohlstedt (Director of Public Relations and Publishing at San Francisco Performances), Melanie Smith (Director of Education at San Francisco Performances), as well as with Ruth Felt. As a side note, this interview only briefly covers Felt's years working at the San Francisco Opera under the leadership of Kurt Herbert Adler; for more on her years with the opera, see the interview with Felt for the Adler series at ROHO.

For more on the arts and artists in the San Francisco Bay Area, see the numerous interviews in ROHO's arts series, in particular the interviews with James Schwabacher, Kurt Herbert Adler, and Betty Connors.

The Regional Oral History Office was established in 1954 to augment through tape-recorded memoirs the Library's materials on the history of California and the West. Copies of all interviews are available for research use in The Bancroft Library and in the UCLA Department of

Special Collections. The office is under the direction of Richard Cándida Smith, Director, and the administrative direction of Charles B. Faulhaber, James D. Hart Director of The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

Martin Meeker, Ph.D., Interviewer

Regional Oral History Office

Berkeley, California

April 2005

**INTERVIEW 1: SEPTEMBER 15, 2004**

[Minidisc 1]

1-00:00:11

Meeker: Today is the 15<sup>th</sup> of September 2004. We are in the home of Ruth Allison Felt on Masonic Avenue in San Francisco. This is the first of a series of oral history interviews for the Regional Oral History Office. Let's just get started by—we've got the biographical information sheet here, maybe just repeat some of the information that we already have in the personal record to get started, and talk a little bit about your personal and familial background.

1-00:00:46

Felt: All right well, starting out, I was born on April 8, 1939 in a small town in Minnesota. Willmar, Minnesota, which was twelve miles from the farm that was in my family since my great grandfather homesteaded it when he came from Sweden in 1860 at the end of the century. My father, his name was Reuben Felt, and he was a farmer with his brother, Harold, it was the Felt brothers' farm at that point. He also served in the Minnesota state legislature for two terms. And sadly, died very young, when I was ten years old. My mother also was born in Willmar, Minnesota. Her maiden name was Alice Somerville.

1-00:1:01:46

Meeker: Did she also come from Swedish background?

1-00:01:49

Felt: No, her background is pretty much half-Norwegian [laughs] and the other half, I think English, Scottish, Irish, on my grandfather's side, Lee Somerville. But her mother was Norwegian from Norway. Actually, she wasn't—I'm trying to recall. Do I recall if she was born in Norway? I don't think so. I think she was already a second generation American.

1-00:02:17

Meeker: How important was that immigrant background to your parents?

1-00:02:20

Felt: I don't think it was that predominant. I think that just the history of some of the Scandinavian free thinkers that came to America, I think my heritage come from that. When I think of my Swedish great-grandfather, certainly, coming for opportunity, but also objecting to some of the more conservative religious constraints of the Protestant movement or church in Sweden. And interestingly, in that little part of Minnesota, and maybe Minnesota more generally than other Midwestern states, including Wisconsin, it was a very liberal area. Very often, you think of Midwestern farmers as very conservative, and they often are, and maybe more predominantly are, but in this part of Minnesota, certainly, and certainly my heritage, was extremely liberal in its politics and its outlook. In fact my mother was a Socialist. She and my grandmother was very much a follower of Eugene Debs, and my uncle is actually named after him. And my father, as a politician, was very dedicated to the Democratic Farmer Labor party. So there is a real heritage there of liberal points of view, including religious liberal persuasion. My mother and father met at a Unitarian church in Willmar and I was religiously raised as a Unitarian.

1-00:04:20

Meeker: Wouldn't most of the Scandinavian immigrants have been Lutheran?

1-00:04:23

Felt: Lutheran? Yes, and Methodist. Yes, we had all those churches there and a lot of people went to them. In fact, I frequently went to Sunday school with my neighbors, occasionally at the Methodist Church or the Lutheran church. But, in terms of our just basic religious point of view from my parents, it was Unitarian.

1-00:04:45

Meeker: How do you suppose that influenced your upbringing? Your mother being a Socialist and father being an activist in the, you said, Democratic Farmer—?

1-00:04:58

Felt: Farmer Labor party.

1-00:04:58

Meeker: Was that an affiliate of the Democratic Party?

1-00:05:04

Felt: Well, that was what it was called in Minnesota.

1-00:05:07

Meeker: Oh, okay, all right.

1-00:05:12

Felt: I think it was an incredible influence in terms of welcoming all humanity and tolerance, for sure. Absolutely. In terms of religious understanding and welcoming of all religions, that was certainly part of our religious education.

1-00:05:30

Meeker: Is that what welcoming and tolerance meant? I mean, in the context of Minnesota at this time, I'm guessing there wasn't a lot of, for example, racial or ethnic diversity or ethnic diversity in the way that we think about it today.

1-00:05:45

Felt: Oh, right, absolutely, no. It was very white, very Scandinavian, German, definitely. In fact, my mother took me and my sister on the train the spring I was going to be six, we were taking the train to California, to visit her—my grandparents, because they had moved to Los Angeles during World War II or right around World War II, because my uncles were serving in the military. So I remember my mother preparing my sister and me for meeting black people, the porters in the train, because we had never seen a black person. And telling us about black—African history. And my sister was three and I was six, going to be six and she was going to be three. That's interesting. My sister was born on my birthday. [laughs]

Anyway, I remembered that, I remember her introducing us to black people.

1-00:06:56

Meeker: So it must have been a pretty general introduction at the age of six, but do you recall the kind of things that she was saying?

1-00:07:02

Felt: My memory is was just relating it to the world and where you are from and where you start. And just like we were from Sweden and Norway, those populations, in looking at the African American, just a sense of that. Because she didn't want us to be shocked or afraid or anything. She didn't know how we would react, but we would certainly know that the people on the train, and you know, other passengers possibly too, but she was very well aware that we would be introduced to porters that would be, you know, black.

1-00:07:43

Meeker: Do you feel like that also perhaps introduced you to an immigrant sensibility? As opposed to a nativist sensibility where our family has always been here to everyone comes from somewhere else to build a new life here.

1-00:08:02

Felt: Probably. I mean, it's hard to recall. I just do, of course, remember that my whole upbringing was around the concept of the brotherhood of man. Later, in my teenage years particularly, I saw some realities amongst the people that spoke those words, which really disappointed me, because I found they were not always so sincere, ultimately, about that belief. But that was later in life.

1-00:08:38

Meeker: We'll get to that in a bit. But I realize that your father died when you were ten. I'm wondering if you have any reminiscences of what it was like having a father involved in politics.

1-00:08:53

Felt: I guess my memory of my father—well, first of all, he was very much the leader in our community, our small community, farm community. And people looked to him for leadership. He was very instrumental in the REA, the Rural Electrification Association, and getting electric power to our community. He was very involved with the Farmers' Union, an organization for farmers, and then he ran for the legislature. So he was frequently at meetings, and gone. I remember that. And then when he served his two terms in St. Paul, Minnesota, in the capital, he was gone for those many months. So, I think I was very proud

of him and at the same time, I felt at times that I had to share him with too many people because he was not as available as a father as I would have liked. Probably.

I have memories of coming home from school and him coming in from the fields and I knew he was in the bathroom getting cleaned up and he was gonna go out again, you know. [laughs]

1-00:10:16

Meeker: Was he in office when he died?

1-00:10:16

Felt: He had just finished his term. He died in June of 1949. He had just come from serving that session in the legislature.

1-00:10:30

Meeker: What did your mom do after his death?

1-00:10:33

Felt: Well, she had to decide what to do. The way in which they had prepared the wills between my father and his brother was that if one partner died, that the surviving partner would buy out the widow. That had been established in a will. So, my mother could have taken us and we could have moved to Willmar; we could have moved to Minneapolis. But she decided to move to California, I suspect, because her parents had moved there and her sister was there and her brothers were there. And also, as it turned out, her parents, my grandparents were visiting us that summer that my father died. So they were there. So the decision was to then all go to California in the fall, which we did. I think we drove in September.

1-00:11:32

Meeker: What was the extent of the farm? Do you remember what was farmed there, or many acres you had?

1-00:11:33

Felt: Well, yes, it was 500 acres, so it was pretty good size family farm. And it was a result of the fact that my grandfather, Louis Felt, married my grandmother, Tina Bjornberg. And the Bjornberg farm was right next door. So the two married and then those two farms came together. In the time that I was a child, it had multi-crops, from wheat, oats, barley, corn, alfalfa. And then we had beef cattle and milk cattle and pigs and chickens and everything. Now, it's still in the family, which is really nice. My cousins farm it. But now, it's pretty selected, like three crops: corn, soybeans, and alfalfa, or something like that. They don't have multi-crops or they just couldn't make it.

And of course, when I was a little child, it was still the kind of old-fashioned threshing harvest, where the neighbors got together and helped each other. And as a little girl, as soon as I was six, I was able to drive the tractor between the shocks of grain. You know, just putting it in gear and moving it so that the men could load the wagon. It was just great. We would go around from farm to farm in the summer.

1-00:12:58

Meeker: Do you remember what the distribution of labor was like on the farm? I mean, were there employees at this point?

1-00:13:06

Felt: We had a hired man and his wife, who had a home on the farm, not too far from our homes. That was it. There was my uncle and my dad and the hired man. And they did everything, except in the harvest season, when the neighbors came. And we went to the neighbors as well; it was a joint effort. This is before mechanization of the type where you had combines and where you could do it yourself. There's some very nostalgic moments about those summer months when—it was sort of like a picnic. I mean for the kids, it was like a party, I guess, because you got to drive the tractor, and there was never an end of food. I mean you started out with coffee in the morning, or big breakfasts and then before noon lunch, and then dinner in the midday, huge meals with meat,

potatoes, vegetables, everything, pie, and then afternoon lunch at three o'clock [laughs] and then supper. It was just so much food.

1-00:14:13

Meeker: And then back up again at five in the morning, right?

1-00:14:17

Felt: Yeah. So, anyway. So that was a lot of work for my mother and my aunt, who did all the cooking.

1-00:14:25

Meeker: When you went to Los Angeles for the first time when you were six years old —

00:14:32

Felt: Ten. Oh, you mean on the trip.

1-00:14:37

Meeker: I guess what I'm getting at is that gosh, Willmar, Minnesota is a long way from Los Angeles. Even if Los Angeles wasn't then what it is today as far as a metropolis. It was still Hollywood, it was still palm trees, the West Coast. Do you remember what sort of impressions you had of it on your first visit and what your feelings were when it was probably announced to you—I can't imagine you were consulted [laughs]—before moving out there.

1-00:15:08

Felt: Um, well, of course, that first trip from Minnesota to California, when I was going to be six, it was winter time. It was February, so the immediate contrast was the change in the weather, the change in temperature and the warmth. I know that we went one day to the beach, which would have been probably in February or March, which was quite a change. That might have been the first time I ever was at the Pacific Ocean. I have some vague memories—and I don't know if this comes from later, but it just kept being reinforced—the smell of the air. You still smell it when you come into, particularly, the San Fernando Valley and probably more then because of all the orange groves. There's just a citrus-y smell, a sort of sweet citrus, and it was very prevalent in those years. And I think

it is because of all the farming and lots of orange groves. I remember that, I remember that.

And just more, I guess my family that I didn't know. I knew all my family in Minnesota but I didn't know my uncles and my aunt on my mother's side very well. Then there were some new cousins that were born. And my grandparents, of course, who I did—when I was six, that was one of the first times getting acquainted with them because they had already moved when I was born. So I guess those memories.

1-00:17:01

Meeker: So where did you first settle when your family moved to Los Angeles?

1-00:17:08

Felt: In the San Fernando Valley, in Sherman Oaks. And then we stayed in the San Fernando Valley. So, I'm a Valley girl. [laughter]

1-00:17:17

Meeker: I was born in Pasadena, so, nearby.

1-00:17:15

Felt: Oh, you are, so you know.

1-00:17:25

Meeker: What was the transition like for you then at age ten, going from a farm girl to a valley girl? [laughs]

1-00:17:30

Felt: Well, my mother I know was very concerned about my sister and me in terms of going from a school in the country where we virtually were educated for those early years in a one room school house with all eight grades in the same room with one teacher. This was the same school that my father went to and that my grandfather went to.

1-00:17:57

Meeker: You probably knew the teacher quite well.

1-00:17:58

Felt: Oh, sure, in fact when I was five, maybe four and five, the teacher for the school lived in our house. Because that was typical too, the community hired a teacher and then they paid the teacher but they also had to find housing for the teacher. So Mrs. Black lived with us, which was also really a lot of fun for me because she would—I got some extra sort of kindergarten education at home before I went to first grade [laughs] because she would work with me, at night or on the weekends or something. So I had some preliminary teaching.

But when we got to California when I was ten and my sister seven, we enrolled in the schools in the Valley. I went first to Sherman Oaks Elementary and so did my sister. And we were fine. We had missed school in the trip, like a month or something. But there was no problem. I was well-educated, well-prepared, and my sister read so well that they had to skip her a half semester because she was so far ahead in the second grade in reading, which was the key thing, than her schoolmates. So in terms of education and that transition and making friends, I think we were—it was fine. It was an adjustment in terms of finding a house to live in. And my grandmother and grandfather were living with us; my mother decided to do that. And my grandmother —

1-00:19:51

Meeker: You were living with them or they were living with you?

1-00:19:53

Felt: No, they were living with us. My mother—they were not particularly financially in good condition, so my mother decided that she would buy a house big enough for them to live with us. My grandfather was a gardener. At that point he was doing odd jobs and doing gardening and things like that and my grandmother, I know she went to the hospital in that fall period and had to have surgery. So I have memories of visiting her in the hospital, in that transition from fall, September to December, in Los Angeles. We came; we stayed with my aunt and uncle for a while; we bought a house; my grandmother went into the hospital when we were in school. There was a lot going on.

1-00:20:47

Meeker: Your mom was able to buy this house, I assume, because of the money from the farm?

1-00:20:55

Felt: Yes. I guess if you think of it in terms of money today, the value, I think in round numbers, the amount of money that she had at that point was \$100,000. It wasn't—she didn't have it all but that was the obligation that my uncle had towards her for our half of the farm. And so that's the capital that she had. And I remember what we paid for that house on Sherman Oaks. [laughs] \$15,000! Which in those days was still quite a bit of money. It was a very nice house, too. But, yes, she was able to buy that house.

1-00:21:55

Meeker: And did she have some—where did she work, I guess?

1-00:22:00

Felt: Well, she didn't work at that point, but she did then look for a job, and she did start out working in an office in a small business in the Valley. And then she decided to get training as an escrow officer. So she passed the exam that you need for that and worked at the Bank of America in their escrow department. I didn't put that on that form, but she did that until she met my stepfather ten years later, and then she joined him in his printing business. And that was what she did for most of her life then after that, is work with him in his small print company.

1-00:22:44

Meeker: Do you remember any difficulties arising from that period in which your mother was a widow trying to raise two kids, getting a career started?

1-00:22:57

Felt: Um. I think my memory is that—and this was true always—my mother was very smart but she was very insecure. And she married my father when she was twenty-one. My father was thirty-three at the time, so he was significantly older. And she was a town girl, she wasn't a farm girl, and she moved to the farm with my father and she always felt that she wasn't really adequate to the job. My

sense as a child, she was very, very—she was afraid to drive the car and yet she had to drive the car. She always felt that her skills in the kitchen, her skills in baking, or sewing, et cetera, all the things that farm women do, was not something that she felt really confident about. So I certainly was aware of that insecurity, and as her oldest daughter, I think what happened to me, certainly when my father dies, I really sort of not only—you lose your childhood in a way with that kind of death reality—but I also became sort of my mother’s partner rather than her daughter. Being sort of support system for her. And she also had to be the support for her parents. And that was not easy. Because my grandmother was not an easy woman.

My sister and I talk about this; we remember the year, those years in California when we first moved, particularly that there were incredible fights between my mom and my grandmother. So there was tension all around that.

And eventually, sooner rather than later, we sold that house that we bought at first, and bought a duplex so that my grandmother and grandfather could live with us, but live separately.

1-00:25:11

Meeker: Compromise.

1-00:25:12

Felt: Yeah, right. Yeah.

1-00:25:13

Meeker: Do you remember what sort of arts education you got while in Minnesota?

1-00:25:17

Felt: Well, interestingly, my mother—and of course this was typical, I think of so many families, and still is, but I wish it were more typical—I started taking piano lessons when I was six from the local piano teacher in town. My father was quite cosmopolitan in that whenever there was any kind of music coming into our little town, he would get tickets and we would go. I remember going to a piano recital with him and my cousins that my dad arranged. So I am taking

piano lessons, and as soon as we moved to California, my mother found an another piano teacher for me and my sister. So we took piano lessons—I did—I studied piano still in college.

And the music education, even in this little country school, and arts—the teacher, my first grade teacher, Miss Dahlen, she was a wonderful artist. She could draw beautifully and we had drawing and painting, and she also played the piano. I think they had to. This was one of the requirements for these teachers. And so we had singing, and then when I moved to Los Angeles school system was really—California had some of the best schools in the country. Our elementary school had amazing arts. In fact—I tell this story because I think maybe it’s responsible for what I do now—that first year in fifth grade, in Sherman Oaks, I tried out for the chorus and I got in. They were having in those years in the spring a music festival of the public schools, where the choruses and orchestras from the schools competed to be part of a big performance that would take place at the Hollywood Bowl. And my little school chorus was one of the winners. So, in May of 1950, I was singing on the stage of the Hollywood Bowl. I still remember it. I can even tell you what I was wearing! [laughs]

1-00:27:40

Meeker: Well, that was just a few months after you had moved to California, right?

1-00:27:44

Felt: Well, it was in May of ‘50, so like six months later.

1-00:27:49

Meeker: Six months later. And what were you wearing? [laughs]

1-00:27:50

Felt: I was wearing a pastel blue sweater and—this seem to me like it doesn’t go together, I wouldn’t ever choose it now—but I think that I had a red wool skirt, and we had to wear a pastel-colored sweater. So I was wearing one that was light blue.

- 1-00:28:10  
Meeker: Perhaps those were the school colors or something.
- 1-00:28:14  
Felt: I don't know. No, I think that all of us on stage were supposed to have light blue, pink, yellow, all pastel colors.
- 1-00:28:16  
Meeker: A spring sort of thing. Do you remember what music was on the program?
- 1-00:28:24  
Felt: Yeah, right. [laughs]
- 1-00:28:25  
Meeker: Do you remember what music was on the program?
- 1-00:28:27  
Felt: Yeah, it was all; it was more folk music, folk songs and things like that.
- 1-00:28:35  
Meeker: Something like the song about the Erie Canal or something?
- 1-00:28:41  
Felt: Yeah, right. If I really thought about it I could probably—I probably have the program here somewhere, in the scrapbook. I know I do. [laughs]
- 1-00:28:49  
Meeker: Excellent. Did it feel like the arts were an integral part? Or did it feel like they were sort of a special or separate part of education?
- 1-00:29:01  
Felt: Well, it seems to me they felt like an integral part. In those days, everybody took art classes. That's what so sad to think about the situation today, because I was—for instance in junior high school, my music class, which was for everybody. Everyone had to take it. I can remember vividly the instruments of the orchestra and also taking field trips to the Los Angeles Philharmonic and having to listen to radio—to what was it? Firestone Hour—and write reviews of the radio programs that we listened to. And I remember some of my friends—I didn't do this but—took drama or theatre arts and were in plays. I always sang in

the chorus, even in high school, and other friends were in the orchestra. It seemed like it was a requirement, that you had to be part of an arts—the arts curriculum was part of your requirement then, just like reading or history, or anything like that.

1-00:30:15

Meeker: When you look back to this period of time, which would have been elementary school or junior high school I guess, do you remember now your arts education more than you do other elements of your education? The detail you mention about listening to the radio and writing reviews, Toscanini or something like that, is vivid and it's clear. Do you have the same sort of memories of your math classes or your literature classes?

1-00:30:48

Felt: I guess when I think of this—certainly because the arts are such a predominant part of my life, so I suppose I've thought about those more often—but when I think about some of my school experiences, I have vivid memories of my interest in mathematics. And I was good at it. I mean, I really liked it. I liked algebra and I liked the challenge of trigonometry and calculus. And I loved one teacher in particular in junior high; I don't remember his name. I really liked him and I really liked how at the end of the week, he would give us—it was not a mandatory thing—but he would give us a real interesting, challenging problem. Oh, I always looked forward to those. And I usually got them, too. I mean, sometimes I didn't, but I was very, very interested and enjoyed the challenge of math.

I also remember liking languages. I wish today that I had stuck with that more, but Spanish and French. I liked school. I liked learning. My whole path was more of a general education because I really didn't know what I was going to do. And I also have really vivid memories of one literature teacher in high school who was a very controversial character, and very sort of irreverent and outspoken. And everybody remembers him, Mr. Frisius. I loved the challenge of his class. I loved reading the books and writing the reviews and having him—he

was funny; he wasn't cruel, I don't think that was it, but he was really very pointed in his criticisms of your book reviews [laughs] if he thought you were being sentimental and didn't get it.

1-00:33:17

Meeker: Is that why he was controversial?

1-00:33:19

Felt: Yeah, I think he was, because he wasn't—he was very opinionated. Students loved him but there were times when he probably made somebody cry. [laughs]

1-00:33:37

Meeker: So when you say controversial, is that controversial among the students, or among perhaps the parents or other teachers?

1-00:33:43

Felt: Well, his style, his style was sort of abrasive and irreverent, and so some people—I guess maybe when I say controversial, some kids just didn't like him. He wasn't the only teacher in English literature, so they didn't have to take him. But some of us really liked him. And I really did.

1-00:34:08

Meeker: Since your mother had to fend for herself kind of unexpectedly, did she push you in any direction, toward a more practical pursuit? Was there any kind of pressure applied on you or expectations?

1-00:34:26

Felt: Well, I think, my mother never could go to college. And from the time that we were even able to have this concept in our minds, when we were really small, my mother told us we would go to college. Even in Minnesota, they must have been some of the first t-shirts that you could buy in a store that had writing on them; we had a University of Minnesota and the year that we would graduate on the shirt. She ordered them. So, for her it was very important for us to be educated. Also I remember when I got to Los Angeles in junior high, she was really upset. She didn't think that my education in English, in grammar was sufficient. She didn't think the education was good enough. So I remember I had

to go to summer school, and she went to see the principal of the school to say that she wanted me to have more grounding in grammar, and just basic of writing. So, I was enrolled in a class in summer. Also, at the same time, I took a typing class. She wanted me to learn to type! [laughs] And I did. So I learned to type very well in the seventh grade, I think. Yeah, my mom was very ambitious for us in terms of a quality education.

Now, when I was thinking about a profession and going to college, she wanted me to be a teacher or a nurse, or one of the professions that were more the line for women. And I didn't want to do that. I wanted a more general liberal arts education. So I looked at the education curriculum at UCLA where I went to college. But I found it too focused just on education courses, I just wanted to take too many other things. So I took all these international relations courses, English, literature, music, art—I wanted to take a variety of subjects. And then I told my mother, “Well, let me do this for my undergraduate, and if I want to teach, which I might, then I can go and get those courses later.”

1-00:37:10

Meeker: So even though this was, particularly in your elementary and junior high school and I guess through high school, the fifties, and I know there was a certain element of pop culture that was educating young women that—I guess there probably some multiple interpretations of this—but there was an element of pop culture that was telling young women that you're not really supposed to go out and work; you supposed to—

1-00:37:38

Felt: Get married, oh yes.

1-00:37:39

Meeker: —have children, stay in the kitchen, make your husband happy. But it sounds like—do you think your mom was responding to this in a different way by insisting that you learn typing and insisting that you improve your writing abilities?

1-00:37:44

Felt: Well, I suspect some of it was her own experience. Here, she was widowed at age thirty-three. From the outset, because she was herself denied the opportunity to get a college education, she was very motivated for us to be educated. I have to say that contributing to her insecurity was the fact that she didn't have an education, higher education. And interestingly, which I find kind of remarkable, my father's family—my father was one of six children, four girls and his brother, two boys and four girls—all of them, my father being the oldest boy having to do it later, all went to university and graduated. One of my aunts even went to Paris, went to the Sorbonne when she was nineteen, on money that her mother had saved from selling eggs. They were very motivated for education, my father's side. And my mother, although she was the salutatorian, second in her class in high school, and wrote poetry and worked on the newspaper and studied German, she couldn't go. And she was very smart. I think she was motivated that way. And probably because she lost her husband and she had to work, she was very mindful of the fact that we should have some basic skills, like typing.

But I guess, from the kind of person I was, I remember in junior high, in the ninth grade—I was fourteen, yes—I came to my mother in the spring and I told her I was really unhappy in a way because I was popular in school but I really didn't like the party scene that was happening with my peers when they were thirteen and fourteen, and it was those—maybe I was a prude and I certainly—but that was when all the kids were getting together and they were making out, and you know. And it just seemed to be so mindless, and I was always very serious. So my mom then, that summer, decided to take me and my sister to the Unitarian summer camp, it's a family camp up in the San Bernardino mountains. And at that camp I met a group of young people that mostly were older than I was, high school and college kids who were part of a group called Liberal Religious Youth [LRY]. It was affiliated nationwide with the Unitarian Universalist Churches.

I got very —I was like a little mascot to them. I was three years younger than most of them, but I really enjoyed listening in to their discussions. I also enjoyed the adult programs. I remember at that camp. I remember the session, more than one, just analyzing and looking at the Picasso *Guernica*. And I was just—it was so emotional and so powerfu —so I got very engrossed in the intellectual life and the thinking around this Unitarian Universalist congregation, and I became a member of this youth organization. For those years, then, high school because I was just going into high school, fourteen to eighteen, that was really the most important part of my extra-curricular life, was the people I met. And they lived all over the city of Los Angeles. Plus I went to Michigan and Cleveland and Boston in the summer and at Christmas for meetings with these kids, other young people. It was very, very significant for me.

In terms of music, the Unitarian church in Los Angeles, the First Unitarian Church, in addition to being very politically controversial in its way [small laugh], with a lot of Hollywood Ten members like Dalton Trumbo—Nicky Trumbo, his daughter, was one of my friends—during the McCarthy era and all of that. Pete Seeger used to sing there regularly. Marilyn Horne was a member of the church, I remember hearing her there.

And my first boyfriend, one of my first boyfriends, a young man from an Italian family, whose family loved music, loved opera. So I remember going to my first operas with them at the Shrine Auditorium in Los Angeles, actually with the San Francisco Opera on tour.

1-00:43:28

Meeker: Los Angeles didn't have an opera company.

1-00:43:30

Felt: No, not until just recently.

So that organization and involvement with all these different young people from around the city was very, very, very much of my life then.

In fact, also, it was sort of the revelation of the weaknesses of human nature, because we also had, as part of this group, because we had members from churches all over the city of Los Angeles. Whereas the Valley was very white; there weren't really any African Americans in our neighborhoods or in our church. We had social activities with members of the Los Angeles church, of the Long Beach church, and there were African Americans there. I remember three of the guys from one of the Los Angeles churches went to—I'm trying to think, the high school in downtown Los Angeles?

1-00:44:41

Meeker: Manual Arts?

1-00:44:31

Felt: Or Jefferson, I don't know. But, anyway, I can remember that they played basketball. They were on their team. And they were playing our high school, Van Nuys High School, in Van Nuys, and so the game was there. I was at the game, of course. And then after the game, I went down and actually saw these guys who I knew so well from church and, you know hugged them. Oh, my God! You should have seen the reaction from some of my classmates who looked at this because they—first of all, some kids were just excited. They said, "Oh my God, how do you know these guys? How do you know them so well?" And then there were other ones in my class, unfortunately, that were so bigoted. And they were just appalled with these black guys. And also unfortunately too, in our church, the daughter of the then-president of the congregation—not the minister—she had a fairly big home in the Valley, so she wanted to have a party one summer for our friends, all of our church friends and all these other LRY'ers. So she offered to have it at her house because it was big, it was the biggest house. And then she had to come to us and tell us that her dad and mother wouldn't let us do it. The reason—and it was just so discouraging, I remember talking to my mother about it—is because there would be black kids there and they didn't want to have black kids come to their house in that

neighborhood. Ugh! It was just one of those moments of revealing the hypocrisy of all this stuff that people spouted.

1-00:46:43

Meeker: And do you feel like you were able to see the hypocrisy of that primarily because of your religious education and upbringing as Unitarian?

1-00:46:51

Felt: Yeah, because our whole premise there was the brotherhood of man and the welcoming of people of all races. I mean, it was in all of the sermons and all of the literature and all of the beliefs. Then, when reality was there in your own house, you couldn't, you weren't strong enough.

1-00:47:13

Meeker: Were this friend's parents Unitarian?

1-00:47:15

Felt: Yeah! Yeah. He was the head of the church! And his daughter was just mortified. We were all, all of us, as idealistic young people, just so, so angry and just really, really upset.

1-00:47:30

Meeker: And this would have been around the late 1950s.

1-00:47:39

Felt: Yeah. Mm-hmm, yeah.

1-00:47:39

Meeker: Historians always look at the 1950s as kind of the birth of teenage youth culture, particularly in relation to pop culture, you know, rock n' roll, Elvis, the back seat of the car, all those sorts of things. With your participation in this Unitarian youth group, and your interest in classical music, at this point—and maybe you could talk more about your emerging interest in that—but how did you feel vis-à-vis the emerging pop culture of the day?

1-00:48:20

Felt: Well, I suppose that was kind of the reason that I opted to go towards the Unitarian youth organization, because we also—I certainly was not alienated from my high school peers, and I had friends and people liked me and I liked them—but I didn't really socialize very much in their parties. My whole life and activity was really all around my friends in LRY. And I ended up doing some great things. I remember going to Mexico, to Baja in the summer on field trips, where we worked building a hospital down there. I was just really into being, doing, you know, causes. So I remember all the different, some of the things like the lowered cars and the dice on the dashboard [laughs], you know the knitted things and all of that that we had, and hanging out a little bit at the drive-in. But you know, I really didn't do that much of it, actually. I was having dates when I was high school, I guess, with my friend, my Italian boyfriend, Italian American, who was then in college. I went to the movies, I know that, I have memories of that.

1-00:50:09

Meeker: Sounds like you sort of skipped over it or veered around it.

1-00:50:13

Felt: Yeah, I veered around it, I think. Yes. I did. And some of my friends—I remember one of my good friends in high school was one of my classmates—our friendship was built around just religious discussions, because he was a very conservative Lutheran. He's a minister today. And he couldn't understand my perspective, of really not believing in a personal God, and not really believing in Christ as the son of God, and believing in the greater sort of ecumenical religious, more spiritual view of faith, that revered Jesus as a great man, but didn't put him into a God figure any more than Buddha or any of the others. I remember we had so many discussions, and so many, I guess, disagreements. It was all very friendly, but there was a lot of that. [chuckles]

1-00:51:24

Meeker: Interesting. What was the role of women in your church, in Los Angeles? Did it break the patriarchal mode of Protestantism?

1-00:51:35

Felt: Well, the ministers were always men. I don't think it had such a heavy patriarchal influence, but the power, I mean the minister, in all those churches were men. And the leadership? I think there were women leaders, too, though.

1-00:52:02

Meeker: Did they take a more liberal perspective towards the role of women in society than you think your friend, for instance, in the Lutheran church did?

1-00:52:11

Felt: I would say yes. But I'm not really markedly convinced of that really. In the Unitarian church, particularly in Los Angeles, as opposed maybe to England, where it's more traditional, there were a lot of political concerns and discussion, and a lot of stuff around books and just literature generally.

[interview interruption]

1-00:52:57

Meeker: I'm wondering if your mother continued to dabble in socialism or politics while in Los Angeles?

1-00:53:17

Felt: Oh, yes, she did. I remember vividly her working for the candidacies of Jerry Voorhies and Helen Gahagan Douglas against Richard Nixon. Yeah, she got involved in those campaigns.

1-00:53:37

Meeker: That was 1950, that was shortly after you moved there.

1-00:53:42

Felt: Yeah, very definitely.

1-00:53:44

Meeker: And you said that you were participating in some politics or organization activities? Do you want to talk about some of those?

1-00:53:55

Felt: Well, because of my mother's interest in politics and also just the Unitarian church, and particularly after the Hollywood Ten and the McCarthy years, as a young person in high school, I was involved in some rallies, I guess, to some degree, and petition-signing and that sort of stuff. I was very—it was part of my environment, let's say—very aware of political issues.

1-00:54:38

Meeker: Was there any kind of organizing principle in what attracted you to certain issues or causes?

1-00:54:44

Felt: Well, I guess my whole heritage based on my family and my parents' political persuasion was always extremely liberal and embracing of causes that were aligned with the Democratic party or that sort of persuasion, in terms of the working man and workers, and organized labor, that sort of thing.

1-00:55:19

Meeker: You mentioned this incident at your high school in which you were embracing your black friends to the dismay of some of your other high school friends. This also was the time in which civil rights was coming to Los Angeles. Did you participate in any of those organizations?

1-00:55:40

Felt: Not any organizations, I don't believe.

1-00:55:47

Meeker: Were you even aware of what was going on?

1-00:55:47

Felt: I don't recall, actually. I remember my concern about embracing people of all races and feeling really strongly about any kind of prejudice because of just the way in which, my basic convictions, but also just the friends I had that were of different races. Politically, I have more memory of the witch hunts in Hollywood, the Hollywood Ten.

Because also that was that time that there was legislation that had been passed that actually the courts then put down for churches to maintain their non-profit status or their non-taxable status, had to sign a loyalty oath. And our church in Van Nuys, the little one, our little church, we were the test case. I remember that very vividly. It was extremely contentious in our church because there were members of the congregation that didn't want to fight it, and they didn't want to be in that battle. They felt very strongly about that. Then of course there were others, the majority of the congregation that felt very strongly that we had to fight this, that this was unconstitutional, to demand that people sign a loyalty oath. So we were the test case, our church. My mother was very involved with that.

1-00:57:34

Meeker: Was there a threat of a schism amongst the congregation?

1-00:57:36

Felt: Some people left the congregation, yes, yes. It was very contentious.

1-00:57:41

Meeker: Do you know if it was an ACLU case?

1-00:57:42

Felt: Probably was, yes. I know my mother was a member.

1-00:57:49

Meeker: I also want to talk a little bit more about your interest in music during this period of time. You said that you were dating a college guy who came from an Italian family, and exposed you to opera. Opera is an incredibly diverse and wide-ranging musical field, right? Were you developing certain tastes and preferences, or was there just a learning process going on?

1-00:58:18

Felt: Well, I think it was a learning process, certainly. I remember the first opera I went to see was *Tosca*. And I remember my boyfriend and his family—Gary Carmody his name was—he gave me recordings to listen to. So I remember preparing myself. But then, I remember joining a record club with LP's and

classical music. I joined and was buying regularly. I had a record player. My mother and sister weren't opposed to it, but they didn't quite appreciate the fact that—and we had a small house—that these pieces of music were so long. [laughs] And they went on forever! [shouts]

But I listened, and that was very much a passion of mine was to buy the symphonies and to learn as much as possible to get as acquainted with music as I could. And I really liked it. I did it because I liked it. It wasn't anything that I had to do.

1-00:59:31

Meeker: I know just the way that I approached it later in my life was, there was an appreciation and a love of it, but there was also a desire to sort of know that there was so much out there I didn't know and to learn about it. I'm wondering the extent it was entertainment for you versus the extent it was something you wanted to educate yourself about. I mean, not just listening to the music but perhaps listening to all of Mozart's symphonies and so forth.

1-01:00:18

Felt: I would have to say that I think it was more the pleasure of the company of this music. I don't think I had a real scholarly analysis at that point that I wanted to listen to all the Mozart this or the Beethoven symphonies or whatever. I think I just knew there was so much to listen to. I was finding maybe that I liked certain things better than others but at that point I was just kind of wide-eyed and wide-eared and wanted to listen to as much as I could. And I did also usher a little bit, too, at the orchestra, at the L.A. Philharmonic when I was in high school, I think. Yeah, I don't remember. I wanted to go actually to live concerts. And I was still playing the piano, but I never had any fantasies about being an accomplished pianist or performing. But I was learning repertoire there.

1-01:01:22

Meeker: Were you also listening to twentieth-century music?

- 1-01:01:28  
Felt: I don't think that much, no. I think I was just getting familiar with Beethoven and Mozart and Brahms and Tchaikovsky—
- 1-01:01:36  
Meeker: The canon.
- 1-01:01:39  
Felt: Yeah, the traditional ones.
- 1-01:01:47  
Meeker: So, should we talk about UCLA?
- 1-01:01:49  
Felt: Yeah, we can. If I had my choice in money that was required, I would have gone to Pomona College. That's where I wanted to go.
- 1-01:02:01  
Meeker: Interesting. Well, where did you apply to? What were the different choices?
- 1-01-02-2:15  
Felt: I applied to Pomona. I know I did because I wanted to go. I did get in but I didn't have enough money to go. I needed a bigger scholarship. I got a little one but it wasn't big enough. I think I only applied to UCLA and Pomona.
- 1-01:02:23  
Meeker: What was it about Pomona that attracted you?
- 1-01:02:25  
Felt: Small, liberal arts school. But I went to UCLA, then, I got in—and of course, it was very affordable; it was fifty dollars a semester or something unheard of— with the idea that I would try to get into Pomona and get a bigger scholarship or have the wherewithal to go later. But, I never did. UCLA was satisfying enough for me.
- 1-01:02:55  
Meeker: Did you live at home?

1-01:02:56

Felt: No. I rented an apartment in Santa Monica with a young woman who I knew from the church. She was from Glendale. She was a year older than I was and she was going to Santa Monica City College. So we rented an apartment.

1-01:03:12

Meeker: What year did you start?

1-01:03:15

Felt: 1957.

1-01:03:17

Meeker: Okay.

1-01:03:17

Felt: Yes. And that was a little bit unusual. I mean, some people were living in dorms or living at home, and not too many freshmen had apartments.

There was all this questioning then about trying to rush a sorority. It didn't appeal to me exactly, but I was intrigued with it. I remember one boyfriend in my freshman year who went to USC who joined a fraternity and he was very intent on me becoming a sorority girl. So I decided to give it a chance. And through him, because he was a Beta, one of the more prestigious fraternities, I guess, he introduced me through the parties to a number of sorority girls that were in good sororities at UCLA. I liked them and they liked me but—. I went to their sorority houses, and I'll never forget one girl, a young woman there I asked, I said, "When you rush a sorority and you get in, you're a pledge or whatever, what sort of restrictions or what is expected?" And I learned that you could be really, really—you had to sort of meet the standards in the patterns of behavior that your older sorority sisters felt was appropriate. Like even, the kind of guys you dated. And I said, "What do you mean? They would disapprove of someone that you wanted to go out with?" "Oh, yes." "And you shouldn't go out with them?" "Yes." And I said, "Oh my God, this will never go for me." Those kind of restrictions. So I made a decision. Not only was it so costly, but I just would never fit in there. So—[chuckles].

1-01:05:26

Meeker: And then what happened to the boyfriend?

1-01:05:28

Felt: Oh, he was sort of short-lived. [laughs]

1-01:05:30

Meeker: Yeah. Sounds like maybe. So what sort of social group did you then find in college? Was it a continuation of what you were participating in in high school?

1-01:05:41

Felt: No, actually, it's very interesting, because I had been so active in this church group and when I went to college, after the first year, I sort of got so immersed in my work at UCLA. I also worked, always worked on campus in the student store or the history department. And I had roommates in my apartment living that were not my classmates at UCLA. My first roommate went to Santa Monica Junior College. But I had women roommates that were usually older than I was so some of my social life in my junior and senior year particularly was around their lives. And I was introduced to a real diversity of people, what I suppose you would think of as artists or bohemians, that sort of thing. And I had friends in college. And I dated guys, went to some traditional football games and fraternity parties, thing like that.

Just trying to think about my social life. Yes, it was around friends. One of my roommates had a really interesting friend from Germany, one from Hungary. We used to go to some of the coffee places in L.A. Sometimes, some jazz places. I'm trying to remember. [laughs]

1-01:07:45

Meeker: Well, from what I understand, Venice and Santa Monica were both rather bohemian at that point.

1-01:07:53

Felt: Yes. And the Village, you know Westwood Village, when I was in UCLA was still a village, none of those tall buildings. [laughs] Just trying to think—some

people periods in your life maintain such a vivid sort of recall and others kind of blur. [laughs]

1-01:08:27

Meeker: So you have the typical college blur. [laughter]

1-01:08:29

Felt: I mean I have memories of working in the history department where I met some of the graduate students in history. One of their passions, I remember, was mahjong. And I got into going—I bought an antique mah-jong set, learned how to play, and played with them.

1-01:08:53

Meeker: Is that the one that you purchased in college? [referring to a mahjong set in the room]

1-01:08:56

Felt: Uh-huh. Yes, yeah. And I can't remember how to play at all now. [laughter] But I remember there was a period of time where I was working, it must have been my junior year, where I was really into that life.

1-01:09:09

Meeker: Do you recall any influential courses or professors that maybe steered you in your future direction?

1-01:09:17

Felt: Well, I can remember finally signing up for a piano class, where I wasn't the only student; there were like five or six students that were studying piano. It was really the first time that I'd had a really accomplished pianist as a teacher. We virtually spent the whole semester for me learning one Brahms intermezzo. It was one of the Opus 119. And that was just a revelation to me. It was a short work, but just to spend that much time on not only being able to play it, but more, to interpret it, and to get the nuances out of it and really, really study it. I remember that very vividly. A teacher, his name is Gabriel Chodos, he's in the East now, but he was an aspiring concert pianist himself. He had a minor career. I remember that very, very strongly.

1-01:10:28

Meeker: I'm wondering if you can explain to a non-musician the difference between what I imagine would be the typical base-level learning a piece, which is—

1-01:10:40

Felt: Just the notes, playing the notes, which had pretty much been all of my piano lessons, just learning the notes. I was a great sight-reader. I could read scores easily. But then it was like, okay, play this piece, and play the notes, done.  
[laughs]

1-01:10:57

Meeker: Move on to the next one.

1-01:10:59

Felt: Yeah. You know, get a star on the page. [laughter] But this class with this one piece was—first of all, the notes, know the notes, that's just the very beginning step. And then it was listening to the music and the phrasing and the emphasis, and looking at the composer's markings, but also just coming to terms with the piece yourself and how you wanted to play it. That was frustrating at the same time it was really inspiring and enriching.

I remember that year also the recording—it was pretty new if not brand new — that Leon Fleischer made with George Szell of the Brahms D minor piano concerto, number one. Gabriel Chodos was learning that piece himself and he just found this recording which is one of the legendary recordings of this work between Szell as conductor and Fleischer as young pianist so inspiring that he told us, his students. I remember going out and buying it right away. It became such a meaningful work for me, not only because he was so enthusiastic about the piece as well as the performance of it by these artists, that I was inclined to really like it, too. But also I find it just very moving. It still is one of my most favorite pieces of music. And it became a kind of important musical refuge for me, particularly at the end of my senior year in college when I went into some sort of minor depression because of the impending final year of college. Graduation was coming and stepping into the abyss of what's next. Anyway, but

that piece, that Brahms Piano Concerto, and I suppose the Brahms Intermezzi that I learned so concentratedly that year, was very significant.

In terms of other classes, I remember taking in that maybe last year of college an Italian Renaissance painting course, history. I hadn't taken that much visual art at all, but this was just something I chose to take and it was so enjoyable. And then I took my first trip to Europe six months after graduating from college and went to Italy. I had all my notes from this class. It was just so great because I had all this background on all the works of da Vinci and Rafael and Michelangelo. It was great! [laughs]

1-01:14:28

Meeker: Well, can we talk about the transition then from college to what comes afterwards?

1-01:14:34

Felt: Yes. [chuckles]

1-01:14:35

Meeker: I mean, I wonder what were your friends, particularly your girlfriends, going through at that point in time. I know you said that some of them were older than you, but were they quickly getting married or moving into a career? How did you compare yourself to what was happening to your friends?

1-01:14:56

Felt: Let's see. Well, I do know that when I was very aware of the difference—

[Mindisc 2]

2-00:00:05

Meeker: All right, we're going again.

[interruption]

2-00:00:07

Meeker: —irresponsible trip to Europe. [laughs]

2-00:00:09

Felt: Well, yes, so that was what I wanted to do. And Robin and I were researching freighters because those were the days of the Ford freighter guide that was advertised in *Esquire* magazine and you could book a freighter. So we wrote to the cheapest freighters in that directory or that book and actually booked passage on a Swiss freighter that was going to leave in January from Norfolk, Virginia. But that summer I got a job as a receptionist in Beverly Hills for a company called Executive Business Management. I had gone to an employment agency and that was one of the places they had sent me for an interview, and I got the job.

It was interesting because it was founded by an American Airlines pilot who still actually—I think he may have—no, he had just stopped flying. But his wife was an actress and he decided to start a business management company because his wife and her friends in television and motion pictures were in such need of advice and business management. He had gone to law school as a pilot. He was an interesting man because he was a real risk-taker. He had left this country when he was sixteen, gone to Canada so he could join the Royal Air Force and fight in World War II, and that's where he learned to fly. So when the war was over he came back and he got a job right away with American Airlines, and he was really young.

So he had just started this business that had some really interesting—his wife, Nancy Gates was her name, she wasn't a big actress—but in those days he also represented Aaron Spelling and Carol Burnett and some of these people that later became really big in the industry. So that was my first job. And I knew I was going to only be there for six months and I was nervous about telling them that, and you know, giving notice when I did. But obviously I did and told him, and he couldn't have been greater. He just said, "Well, Ruth, I like you and you're doing great work here, but I'm so pleased you're doing this because this is exactly what you should do when you are young. You should travel, see the world, you've never been to Europe." He was just terrific. He said, "You know,

if you need any money, if you really get into trouble, you can always telegram here and I'll help you out." [laughs] He was just great!

But in the meantime, that summer, I also had met a young man from New York who I fell in love with. And he lived in —

2-00:02:57

Meeker: Where'd you meet him?

2-00:02:59

Felt: I met him because he was the cousin, first cousin of one of my high school friends. He and a buddy were out in California just visiting, and I met him that summer and then went out with him a few times and then wrote to him. And then when I went East to catch that freighter, arranged to come early and spend a month with him and his family; his sister had an apartment in Greenwich Village, and it was just all very exciting. And he was a year younger than I was and he was finishing up his college that year at Hamilton in upstate New York. So I went off to Europe on this freighter and it was just incredible. Sometimes I think when I tell my stories of my life, that I've had some of the most fortunate encounters.

The captain of this freighter—I think it was the *M.S. Regina*, Swiss, brand new—was a German. He had been the captain of Germany's biggest luxury liner, the *M.S. Columbus*, at the onset of World War II. Fascinating man. He had been at sea since he was fifteen, his whole life. Before America and Germany were at war, when the British and the Germans were at war, he had the *M.S. Columbus* over on East Coast of the U.S. and going down to Central America and South America. He was ordered by Hitler to bring the *M.S. Columbus* back. He was steaming across, about to cross the neutrality zone of the U.S., because we were not at war yet with Germany, and he was obviously watching out for British destroyers because he thought, "As soon as we get into international waters they're going to be there." And they were. So he scuttled the ship off the coast of the U.S. and he and his crew were taken by the coast guard to the U.S.

and they were put in intern camps in Arizona, so he wasn't a prisoner of war. I had read this book actually, before this trip, *The Tin Drum*, of Gunter Grass, there are a couple of pages in that book that are dedicated to this event, in that was the captain a coward or courageous in this act. And it certainly was a very, very controversial thing. But as he pointed out—and also it was very difficult for his crew because he had all these young Germans and they felt that they had been betrayed even though he knew that if they had gone on, they would be prisoners of war and the ship would have been taken by the British.

So that trip, that two weeks on the Atlantic with this captain was so fascinating because he was such an international man, and my roommate and I were, you know, I was twenty-one and she was twenty-two or something.

2-00:06:41

Meeker: And he was happy to entertain?

2-00:06:43

Felt: Oh, yeah. And there were seven passengers. And he was used to being a social captain, you know, with great meals and all sorts of stuff. So we had the most fascinating trip. We had the owner's suite on this freighter. \$150.00, everything included! [laughs]

2-00:07:01

Meeker: No longer, right.

2-00:07:07

Felt: Oh, my God, yeah. So then, I got to Germany, Hamburg, and we started our trip down Hamburg, Austria, skiing in [San Anton?], going down into Italy, Venice a week, Florence a week, two weeks in Rome, coming around to Nice, and then to Barcelona, Madrid, at which point I got sick. I had hepatitis. I had to fly home from Madrid. And it fortunately was the kind you get from food, so I recovered pretty quickly.

[interview interruption]

2-00:08:02

Meeker: I believe you were talking a little bit about the Europe trip, but I'm wondering if we could go back a little bit; there's a question I want to ask before I forget. That was, you were talking about the difficulty of being a young woman and a college graduate in the early 1960s, particularly in comparison to young male college graduates. I've always wondered, this is sort of right before the birth of what's called second wave feminism, and one of the products of that has been the contribution of a language to talk about gender inequality when it comes to employment, for instance. But this is, from my understanding, before that language existed. And I'm wondering if you remember how you and your friends would have talked about these difficulties, if in fact you did talk about them.

2-00:08:59

Felt: Yeah. I'm just trying to remember as well. I remember being aware, of course, of the limits for women without any specific skill, other than broad, basic education. And I know that I was being torn in the realization that probably my mother had been wise in saying that I should have been preparing myself to teach, where I could have. If I had gotten a credential and done that in college, that would have been an automatic teaching position, which, if I recall, some of my friends actually did achieve. You got your degree and you got a credential and you applied for an elementary school teaching job or a high school whatever. I think I was personally, in terms of my interests and dreams, very uncertain about what I really wanted to do. I didn't want to limit it to just saying, yeah, I'm going to be a teacher. I still had sort of these dreams that something was going to be out there that would be more exciting. I suppose some of this was also feeding this desire to go on this trip to Europe. That was part of my education, to learn and also to experience this.

I can recall on this trip all of the realities of actually being in Europe on your own without the structure of your school and your exams and whatever else has been just part of your life all the time. That it was, my God, it was overwhelming

a lot of the time. It was exciting but it was frightening, and you were really dependent on your own ingenuity. I wasn't on a tour. Every city was different and meeting different people and exploring. I was really fortunate to have my roommate, Robin, who was a little older than I was, but also she was a real free spirit, had a great, great sense of adventure. So she was kind of a role model for me. She helped me be more free. But that was a learning experience, too.

2-00:12:09

Meeker: How long were you there?

2-00:12:11

Felt: Well, it turned out, that whole trip, that period was four months, from starting in New York and that experience, on the freighter and then I came back in April when I was sick. We were going to stay until the money ran out. Of course, that was Europe on five dollars a day. And it was five dollars a day. It was amazing when you think about what the dollar could buy in those days.

2-00:12:34

Meeker: Did you try to experience the cultural resources via the museums while you were there?

2-00:12:41

Felt: Yes, we did a lot of the art for sure and tried to go to some concerts. A lot of it was the places themselves, just the cities and the people, because it was all so different and so new, and the food. I guess I remember most vividly the art, painting and sculpture, particularly in Italy.

2-00:13:22

Meeker: So you come back to the United States that April and you're suffering from hepatitis?

2-00:13:30

Felt: And I stop in New York and see my, um—Gary Ferraro. His uncle was a doctor, remember. And my mother in the meantime had been in touch with a doctor in Los Angeles and I arrived and they took me right to the hospital. I was in the hospital a few days. I had the tests and it was confirmed that I had hepatitis.

Even though I knew, I recovered from the jaundice and everything quickly, but that whole summer into the fall, it was clear that I had been sick. Because I ended up going to Hamilton College for Gary's graduation and the plan was he was going to graduate school at Wesleyan in Connecticut and that I would go to Middletown, Connecticut, and get a job and get an apartment, which I did.

And that was also quite an experience. I took a bus up from New York, from Long Island where he lived with his parents then, after he came back from college [chuckles], and checked into a motel in Middletown and started looking at the apartment ads, found an apartment next to the library, which was nice, and then I started looking for jobs. It was very funny because Middletown, you know, is a small college town. [chuckles] The day that my phone was going to be put in this little apartment, I overheard the telephone worker say, when he connected it and called in to make sure it was working and everything, I was in the other room but I heard him say, "Oh, yeah, she is from California. Yeah, she's cute." I went down to buy a winter coat on Main Street that summer at the department store. And the saleslady said, "Oh, you must be that girl from California." Apparently, I was causing kind of a little scandal because here this girl from California had come to live in an apartment in Middletown, Connecticut. [laughs]

2-00:16:07

Meeker: I'm thinking Peyton Place. [laughter]

2-00:16:09

Felt: So, I got a job right outside of Middletown at Pratt and Whitney Aircraft, which was one of the best paying jobs I could get for a big company like that. I got it because I was good at math and I could use a slide rule. I was hired as an engineering assistant to extend formulas and work out model mathematics. I had to get a top security clearance for that because it was in defense. And it was so interesting because all of a sudden the FBI or whoever does—who does those?—anyway, I had to fill out all of this information, and they went around Los Angeles and my family and talked to people. I thought, uh-oh, I'm not going

to get this, because of my Unitarian, left-wing activities in high school. I was involved in petitions and things like that politically in high school, but not in college. And they didn't go any further than UCLA. They didn't think that somehow, far enough back. So they never even got to the place where I had been a supporter of Dalton Trumbo who was on the Hollywood Ten list. [laughs] And I didn't tell them.

So I got my clearance and I was working there—

2-00:17:52

Meeker: That must have felt like sort of a coup because that's generally like a professional position, right, as opposed to a clerical one?

2-00:17:57

Felt: I guess, in a way, except it was clearly an assistant's job. I wasn't doing anything other than working out the numbers mathematically for these engineers that were the brains really. I'm not saying that I didn't have a brain, but I mean I wasn't thinking in terms of creatively for this stuff. I was just working out the formulas and taking all these numbers places.

But then, I came home from work one day and my fiancé, who I was planning to marry in the following spring, tells me he had just dropped out of school. He was finding it not what he liked. It was news to me. He hadn't even shared any of this anguish with me! So I thought, this is really unusual. I was upset, I thought, [dramatic gasp] "Oh, you're going back to Garden City, New York? I'm here only because of you." So I gave notice and a month later, or maybe two and a half weeks later, I left and went back to Garden City, thinking I would stay there in New York, maybe get a job, depending on what he was going to do. But it was so clear, very, very painful and emotional, that he was so confused. He was not sure what he wanted to do, and finally, as difficult as it was for me, I made the decision one morning, I just said, "You've got to decide a lot about your life, and it's too soon for you to be married. And it's probably too soon for me, too. So I think we should think about postponing this to something way in the future

or maybe forever, I don't know. And I feel like I have to go back to Los Angeles."

2- 00:19:59

Meeker: How did he respond?

2-00:20:02

Felt: Well, he was very, very upset. But he was someone that couldn't—he really was totally interior and he really couldn't share some of these things with me, I learned. He couldn't talk to me at the time that he was in school at Wesleyan, that he was really struggling with that decision. He just decided on his own to leave and told me when it was done. So there were little signs that this was not a very good partnership. We were too young.

2-00:20:40

Meeker: Had you missed Los Angeles much?

2-00:20:44

Felt: Probably, yeah. I think so. I think I missed my friends. I certainly enjoyed Gary's friends, graduate students up at Wesleyan. And I remember taking a couple of really great trips from Connecticut to one of his classmates' family farms in the fall and the leaves were beautiful. It was really great. But I think it also was his life and all his friends, not that I didn't become friends with them. But I missed my closer communication with some of my women friends and other friends in Los Angeles. And then when this relationship was so uncertain, I was really emotionally very upset because I still cared deeply for him. It wasn't that I didn't love him or find him someone I was very attracted to. It just was so confusing and troubling to feel the inability to really communicate. So I just—I remember, he didn't want me to go; he wanted me to stay. But I suppose what I did is I fled because emotionally it was just so, so hard. And I was living with his parents in his sister's old room and he was down the hall —

2-00:22:33

Meeker: So you did move back to the family home for a short period of time?

2-00:22:37

Felt: Yes, right, mm-hmm. And I liked his parents, but it was just too uncomfortable.

2-00:22:48

Meeker: Did you feel yourself comparing that situation to, for instance, what you had experienced in Europe recently?

2-00:22:54

Felt: In what respect?

2-00:22:58

Meeker: I mean just sort of seeking to empathize in a situation in which you are constantly kind of moving away from your home. Moving to Europe, then moving to Connecticut and then moving to the family home and really kind of being separated from all that you really knew and brought into a different situation. Like, I just know if I was in that position, I would constantly be comparing the current situation to previous experiences.

2-00:23:34

Felt: Yeah. It's, I don't know exactly. I think clearly, when you are in a situation, which is different or new, and challenging, you would automatically want to return home to some safety and familiarity.

I also remember sometimes my own just anger at the snobbishness of the Eastern establishment when it came to Los Angeles and Californians. It was so—nobody even pretended to be polite about it. You weren't of the same intellectual stature as the Easterners and putting down our Hollywood culture and in many ways, more relaxed and sort of just an easy way in California.

And then other memories of that time, I remember being in Connecticut when the Bay of Pigs happened. Yeah. I can remember that. [\_\_\_\_\_] speeches and how frightened we all were.

2-00:25:00

Meeker: Was there any consideration that Gary was going to be drawn up to do military service?

2-00:25:13

Felt: I'm trying to recall if there was some—I don't remember but it seems to me that he had a deferment for —

2-00:25:26

Meeker: Graduate school or something?

2-00:25:29

Felt: Yeah, maybe that was what it was for. I don't remember, that ever being a real impending sort of threat, in terms of needing to join or be drafted or something. I don't recall that.

2-00:25:43

Meeker: So did you return to Los Angeles then?

2-00:25:44

Felt: Yes, I did.

2-00:25:45

Meeker: And what year was that?

2-00:25:46

Felt: That was—well, let's see, graduated in '61, went to Europe in January of '62 and so when I got back, I moved in with my sister in Westwood for a short time. She was still in college.

2-00:26:07

Meeker: UCLA as well?

2-00:26:09

Felt: Yeah, she was in nursing school. So, she did that. She professionally chose a profession where she would be educated as a nurse, nurse practitioner. She went on that path directly from school. And Robin had come back from Europe; she stayed on when I got sick for another couple months. She was back and then we got an apartment together in Westwood. And I went back to see Bill Hayes at Executive Business Management, just for a visit, to see the people there. And I had no intention of going to work there. But he created a job for me. He said, "I would love you to work here, and I'll create a job which will give you an

opportunity to grow and learn more and earn more money and I'll offer you an opportunity to build a profession here." So I took it. And worked there until '65 when I wrote a letter to Hubert Humphrey when he became vice president of the United States ,and ended up going to Washington in July of '65. And part of that experience with Executive Business Management was very positive, and the other side of it was really not rewarding because I was such an idealist when it came to artistic product that the television sit-coms, or in those days, serials or whatever that were being developed that this company was behind and many of the artists I thought were just awful. [chuckles] And they sort of gave me pilot scripts to read as they did for everybody, just for our opinions, and they finally gave up giving them to me because [laughs] I was not a very good positive—I mean I wasn't very supportive of the stuff they were developing.

2-00:28:28

Meeker: What was the position they created for you?

2-00:28:30

Felt: It was kind of an executive assistant to Bill Hayes. It was doing a lot of different things. And of course, I remember their first Xerox machine, and big huge—turning half of the office into a mainframe computer room, you know all those IBM old punch cards and—ah! technological revelations, and the sort of technological improvements and learning some of that stuff. Oh, it was just multi-faceted, insurance policies for the clients and all sorts of different aspects of business management and some legal sides of it too, and contract negotiations and product development.

And also lots of the Hollywood scandal side. I'll never forget as a young woman in Beverly Hills then, the experience of constantly being hit upon by men, our clients even. I know Bill Hayes was not exactly a player himself, but he never did that with me and he was very protective of me, actually. Because there was one party—most of the young women on the staff were invited to these parties up in big homes with celebrities—and I remember one party, he said, "I understand, Ruth, you are going to this party tonight," because I didn't always

go. And I said, yeah, I was, it sounded kind of great, I mean really great house and everything. He said, “Yeah, but you know you should come, but I just want to warn you, the party is going to get a little rough in terms of what I think you would like to participate in or not. So why don’t you come, but you should know, and I’ll help you, you should know when to leave because I don’t want you to be upset and I don’t want you to get hurt.”

2-00:30:43

Meeker: Did you go to the party?

2-00:30:45

Felt: I did. But I didn’t stay long. It was, you know, it wasn’t—I don’t know if there was much, probably was, certainly drinking. And I drank; I’ve always liked alcohol, but I think there might have been some drugs too, I don’t know, and also a fair amount of just pairing off and, you know, sex. But, anyway. [laughs]

2-00:31:08

Meeker: Well, how did it feel, somebody who was certainly a fan of the arts, to see, although it was a different side of the arts, to actually see the different side of the arts, which was the business side of it? Did you feel like you were gaining useful knowledge into what makes the staging of an opera happen or the touring of a symphony happen?

2-00:31:35

Felt: Not really there. I think what I was probably learning more of, in terms of just the skills behind the scenes, was the business side, would be more of the tactics behind effective negotiation on terms for contracts and the different types of back and forth about disagreements about money, in terms of what people should be paid or demands in that regard. Because most of the clients that were part of this office were in the television industry. Lucy [Lucille Ball] and Desi [Arnaz] and that program, Bob Banner, *Candid Camera*, Aaron Spelling and all of that development of television, Carolyn Jones, his wife, Joe Hamilton who ended up marrying Carol Burnett. I mean, yeah there were lots of big stars, Hugh

O'Brian, Vince Edwards who had Dr. Ben Casey—these were big, popular television programs.

2-00:32:42

Meeker: What do you think it was out of the negotiation process that you learned? Did you draw your sort of top three lessons that you learned from that, or was it just a knowledge that it happened and there was a certain method for it?

2-00:33:01

Felt: Gosh, I think, probably in terms of this office and Bill Hayes and Jerry Marks, his partner who created it, in terms of their skill sets and the way they ran a business and the way they managed their clients and the way their terms and so on, the overall preparedness and consistency and organization. It was very well run. That's, I think—it wasn't sort of crisis management and it wasn't sort of seat of your pants, let's just go for it. I think it was a lot of strategy and effective work. Because I know, also at that point, Bill got two big baseball players, Don Drysdale and Sandy Koufax, to be his first sports clients. And that was exciting for us in the office. And also I was privy, I guess, to some of the strategies that he came up with to win—there were obviously other firms that wanted these people, to represent them. So I'm not recalling specifically, but I just basically think it was that overall sort of framework of working in an effective office, even though ultimately I didn't want to put my energies into that product or into that effort. But I could respect very much the way in which he ran his business. That would be what could be said in a nutshell about that. [laughs]

2-00:35:06

Meeker: Well, I'm wondering if we should probably stop at this point.

2-00:35:09

Felt: Yeah, all right.

**INTERVIEW 2: SEPTEMBER 23, 2004**

[Minidisc 3]

3-00:00:06

Meeker: Okay, this is Martin Meeker interviewing Ruth Felt for the second installment of our interview. It is September 23<sup>rd</sup> Thursday, at about 9:30 a.m. So let's just get started and perhaps just jump into the Henry Miller story, if that's all right with you.

3-00:00:26

Felt: Yes, well, my last year of college at UCLA, in the spring as graduation was approaching, for some inexplicable reasons, and I suspect it was the impending end of college and the uncertainty of what comes after, but I became quite depressed, which was very unusual for me. Not that I hadn't had moods and things like that, but I just for some reason got very, very depressed and it was very hard for me to even get out of bed in the morning, you know that type of depression, and go to class and go to work. So, in sharing some of that concern with some of my friends, one of my friends brought me a book and said, "Why don't you start reading this. I think it might be good for you right now." And it was *Colossus of Maroussi* by Henry Miller. Of course, I knew who Henry Miller was, but I didn't know about this book.

The book is a nonfiction story of his visit to Greece and his absolutely falling in love with the Greek people. And it's really a testament to Henry Miller's whole philosophy of life and his love of all the passions and food and love and people. It is such a wonderful endorsement of human capacity. So yes, it really did inspire me. And it really made a difference. And it's a book I treasure today and I give it to people because it's not so well known but yet many people think it's his best book. He was made famous by the censorship of the *Tropics [of Cancer and Capricorn]* but he's a great writer. So that was in 1961.

3-00:02:32

Meeker: Did you try to seek therapy in this context in that period of time?

3-00:02:35

Felt: No. But I did later, so we can go there later. [laughs]

3-00:02:40

Meeker: I mean was it not suggested to you or you didn't really consider it a—?

3-00:02:43

Felt: No, I didn't think it was—it actually didn't seem to last too long. I remember that book and I also remember repeatedly playing the Brahms D minor Piano Concerto. I had a lot of Brahms' music, which I actually had been playing myself.

3-00:03:00

Meeker: That's the one you mentioned in the previous interview, correct?

3-00:03:04

Felt: Yes, right. Anyway, so it didn't last so long. I got through that. I think something very helpful was reading Henry Miller and his philosophies of life. Anyway, so it meant a lot.

3-00:03:24

Meeker: Was there anything more specific in it or was it more, like you said, his general celebration of the capacity of a group of people for life and love, I guess?

3-00:03:33

Felt: And freedom and just being such a spirit of joy, human foibles as well as human greatness but also being extremely realistic about human failures. If you'd like, I have a lot of his writing and there's a little book called *Nothing but the Marvelous*. A woman compiled a lot of his writings. I just was re-reading it sort of in memory—which I frequently do anyway because it still is very meaningful to me, about who he was and who he is as a great writer. I don't think he's really been appreciated as much as he should be and probably will be going forward.

Anyway, this is '61, and in 1963 or so, a few years later, I went to Minnesota to visit my family, the farm and my aunts and uncles on my father's side primarily in Minnesota.

[Interview pause for machine noise outside]

3-00:04:57

Meeker: You were talking about your trip back to Minnesota.

3-00:05:03

Felt: Okay so I was in Minneapolis and I decided to go and visit in the morning my sort of black sheep Aunt Olive, one of my dad's sisters, who is the one that ended up going to Paris when she was nineteen, to the Sorbonne. She was always kind of the odd one. I mean, she had flaming red hair and nobody else did and she was the poet, and people were always sort of aghast at her adventures, and anyway—

3-00:05:32

Meeker: Were they jealous as well?

3-00:05:35

Felt: I'm not sure, maybe. She was kind of the oddball in the family. In terms of a Scandinavian family, she was extremely demonstrative and she always had lots of men in her life. I remember her coming out to the farm in her high heels and her skirts and bringing her latest boyfriend and sitting on his lap and my mother and my father were just, "Oh my God!" [laughs] So I went to visit her in Minneapolis, and at that point her husband had died, her third husband, I guess. She had this big house in Minneapolis, four stories, and I knew that she had made room there for different people, interesting people, mostly artists actually, to live there. Maybe five or six people lived there. She had a nice place there. So when I was in her kitchen that morning having coffee with her, I said, "Who's living in your house now?" So she described who was there, you know, naming them and telling me what they did. And then she said, "Oh, yeah, and on the top floor is this man whose name is Tom Moore. He's not an artist himself but he's connected to one. He is the main secretary to the fan club of Henry Miller." I said, "Oh, really!?" And she said, "Yeah! A very nice man, but he's devoted to Henry Miller and he keeps track of all his fans and helps him with his mail." I said, "Oh my goodness, can I meet him?" And then I told my aunt about my—

just a few years before having read *The Colossus*. And she said, “Oh yeah, just go up and knock on the door. I think he’s probably there.” So I did and he was there, and I went in and just had a very long visit with him, just talking about Henry and his devotion to him, and I told my story. And that was that. It was really pleasant, just learning more about Henry Miller and why this man was so committed to him.

3-00:07:43

Meeker: After reading *The Colossus*, did you continue to read Henry Miller’s oeuvre?

3-00:07:49

Felt: Some of the Letters with Lawrence Durrell and a couple of—not the *Tropics*, I didn’t get into that—but read some of the short things, *Cosmological Eye* I think, and the letters of Lawrence Durrell. Because I had been reading Lawrence Durrell as well, *The Alexandria Quartet*. Anyway.

Then I came back from my trip to Minnesota in the summer and in the fall, I was out for dinner, sort of late, ten o’clock at night with some of my co-workers at Executive Business Management, this business management firm in Beverly Hills. I think we talked about that last time, didn’t we? So I walked into this restaurant with three or four of them and we sat down and I looked across the room—this was Frascati’s on Wilshire Boulevard—and I said out loud, “Oh my God, there’s Henry Miller!” And everybody said, “Huh?” my co-workers—

3-00:08:54

Meeker: How would you recognize him?

3-00:08:55

Felt: Oh, easy! He was across the dining room, I knew it was Henry Miller. I sat there for a while and then I thought, I cannot not say something. So I got up and I went over to his table and I just very quietly said, “I don’t want to intrude but I just would love to say hello and tell you how much some of your writing has meant to me.” And so he said, “Oh! Hello! Why don’t you sit down for a second. Who are you?” [laughs] Which would be typical of him because he’s such a lover of

people and interested in people. And so I told him who I was and I told him just briefly that I had met Tom Moore in Minneapolis this summer. And he introduced me to the people that he was with, and that was his second wife who is now married to someone else who—her husband was there—and I think that was, yeah. It was just a small family gathering. I said, “Oh, are you visiting from Big Sur?” And he said, “Actually, no, I’ve moved here now. I live in Pacific Palisades, in my house” where Lepska, his second wife, had been living with their children, Valentine and Tony and her husband—and he said, “I’ve moved here now so I’m going to be in the area. Why don’t you write down your name and number and you can come and visit.” So I did and then I went back to my table. I couldn’t wait to get home to tell my roommate Robin, because she would really understand the impact that this would have and the specialness of that serendipitous [laughs] kind of being in this place at the same time as him.

3-00:10:49

Meeker: She knew about your experience with *The Colossus*?

3-00:10:52

Felt: Yeah, and she just was an interesting woman, my friend, and my roommate, and she’d gone to Europe with me and she was a writer, yeah, whereas my colleagues at EBM, they didn’t get it exactly. [laughs] They weren’t interested and they didn’t understand why I was so moved by what had just happened.

So I get home that night and it’s about midnight and I’m telling Robin about this encounter and the phone rang. And it was Henry Miller. He said, “Now Ruth, I know you’re probably still up because we just left that restaurant about the same time. It was so nice of you to come and speak to me. Tomorrow night, my family, my children, you met Lepska and her husband, we’re all having a dinner party here and a lot of people that I know are coming, and it would be great if you could come too.” So I went to dinner there in Pacific Palisades the next night. At that dinner, which was extremely warm, and a lot of fun, then Henry Miller took me around and showed me his watercolors, which I hadn’t been so familiar with, because he painted a lot. That was the point where he asked me

what else I had read of his and he was really interested in who I was. That was the thing about Henry that was so remarkable and anything you read about him by people who knew him, really knew him, remark on how he is such a genuinely fascinating person in terms of wanting to know who you are. I mean, he's an artist with an ego but he was just genuinely curious about the people around him.

3-00:12:46

Meeker: Not a Hemingway kind of character.

3-00:12:34

Felt: Right. So it was at that point that he gave me all these signed copies of *The Tropic of Cancer* and *Capricorn* and other books he felt I should read. And then I jokingly said to him, "Henry, well, you're giving away all these books to me, do you have any old watercolors you don't want?" [chuckles] And he said, "Well, nothing that's on the wall but I mean if you look over there in that corner, all of these things on the floor"—all this heap of paper that was in rolls—"all that stuff are experiments and I'm going to throw that all out. As you can see, it's in the corner. If you want to go over there and look at any of that and if you want to save one of those, you can. You can have it." So I did. I'll show it to you, Martin, I have it on the wall. Anyway, I found one that I really liked and I said, "Can I have this?" And he said, "Oh, sure. I didn't really like the way it turned out. I was painting a scene, actually looking at a harbor with sailboats. Normally, I don't paint looking at anything; I paint just from my imagination. I think that's what I want to continue to do. So sure." I said, "Can I ask you to sign it?" So he did.

A few weeks later, he came over to our house, to our apartment for brunch, and Robin and I went over to visit him again. He was a great ping-pong player and we used to play ping-pong with him. There was one point—it probably was actually that first time I went to his house after dinner—where he said, "Now Ruth, I'm thinking you're a very attractive young woman and I don't want to insult you, but I think you want to be friends with me, right?" And I said, "Yes."

And he said, “Yeah, that’s what I thought. That’s what we’ll be. We’ll be friends.”

3-00:14:50

Meeker: As opposed to?

3-00:14:50

Felt: Lovers.

3-00:14:52

Meeker: Okay.

3-00:14:52

Felt: He was noted for his seduction or whatever. I mean, he really loved this gesture. But he was extremely sensitive to who people really were. So when I tell my Henry Miller or I say something about Henry Miller being an inspiration to me, immediately people make that leap, “Oh my God, you must have had an affair with him.” And I didn’t. I didn’t even come close! It wasn’t even an issue. It just was a really special friendship.

And then when I went to Washington to work for Hubert Humphrey, which I guess maybe is the next thing that we do on this sort of journey of my life—

3-00:15:39

Meeker: Well, I want to ask you about Henry Miller. In a relationship there is something that each individual gains from the other person. In these types of relationships, you know, usually it’s the younger person who gains the education and the older person who gains—I wouldn’t go as far as saying sexual favors, but I mean sometimes there is an erotic element evolved. Since that wasn’t part of it, what do you think that he was gaining from your company?

3-00:16:23

Felt: I just think he found me an interesting young person who he liked. And he liked Robin. He liked who we were as young women with interesting ideas. We were attractive and fun and had lots of different thoughts that he could share with us

in terms of whether we were talking about politics or literature or art, you know, music.

3-00:17:00

Meeker: So it was a kind of intellectual exchange.

3-00:17:12

Felt: Yeah, and you know, we could play ping-pong. He just had a great fun spirit, too. A lot of joy, and obviously he was a very open person, and I just think he really loved to get to know people. So we were new people in his life. I think he found it probably very gratifying that I had such special sort of enrichment from his writing.

And then you know that painting that I saved. [laughs] When he came over to our apartment after it was framed and everything on the wall, he just kept going back to it. He said, "Oh! I'm so glad you saved this. It isn't so bad, is it?" [laughs] And I said, "No, I really like it." And then he kept going back to it, he said, "Well, I have an idea. I probably shouldn't say this. Well, I will anyway because I thought it. And I'll think about it later." He said, "What if I gave you two or three other paintings and you gave this back to me?" He just said this. Then he said, "Nope. I take it back. It's yours. It wouldn't be here if you hadn't saved it, so it belongs to you. But I'd love it if you would agree at times when I have exhibitions of my work that if I ask them to contact you, would you let it be shown at the exhibition?" And I said, "Of course! I'd be proud." So he said, "Great." So I did that several times. [laughs]

3-00:18:58

Meeker: Where has it been shown, then?

3-00:18:59

Felt: Oh, just in Westwood, in Los Angeles, in those years, in the sixties at exhibits of his work.

- 3-00:19:04  
Meeker: I'm not very familiar with his writing or artistic career after the *Tropics*. What was he working on at this point, do you recall?
- 3-00:19:13  
Felt: Oh, I don't know if I remember. But there's a lot of—I mean, nothing was ever as sensational as that, of course. And he was very funny about that. He said, "Well, censorship, I guess I have to thank my lucky stars for it because it made my stardom in a sense."
- 3-00:19:37  
Meeker: Well, it helped many writers' careers, [Vladimir] Nabokov and—
- 3-00:19:41  
Felt: Yes, exactly, right. Anyway—what's his name, over here in Berkeley, a famous filmmaker—Phil Kaufman made this movie called *Henry and June* that I went to see and anyone that knew Henry Miller just [ gasps] just winced because it was just so bad.
- 3-00:20:01  
Meeker: The film version.
- 3-00:20:00  
Felt: The film. It just didn't capture who this man was at all.
- 3-00:20:09  
Meeker: Did it capture a kernel of it?
- 3-00:20:04  
Felt: A little. But it just never really touched the profundity of this person.
- 3-00:20:19  
Meeker: Was there something that was the most egregious omission or—?
- 3-00:20:23  
Felt: Well, it just really, again, tended to emphasize the stereotypical concept of him as a sexist, and you know, it just didn't in any way get to the humanity of this man, really who he was. It was hard to see having known him. They comment

somewhere more or less in the intro or on the cover, the guy who wrote the overview said [that unlike this film which totally missed the point.]

3-00:21:05

Meeker: Was there ever an opportunity in your discussions to talk about the relationships of men and women or the status of women, something that might complicate this view of him as a sexist?

3-00:21:17

Felt: I don't recall that. Again, when I say that I had this friendship with him, I did, but I didn't—we didn't see him a lot. He had a very, very busy life with people of all ages and also he fell in love with a young Asian woman who he married. And so I with Robin, we were just some among many, many friends.

3-00:21:56

Meeker: Did you ever get the chance to meet the other of his interesting friends?

3-00:22:02

Felt: I'm trying to recall. Yeah, I did meet some, but I remember more his second wife, Lepaska, because I met her at the same time I met him that night. And her husband who was a professor. And then there was one other man. I think again, I would have to sort of think back as to how many times actually—I think Henry came to our apartment twice, and I think Robin and I may have gone over there, like, three times. And then I would sometimes see that he was going to be signing books or having an exhibition or doing a talk in Los Angeles and sometimes I would go to that and say hello to him there. I know that right before I went to Washington and decided to take that job, I told him at an occasion like that, where he was speaking or he was signing books or something.

3-00:23:03

Meeker: That you were going to head off to Washington?

3-00:23:05

Felt: Yeah, that I was going to go to Washington to work for Hubert Humphrey.

3-00:23:10

Meeker: Well, should we move to that? Seems like a good segue.

3-00:23:13

Felt: Sure. Yeah, right. So this is '65.

3-00:23:17

Meeker: And I think that we covered it a little bit in the previous interview to the extent that you told your boss at the Executive Business Management and he responded in a way that, "You might be giving up something but you're going to do something that's completely different."

3-00:23:46

Felt: Oh, yeah, well, I was struggling with the fact that here I was working for this company and for this man Bill Hayes who was an entrepreneur and I admired him. But I was struggling with the product because it wasn't something that was really, very—I didn't resonate with it, really. I had always been interested in politics from my childhood with my father and my mother, and when Hubert Humphrey became the vice presidential candidate in '64 and then was elected to be the vice president, I wrote him a letter in January of '65 when he took office, a letter of congratulations. And I included a resume and just said that it was wonderful that he was the vice president and I didn't know if he remembered, but I had met him in Minnesota when I was growing up with my dad and I would love to work for him if there was ever a job in his office in Washington that I would be qualified for. So, I sent it off, and I got the usual letter back, thanking me for my good wishes and saying that they would keep resume on file. I don't think he signed the letter, but you know, hey.

So this was January, and then in the spring, in May or June, I got a telegram from one of his assistants, Ted Van Dyke, who was his main speechwriter and advisor in foreign affairs. And so it just said, "Are you still interested in working for the Vice President of the United States? If you are, please call me." So I did. And I talked to him and he said, "I'd like to have you interviewed in Pasadena, nearby, if you can go over there to be interviewed by a woman who has just left

our staff who has worked with the vice president and senator for years and knows our offices.” So I went over and was interviewed, and the next thing I knew, a couple days later, this man called me from Washington and said, “I’d like to offer you a job here, but you need to be here by the first week of July.” This was some time in June. It was really tight, but I decided to do it.

3-00:26:24

Meeker: Did you know what kind of job you were interviewing for?

3-00:26:27

Felt: Yeah, it was his secretary, basically.

3-00:26:32

Meeker: Humphrey’s secretary or—?

3-00:26:32

Felt: No, no, no, Ted Van Dyke’s secretary. No, no, no, not Humphrey’s secretary.  
[laughter]

So I then quickly gave notice and arranged to move things to Washington and arranged to have my little Volkswagen Beetle, which I had just bought in ‘64 shipped. [laughs] And flew to Washington. I arrived on July 3<sup>rd</sup> and I began working on July 4<sup>th</sup>. I suppose that I was confronted with reality that was consistent throughout the year plus that I worked there, is that the man I worked for, Ted Van Dyke, was a real taskmaster and didn’t really have a lot of human compassion, so to speak. I reported to work on the holiday and he was there to greet me. It was the New Senate Office Building because the vice president had offices in the Capitol and the new Senate office building and the Executive Office Building, and Ted at the time was working in the New Senate Office building. I arrived and it’s a holiday and there’s nobody around. But he’s in the office. So he said that there was a backlog of a lot of work because he hadn’t had a secretary for some time. I was there and he showed me my desk and my typewriter and the dictating machine and he said, “I’ll see you tomorrow. Just do

as much as you can today.” [laughs] I thought, “Whoa.” And I was there by myself!

3-00:28:22

Meeker: Were you supposed to transcribe the dictations?

3-00:28:25

Felt: Yes. And he showed me the stationery. But it was completely impossible because—and also the phone kept ringing! And I didn’t know if I should answer it or I shouldn’t. I tried answering it a few times, and then I realized that I shouldn’t answer it because I couldn’t help anybody and it was a holiday, and there was also that I didn’t have answers! I had no orientation really. And in certain cases it was kind of crackpot calls on holidays. And I thought ugh. So I stopped doing that. Of course, he never gave me a key, so here I started at nine in the morning and I couldn’t go out for lunch and come back. [laughs] And all of the dictation was filled with Washington acronyms. Oh my God! I mean I knew the DNC, the Democratic National Committee! But the deciphering of all this stuff was—

3-00:29:29

Meeker: Especially in the Great Society, right? Just an explosion of acronyms.

3-00:29:30

Felt: Oh, it was just impossible. So I did what I could, and I put the letters that I had been able to figure it out and were decently transcribed in his inbox and went back to the hotel where I was staying, which was actually kind of a refuge. Because through one of my friends in Los Angeles who was then a major editor in *Los Angeles Magazine*, I was able to use for the weekend and for the first few days a do-bill credit that he had at the Ritz-Carlton—or what was the Carlton? It was a very nice hotel in Washington, really nice. So that was great because I could at least escape from the trials of that day and go back to this wealthy hotel. [laughs]

3-00:30:16

Meeker: What were your thoughts back at the hotel room that night?

3-00:30:19

Felt: Oh, I just thought I was in over my head. I thought, “Oh my God! This is just really, really, scary.” Because I felt so stupid in a way, so inadequate. And then I met the man that I was going to work for and he was certainly very, very serious and stern and ugh!

3-00:30:38

Meeker: Were you at all disillusioned? Correct me if I’m wrong, but I imagine going to Washington, D.C., young, probably to a certain extent idealistic, expecting that you’re going to do some good and then—I mean, did you feel like you were engaged in doing good, just in over your head? Or?

3-00:30:59

Felt: Well, after that first day, it was just a little bit—I don’t remember—I just remember feeling very confused and frightened. So the next day I go to work and I just met all my colleagues in the office, the other secretaries, all the staff. That was reassuring because everyone was very nice. In fact, I soon also then connected with two of the women in the office who rented a house up on Capitol Hill not too far from the office, and they needed a roommate because their third person had just moved out, and wondered if I wanted to come over and look at the room there at that house and be their roommate. And so I did and I liked it and I did. That was really nice and it was really easy and I was living with two young women who worked for Humphrey as well and who had worked for him in the Senate and knew the ropes. They filled me in pretty fast. They just said, “Now, don’t let Ted get to you because he’s not easy. We all know it. Not to put anything on you, but we all suspect that he probably hired you from California feeling like if you make this big trip, you’re not going to quit right away.”  
[chuckles]

Anyway, it was not an easy thing working for him. Because he was really smart and really a taskmaster. He was on himself too but he just didn’t have any people skills and he certainly was really hard on the person that worked directly for him.

I remember in that summer feeling like, “Whoa.” Frequently, there were times when I was just so overwhelmed with his criticism and the unfairness of what I was being asked to really do [snaps fingers] just like that, that I would just go to the bathroom and cry. [laughs] It was the only way I could relieve the tension. And I remember thinking I really want to quit. But I said, “No, I’m not. I’ll stick this out for at least a year.”

3-00:33:31

Meeker: Were these tasks, just work tasks or was there anything that was intellectual and thought provoking?

3-00:33:40

Felt: Well, I mean it was intellectual and thought-provoking in that you were close to what was happening in terms of the president’s and vice president’s policies. But it was a very difficult time also because of the emotion of the Vietnam War and the bombing of North Vietnam. Hubert Humphrey himself was struggling really seriously with being vice president versus being a leader in the Senate. That whole staff was because they were used to being really proactive in terms of their issues and their capacities and they were virtually under the thumb of Lyndon Johnson and the Johnson staff. And it was really, really hard. And Ted was the main speechwriter and our speeches then, after the very beginning, had to be approved by the Johnson folks.

So, in January—I moved there in July—January, Ted and I were moved down to the Executive Office Building right next to the White House, so we were in the main office of the vice president. I’ll never forget that January at one point, Hubert Humphrey called all of us, his staff, all of us, into his office there and said, “I know this first year has been very difficult certainly for me, and for all of you in this role of being the vice president and the vice president’s staff. And I have done a lot of soul-searching about it myself. I have come to the decision that I am going to honor the office that I have been elected to and I am going to honor the presidency of this country. I will dissent in private, but I will support the policy of the president in public. And if I can’t do that then I should resign,

and I have made the decision not to. But if any of you in this room cannot do that, I certainly understand, very definitely understand, but I need you to—if you want to stay—you need to honor my decision.” So that was—whoo.

3-00:36:10

Meeker: This question of dissent was over the question of the Vietnam War, correct?

3-00:36:13

Felt: Pretty much. That was the most visible.

3-00:36:19

Meeker: Were there other issues as well that you recall?

3-00:36:23

Felt: Probably in terms of just a lot of the social service issues and things like that.

But the Vietnam War was such a major, major problem. When we saw what happened—it was just that whole issue of heating up there and the bombing of North Vietnam. Humphrey was really opposed to it, but—

3-00:36:50

Meeker: How did he make that clear to his staff? Was it his record before being a Vice President or was it something that he said or did while vice president?

3-00:37:00

Felt: Well, I wasn't privy to those discussions. In other words, Ted Van Dyke, my boss would meet with him, as the senior staff—which was all male, by the way, all male senior staff. I don't care how responsible the women were, in terms of their writing, we were all secretaries. And that was another reason that I decided to leave. But in those days, in the sixties, women were very much not elevated into positions of responsibility.

So they had a lot of discussions about the framing of the speeches and positions he would take. Yeah. But I wasn't privy to those other than second-hand.

But I think what happened with me, in terms of just the special connection with him, with Hubert Humphrey, was that I worked with Ted Van Dyke, who was

his main speechwriter, and so frequently it would be just Ted and me waiting up for Hubert Humphrey to come in after an evening event to look at the speech one more time before it was finally typed up for his speech book and sent out to all the press. So I would be waiting with Ted, and it was, you know twenty-four-seven. I mean, it was just...and politics are like that today. But we virtually worked every single day and very long hours. And that was before computers so I had to be just a crackerjack typist, which I was. I got to be really good at it. Because you didn't make mistakes when you typed. If you made a mistake, you didn't use correction fluid, you tore the page out and you started over. Thank God these speeches were on big type. You know big type? So there wasn't so much copy on one page. [laughs]

Anyway, Hubert Humphrey again was just a great human being, as opposed to my boss Ted Van Dyke. He was just such a warm person. He would come in from one of these dinners or whatever and he'd always greet me and he'd say, "Well, you guys, here I am, let's go over this and get it out of the way." Then he take a look at me and he'd say, "How are you doing? This guy, how's he treating you? Not good, I'm sure." He'd look over at Ted. [laughs] "Not good enough, anyway!" He says, "Now, I know he hasn't offered you a drink. So, how about one, Ruth?" He'd go and fix me a drink from the bar. [laughs] And so I had some special encounters in terms of overhearing his discussion about fine points of the speech and also just some personal moments. And then, occasionally, if he was going to Minnesota, which he did frequently on his private plane, if there was room on the plane, if it was over a weekend and I could get away, I would ask to go with. And I was able to a few times, because I had aunts and uncles and family in Minneapolis, so I could ride with his entourage and visit my family. And one time actually I had an opportunity to sit next to him, because the congressman or whoever was supposed to go couldn't go at the last minute. So he invited me to sit with him for the flight and just talk and visit. And he reminisced a little bit about my father and also he knew my uncle. So it was just

a really nice opportunity to get to know him in a very special, rare situation. I mean, here I was in my early twenties.

3-00:41:13

Meeker: Sitting next to the vice president.

3-00:41:14

Felt: Yeah, right.

3-00:41:17

Meeker: Now, you said that you left there?

3-00:41:20

Felt: In September of 1966. So I'd been there a year and three months.

But I'll tell you this story because I had actually completely forgotten about it. I realize I hadn't even told my roommates in Washington, not that people weren't aware of this, exactly. But you know when the Monica Lewinsky-Bill Clinton thing was such a sensation, I was having dinner with some friends, close friends, and all of a sudden I remembered this. And I said, "You know, in those days, when I was in Washington," as I'm sure it is today too, it's just a very predatory kind of place [laughs], as Hollywood is or anything, just a lot of sexual affairs going on with young women and interns and secretaries. Some things never change. But in the sixties when I was there, I was aware of it, but just like the press wasn't reporting John F. Kennedy's activities in the White House, nobody went there. It was nobody's business and nobody paid any attention to it. I said to my friends who I knew really well, I said, "I don't think I ever told you this. I'm not sure I even have thought about it in a long time." But there was a summer night in Washington in the summer of '66, maybe it was August, I don't know. I was going to leave. Everyone knew I was leaving the job. Hubert Humphrey had a meeting with the press out on the *Sequoia*, the yacht on the Potomac. And everyone on the staff—Ted, my boss and certain people—were prepping him for this because it was going to be kind of a grilling. And he had agreed to go out on the *Sequoia* with the press and there was going to be a dinner

and he was going to be answering questions and dealing with issues. He was nervous about it, of course, because he was going to be there on trial in a sense. It was going to be an open press conference type of thing but he was going to be with the journalists. So we knew this and everybody was a little tense for him but he went out. And I think he had his press secretary with him, maybe a couple of people from the press department. So then we get a call in the office, after hours—Ted and I were still there and Humphrey’s secretary—the secretary took the call, and she came in to us and she said, “Well, I’ve got a call from the boss and he wants to know who’s still in the office now, and I told him, and he said he wants everybody out in the *Sequoia*; he needs protection.” [laughs] He was really feeling stressed over this encounter with the press. “He said he wants as many friendly faces as possible around.”

3-00:44:42

Meeker: So this was kind of like an informal press conference and he was moving about and—?

3-00:44:50

Felt: Well, he agreed to this sort of—I don’t know exactly—it was just sort of a dinner and an outing with the press. I don’t know how many there were but it was quite a few. There was going to be drinks and then dinner and an opportunity for the press to talk to him one-on-one.

So we arrived, Ted, myself, Marsha, Humphrey’s secretary, I don’t know who else, maybe there were like six or seven of us. We got aboard and Secret Service brought us over to the vice president so he’d see that we were there. He took one look at me and he said, “Oh Ruth, I’m so glad you’re here. Come. I need to have you stick with me. I don’t have Muriel tonight, I don’t have—. I just need somebody here all the time.” And I said, “Yes, sir.” Sort of like, whoa. Because we were told on the staff, never when you are in an occasion with the vice president, you’re the staff. You’re there, but you don’t ever monopolize him, particularly secretaries. So he got me a drink and he was talking to the press and others. So then I just sort of started fading back because it’s not my job. I was a

little uncertain, too. I thought, “Oh my goodness, what am I supposed to say?” I was just comfort but—. So, soon as I got a distance away, the Secret Service, because they stick with him, right away a guy comes over and says, “Ruth, the boss wants you back.” So, back I went.

And then it was time to sit down for dinner and I was sort of waiting for people to be seated. And the Secret Service came and got me, and said, “Now, understand, he wants you to sit with him. He wants somebody there. He wants a friend.” So I sat with him at dinner. Then at the end of the dinner and the coffee is being served, he turned to me and he said, “Ruth, have you ever been on this boat before? Have you been on this yacht?” And I said, “No.” And he said, “Oh. Well, I think it’s time for me to show you around.” [laughs]

3-00:47:10

Meeker: Interesting.

3-00:47:12

Felt: So he said to the assorted journalists, he sort of winked, I think, he wanted to escape. So he took me down below. And he put his arm around me. I didn’t feel threatened really in any way because I just liked him and I felt, you know, but I thought, “What’s going to happen?” I knew he was using me to get away from them!

3-00:47:43

Meeker: Was it obvious to you or did you think that perhaps there was—?

3-00:47:49

Felt: He—I—my feeling was that I was not in any way being really seduced. I was being used for comfort. He needed someone to—the pressure on him—I mean, he was walking a fine line. Because he was so loquacious and he was just genuinely a very talkative man, as we all know, and here he was with all the press around him making notes and he was walking that fine line where Lyndon Johnson would be furious with him if he made a misstatement or something. So he was under a lot of pressure and I felt, what I knew was that I was being used

just for what I was, someone he knew. And he just needed someone that could help him through this evening.

And so we went below and I think he made some sort of gesture towards me that might have been to kiss me or something, I don't recall. And he said, "Well, Ruth, maybe we could go out afterwards tonight." And I said, "You know what? Why don't we save this for a time when I'm no longer working for you." Sort of just deflecting, and he said, "That's a good idea." And he was fine. He sort of laughed. Then he said, "Well, I think we've been here long enough; I think we'd better get back." So we were coming back to go up the stairs and I don't know what possessed me, probably just my own sort of subtle sense of humor, and now that I think about it, I think, "Woah, that was pretty good for someone in your twenties." But, as we came up the stairs, I just took my hair and I just messed it all up. As we were becoming visible, as we entered the dining room, I started fixing my hair. And he loved it. [laughs] But of course, nobody cared. It just was a moment of levity and that was it.

3-00:50:01

Meeker: And did this provide him with an excuse to leave the boat?

3-00:50:03

Felt: Well, the evening was coming to an end. I think his official, Ted and the press secretary were saying, "Okay, guys and journalists, it's over. You've had your time."

3-00:50:19

Meeker: Clearly the vice president has moved on to his private matters.

3-00:50:22

Felt: And then I went home, they dropped me at my car on the Mall where I parked it. I understand that afterwards, he—which is what he was known to do—went out with some of the staff as a group and they were up until all hours, just letting all the tension evaporate. But I didn't go.

I never—actually I just was in Washington now this summer and I had a reunion with my roommates that I lived with then and a couple of other women that were part of our Humphrey staff. And I said to them, “Do you remember me telling you about this?” And they didn’t. I said, “I don’t think I did.” I didn’t remember it really, I hadn’t even thought about it until after all of this discussion about the ways of Washington. I never felt I was being, in any way, seriously seduced. And I wasn’t! [chuckles] But it didn’t even make a blip on the screen as far as I was concerned. [laughs]

3-00:51:38

Meeker: Maybe that’s a function of memory and looking back at something then from the perspective of today. Because back then, to be frank, sex was used for a whole variety of different functions. Whether it happened or not, there was this sort “boys’ club” element of it, that the one excuse that he could use to get out of this exchange was by appealing to all the other journalists—and I’m sure they were all men—to their sort of masculinity.

3-00:52:18

Felt: Yeah, right. I guess.

3-00:52:20

Meeker: But maybe that wouldn’t have occurred to you as something even worth commenting upon then.

3-00:52:25

Felt: Yeah. I didn’t feel like I was being used unfairly. I mean, I just sort of, I guess, accepted that sort of reality. And it was playful in a sense, so I never felt like Hubert Humphrey was this lecherous man in any sense. And no one ever—we talked about that the summer when I saw my friends—that Humphrey’s own sexual escapades, if there were any, were never, ever—nobody knew. He was a very sexy man in a way, and he loved people and he loved women, and we sometimes speculated whether he had these little affairs and nobody ever knew, and there was never any evidence that he did or didn’t. He loved to party, he

loved to stay out late, and Secret Service never of course divulged anything.

[laughter]

3-00:53:35

Meeker: So it was discretion when it comes to perhaps real transgressions, but total lack of discretion when it comes to fake ones. That's interesting.

3-00:53:45

Felt: Yep. So, anyway. So that chapter in my life was extremely, well, very interesting, very powerful in many ways. And I was grappling with, you know, what I ultimately wanted to do professionally. I certainly had quiet ambitions. I realized that the world of Washington and that level of politics was beyond me. Because if I wanted to move up, I didn't have the professional credentials or the education or master's or Ph.D. or anything that would enable me, as a woman, to be elevated into a higher position.

3-00:00:54:35

Meeker: Were there some women who were making those kinds of moves?

3-00:54:33

Felt: Um, not for me that I saw in the Humphrey office at that time. There were women, including my roommates, who were writing a lot of the "leg-mail" and everything dealing with issues who also were always just secretaries. But you know, later that changed.

But at that point, in Washington when I was there, even though I was working all the time, I made an effort very, very definite—I had subscription tickets to the symphony and I went out to concerts whenever I could. So I was really very interested in music and the arts. And that was when Hubert Humphrey asked me what I wanted to do and why I was leaving. And he said, "Is it because of Ted?" And I said, "Honestly, no. He's not an easy man to work for, but I'm struggling with my own interests and what feels right for me." And he said, "Well, if I can help you, I'd be happy to help you get some interviews in Los Angeles. If you want to draft the letters for me and give them to Marsha, we'll fix them and put

them together and sign them.” So he did, he wrote me a lot of good letters that got me in the door for some fabulous interviews in Los Angeles. With the Music Center—I can’t remember all the different places I was able to be seen. No jobs materialized from that, but at least I had an opportunity to be interviewed.

3-00:56:29

Meeker: Were they all arts organizations?

3-00:56:31

Felt: Yeah, they were, because that’s what I wanted to pursue.

3-00:56:34

Meeker: Had you become familiar with the Washington Performing Arts Society when you were—?

3-00:56:39

Felt: Not really. I’m trying to think when Patrick founded that, if that was—it must have been relatively new then if it was even—

3-00:56:58

Meeker: Actually, hold on one second.

[Interview interruption]

3-00:57:00

Felt: My memory in Washington was the National Symphony in Constitution Hall, going to see the Bolshoi Ballet on one of its first tours in the nation’s capital in the wrestling arena in Washington because there was no place for this legendary ballet company to perform, in our nation’s capital. The National Endowment for the Arts [NEA] had just been approved. And of course, Humphrey was very instrumental in that. When I was at the Executive Office Building, Roger Stevens and that first National Endowment office was right across the hall. So I have very, very strong memories of that. And also the debate about whether or not money should be spent on building the Kennedy Center. There were lots of people who felt, you know, “Why do we need a Kennedy Center? Why do we

need a center for the arts?" And I remember being quite outspoken about why I believed that they did.

3-00:58:03

Meeker: Maybe you could enlighten the debate that was going on a little bit, if you could just talk about that.

3-00:58:10

Felt: From my own experience of the limited facility that Constitution Hall provided for the orchestra, and also just that experience of going to a major ballet company from Russia, or Soviet Union in a wrestling arena in America's national capital? I mean, it was just an embarrassment that the culture and the performing arts in America, in its own capital didn't have facilities where the arts could be seen. There was this argument then that, "There isn't an audience for it. How can you have three theaters all of a sudden just available, and what's going to go in there and who's going to come?" I just believed strongly that there was plenty to go in there and it maybe wouldn't happen instantaneously but there would be audiences. Hubert Humphrey believed that, too; he was a very big advocate of the arts. That's what my memory is of that year-plus that I was there of that. The NEA and the Kennedy Center issue.

3-00:59:34

Meeker: Did you have interactions with the people on the NEA staff?

3-00:59:38

Felt: Yeah, Charlotte [Woolard?], who worked for Roger Stevens, became a friend. She was right across the hall and I remember going to things with her. And then, as it turned out later on, she was a close friend or colleague or knew Kurt Adler in the opera. I've lost touch with her now.

3-01:00:03

Meeker: Did you have conversations with her about the vision of NEA and what kinds of arts they were interested in supporting?

3-01:00:11

Felt: I don't recall specifically, but I think in those years there was this debate about whether or not there should be a NEA at all, in terms of supporting artists or arts in America. Some of the more fine-tuning in what they focused on has evolved and changed over time. Whether it's the Mapplethorpe issue and supporting individual artists that came much later. I think initially, in those early years, it was just the whole general idea in itself, whether our government should in fact have a National Endowment for the Arts at all. That still raises its head from time to time. [chuckles] But at that point, certainly with the presidency of Kennedy, then later being sustained—and actually, it was Nancy Hanks under the Nixon administration that really took the National Endowment for the Arts to another level. She was one of the major leaders. And Nixon, and his presidency, hey, I'm not a fan, but he was not so bad for the arts. [laughs]

3-01:01:37

Meeker: Or the environment or a couple of other issues, yes. Long for Republicans like that, right? [laughs] So what was the impetus to leave the position at the White House or the Executive Office Building?

3-01:01:57

Felt: Well, mainly just my own personal interests and belief that I really ultimately wouldn't see myself working in politics. I thought about it and said if I really can choose what I love in life, it's the arts. And if I could find a way to work behind the scenes for an arts organization, in the office, then that's what I would choose, if I can do it. And so when I got back to Los Angeles, I had those letters of intro from Hubert Humphrey, which got me in the door in certain places. No jobs resulted, and so then I decided a few months later that I would apply and go back to graduate school and get a master's degree. And then maybe teach or find a way in which I could use a higher degree to get a better job. And I was actually at UCLA doing all the paperwork for the graduate school application—and then I also wanted to go to the personnel office because I had always worked on campus when I was an undergraduate there—and decided I needed to work. "I need to go to school and I need to work on campus." So I went to the personnel

office and was filling out the job forms, and I had an interview there with a personnel person and she was asking me what I was interested in. So I sort of told my story about now coming back to grad school but that I had hoped to get a jobs in the arts. And then she said, “Well, we have a position that’s open at the Fine Arts Productions office here, and that is the department that presents all the touring artists here on campus. Would you like to go and apply for it?” And I said I certainly would. So I did and I got it. So I never went to grad school.

3-01:04:02

Meeker: What were you going to apply for?

3-01:04:07

Felt: Well, at that point the job that was open was the administrator for the Student Cultural Commission, which was a student group that worked with this department to bring the students into an interaction or a communication with their programs—this series was like Cal Performances—a big series that brought the major pianists, whether it was Arthur Rubenstein or [Arturo Benedetti] Michelangeli or the orchestras of the world or the major dance companies, jazz artists to the campus, to Royce Hall. This, my first job, the position I was hired for was working with the Student Cultural Commission [SCC].

3-01:04:50

Meeker: Was that a new job? Because I remember reading in the Betty Connors interview about Cal Performances or what became Cal Performances that there was—  
  
[phone rings, interview interruption]

3-01:05:02

Felt: You were saying about Betty Connors?

3-01:05:06

Meeker: Yeah, that the idea of having student input into their programming, I think if I remember correctly, was something that came out of student movements in the

1960s, and I'm wondering if this was a new position or if the position was already extant when you arrived.

3-01:05:26

Felt: The Student Cultural Commission was relatively new, I don't think it was brand new. We had a nice program—the students that were on it, I think there were just a group of a dozen or something. They were appointed by the student body president or something. They met with me and they selected certain concerts or performances that we were presenting and designating a certain number of those tickets, our tickets, would be bought at full price from the fund they had control over and sold back to students the week of each performance at fifty cents, I think. Fifty cents was a lot more then than it is now but still—

3-01:06:14

Meeker: Do you remember what the ticket prices were full price, roughly?

3-01:06:17

Felt: I suppose—when I think of what they were at the opera when I started, they probably were like ten dollars. Because, as an aside, when I started at the San Francisco Opera, 1971, a box seat was sixteen dollars. So that gives you—when I saw that on an old brochure, I thought, “Oh my God.” [laughs]

3-01:06:44

Meeker: The increase that's happened is something that's much more than inflation. And that's something that we're going to talk about later on.

So, if I'm hearing you correctly, the students were not actually engaged in the programming?

3-01:07:00

Felt: Well, not in the main, the big programming. But they made their opinions known about it. And some of these students that I worked with were very knowledgeable and music lovers and they certainly were telling me and also occasionally my boss the favorites that they wanted to see and their opinions. But we also, which I then organized with them, put together a series of concerts

on campus, just for students with local people in Los Angeles, professionals, performers. It was during the day at school. We did our own little series that was presented by the SCC. My job was to work with them to design the promotional package and engage the artists. So it was just a little mini-series within the big one.

And at the same time, I was then also asked to help with the big concerts and be the backstage person whenever artists came. Not everything, but I certainly have very, very vivid memories of one of the first ones that I had to be representative for. It was Isaac Stern and Eugene Istomin and Leonard Rose, they played as a trio, the Istomin-Stern-Rose Trio. I remember going over to Royce Hall to meet them, or picking them up and bringing them to the theater and having a most troubling exchange and delicate negotiation with Eugene Istomin, the pianist, because he was extremely nervous and we had a page-turner for him, which we had to arrange. But he was just so nervous—and I guess this was just a personality trait of his—that he was really hard on the page-turner. I mean, he was taking out his nerves on her.

3-01:09:15

Meeker: During the performance?

3-01:09:16

Felt: No, during the rehearsal. It just was very tense. And I remember how—because I didn't have any experience, I mean I was just learning my way around and having to juggle that. And then, he couldn't seem to get the right height on the piano bench, so I remember he asked me if I could bring some pillows to the performance so he could sit on one, and did I have a variety of heights. I remember going, "Oh my God! What?!" So I remember bringing pillows from my apartment! I had sort of a selection of couch pillows and things like that. Then I remember Isaac Stern seeing my serious uncertainties about this, and he just finally took me aside and he said, "Just relax. He does this all the time." [laughter] You know it was like, "Okay."

There were several opportunities like that, that I found actually scary, but I really liked it. I really did enjoy that challenge and being with the artists.

3-01:10:44

Meeker: Are those issues of the personalities of the artists something that set this work apart from the work that you were doing, for instance, in Washington or in Beverly Hills?

3-01:10:57

Felt: Oh, there is no question. First of all, if you love the piano trio literature, for instance, [laughs] and I think they played the three major ones that night in that concert, I mean just sitting there, listening to them rehearse is a pleasure.

3-01:11:14

Meeker: But that's part of work as well.

3-01:11:15

Felt: Yeah. Oh, sure. And just being at the performance, that, to me is one of the greatest rewards of what I do now and what I did then. You put all your efforts into producing this or presenting this and then you actually get to experience it. And you don't have to wait too long. You feel that performance and how great it is or not so great. You feel the response from the audience. You don't have to wait for the product to be produced three or four years down the line, you get this immediate gratification. It's pretty immediate anyway. If you love music, or dance, or other, you do get to experience it.

3-01:12:02

Meeker: Do you feel like from that perspective of working to present it and then being able to sit back and enjoy the presentation, did this influence or change what you thought was a good or a great performance or a bad performance? And also, did it influence the way that you felt the audience response to a performance?

3-01:12:33

Felt: Well, I certainly have found from 1966 when I started in this field, and even to today, I'm still learning so many things. There's no end to what you gain, even sometimes hearing the same piece of music again interpreted by someone else.

And also just experiencing new repertoire, there's just so much, such an incredibly rich area. And also the arts and the way people experience it is very subjective and you find yourself not liking something very much yourself, for instance, and then encountering someone who loves it. That's just part of it.

I found myself forming my own standards in what I thought was better than other stuff. And what I would choose to go to more than something else. And also in terms of what I do now in making artistic decisions about what San Francisco Performances presents. I don't present only what I prefer because I don't think that's right. But it certainly veers in that direction. I don't really go to things very much that I don't like, that I really don't like. I certainly present things that are not my favorite things. But I feel like they have to be at a real high level.

I don't know if I'm answering that.

3-01:14:27

Meeker: I think what I was asking, you certainly have answered, but more directly, you had a history of going to a lot of live performances of chamber music and orchestras and so forth. Doing that as an individual, the only person you have to answer to is yourself, did you like it or not like it or think that there were things were good or failed about it. And perhaps the person that you go with, right? But when you—

[Minidisc 4]

4-00:00:04

Meeker: I believe we're on again. So we were talking about fine arts performances at UCLA. From a layperson point of view when it comes to fine arts, somebody who wasn't really educated in it—and I'll want to come to this again when we talk about SF Performances—but I've always been curious, particularly in the 1960s and seventies and eighties when you have what seems to me like a real expansion in the number of kinds of arts out there, particularly when things like world music and performance come along and electronics and all those sorts of

things, how did people at UCLA determine what fit within the purview of fine arts performances?

4-00:00:56

Felt: Well, I think the woman I worked for at UCLA, Frances Inglis, was kind of one of the leaders in the state of California, with Betty Connors. The two of them at the biggest universities at UC, they led the way in putting California on the map in terms of a place where touring artists could find a stage. And they, because of the university environment—and also I know in the case of UCLA, with Franklin Murphy and Chuck Young and the leadership from the chancellor's office on down, there was a real commitment to have that arts experience and the performing arts at the highest level be on the campus. It was a real diversity then. In terms of certainly classical music, jazz, very definitely contemporary dance, in terms of bringing Martha Graham and Paul Taylor, all those American companies that were just in the beginnings of their legendary, historic rise. And certainly at UCLA, we also presented rock 'n' roll when it started taking off, whether it was—I remember Elton John when he was just starting. I remember meeting him. I remember Simon and Garfunkel, too, and how shy they were.

4-00:02:25

Meeker: Were there any debates or conversations about whether rock 'n' roll or at least quality performers like Elton John and Simon and Garfunkel, fit within the category of fine arts that traditionally had been more like classical music and dance?

4-00:02:43

Felt: I suppose, yes, but I think the philosophy and perspective of Frances Inglis—her position was much more all-inclusive. And also she was a very astute businesswoman. And there were big audiences there, potentially, and student audiences. And I remember in those years that I was there, just at the end of the sixties, Pauley Pavilion, the big basketball pavilion had opened and we had concerts there. Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young—Crosby, Stills, and Nash in those days, I don't think Young had joined them yet—and I remember one

memorable one, what an impressive thing that was, Joan Baez as a folk singer. She, just by herself with a guitar, stood in the middle of that basketball pavilion, no backup, nothing! One standing mike! The place was packed! I don't know how many people we fit in there, 14,000 people? And she held that audience the entire evening. I mean it was really, really incredible.

4-00:03:54

Meeker: Did that influence at all your understanding of what quality performing and artistry was?

4-00:04:03

Felt: Oh, certainly, certainly.

4-00:04:07

Meeker: How so?

4-00:04:08

Felt: Well, I think if you have the advantage of being part of a program that presented and chose the best—I mean, I wasn't making the decision, I was just supporting those decisions—and Frances was great at it; she was really making great decisions. She had some advice around her, in terms of some of the academic departments to a degree, but we also—she was on the ground floor with Franklin Murphy in those days in creating Center Theater Group that then went down to the Music Center. And I worked with her on trying to bring another professional theater company to the campus. And I learned a lot from that in terms of the academic small-mindedness, I suppose, one would have to say in certain degrees. [chuckles]

4-00:05:01

Meeker: What is it that you learned?

4-00:05:04

Felt: Well, I'll never forget that Frances and the chancellor were very keen on having a professional theater company on campus that would be a rich resource for students, not whether it was in dramatic arts themselves, if they were focusing on that, but also the general student body. But also the community, Westwood

and the greater community in which UCLA sat. And after Theater Group made the decision to go down to the Music Center, Frances wanted very much to have another professional theater company have a home on campus. She knew that to do it effectively, she had to have the buy-in of the academic department in theater arts. So they were brought in from the beginning. But I could sense, just in working with her, that the chairman, for instance, of the department—theater arts I think it was called there—he was really not very enthusiastic about this idea. He wanted to run his department and he wanted to teach the way he wanted to teach. He was kind of being drawn into this kicking and screaming without making too much of a big deal about it. But he wasn't very supportive.

I'll never forget a meeting. We had selected a couple of the smaller theater companies in Los Angeles that were very interested in being our resident theater company. We had been to their productions and we brought them in to have a meeting with the chair of the theater arts department and a couple of key professors in that department with the head of Central Stage, which was the people that did all the technical work. And I'll never forget sitting in this meeting going over the final discussions about how it would evolve, if it happened, and the chairman of the theater arts department had the audacity to say—he was completely sober and serious—he said, “Well, you know, I have to admit that I think about going out to the theater like I do going to the dentist's: I avoid it at all costs.” [laughter] We just couldn't believe it. Here's the head of the theater arts department at UCLA admitting or having no problem telling everybody that he hates the theater; he hates going to it.

4-00:07:38

Meeker: Do you remember if it was that he hated the theater or he hated what the theater had become? Was there an elitism involved in it or—?

4-00:07:45

Felt: Well, I think you see that—and I saw it—in the university sometimes in the sort of “ivory tower” mentality. They get very locked into their own sort of academic environ of teaching the art form, but not relating it very realistically at all to the

real world of that live performance or that professional experience. So that they just want to exist in their little bubble but not relate it to the professional theater out in the world. He didn't want to be bothered. He didn't want to be bothered with the profession.

4-00:08:29

Meeker: So it was more of a rarefied art form that he was interested in as opposed to something—?

4-00:08:35

Felt: And he didn't want to—and you often found sometimes even in the music department, some of the music professors or composers were very, very adversarial when it came to relating to some of the touring artists that we were bringing. They were very jealous, or they didn't—and of course, music is again such a subjective art form, in terms of what people like or not like, or think is good or not good, and if anybody was opinionated, it was the professors at the university. They were certainly—as they would be and should be—they were just very opinionated about what they felt was good or not good.

4-00:09:14

Meeker: Was it entirely on artistic grounds? Or were there other elements involved in that kind of relationship?

4-00:09:22

Felt: I suppose they would say, for sure, yeah, artistic tastes and evaluations. But some of it I think is competition. The world is full of competition and egos and jealousies and whatever.

4-00:09:38

Meeker: Were any of the faculty members touring artists as well?

4-00:09:41

Felt: A little bit maybe, not so much. They certainly performed locally. But our mission more than anything else was to really bring the best from all over the world. And we did support certain pianists on campus, and composers, for sure. But it was that –you know.

4-00:10:10

Meeker: To what extent do you suppose that was the root of some of this conflict, that you have this whole stable already of artists, and yet the university is focusing on people who are not there?

4-00:10:24

Felt: Well, I think—I know, for example, that my colleagues today who are the heads of presenting programs on university campuses are constantly dealing with that dynamic, of how they relate to the academic departments. And the ones that are the more successful are the ones that really do create a positive dialogue, still fulfilling their role of bringing to the campus major artists from everywhere, but at the same time, acknowledging the partnership that they should have with the academic departments. And sometimes that can be an extremely successful and positive partnership, and other times it just completely breaks down. And I've heard of stories from colleagues that have brought—I'm trying to think—maybe a contemporary composer and the major person in the music department, professor, has just ridiculed this composer that's coming and not encouraged students to go and experience it. And then you get the other side of it where faculty can be extremely welcoming, whether they agree or not, feeling your students should have that experience. Even if they don't like Philip Glass, "Hey, he's a major voice in our time, and here he's on campus and you shouldn't overlook the opportunity to go to a session with him." There's always all those personalities involved.

4-00:12:12

Meeker: So that played out within the UCLA context.

4-00:12:19

Felt: Yeah. At the same time, Frances, I think, had the endorsement of the chancellor and the chancellor's office, and with that kind of authority from on high, then she could act fairly independently. But keeping in mind, she wants good relationships with the music department, with the dance department, with the theater arts department.

4-00:12:53

Meeker: What years was she there? Or rather, you were there?

4-00:12:55

Felt: I was there from '66 to '71. She was there for a long time. I don't remember when she—late fifties? She would have been a contemporary of Betty Connors.

4-00:13:10

Meeker: Yeah. We have an interview with both of them.

4-00:13:11

Felt: Oh, you do. Yeah. Well, Betty, of course, had a faculty committee that she worked more closely with than I think Frances did down at UCLA. Because, again, every university setting has its own peculiar set of arrangements. They're similar and yet they are different.

4-00:13:31

Meeker: I'm wondering if you could talk at all about the question of gender and the fact that both of these large, West Coast presenting organizations were run by women and it seemed like one of the reasons you decided to leave Washington was that success meant masculinity.

4-00:13:52

Felt: Well, it's interesting in California—and I think just in terms of the facts about the West being about breaking all the traditional patterns—I mean the UC system, then, in terms of the presenting role that I actually went into and worked with, was dominated by women. There was a woman in Santa Barbara; a woman in Davis; a woman in Riverside. So the main university presenters, in terms of those programs, were all run by women. Another major woman was Fan Taylor in Wisconsin. But in terms of just the field itself, once you moved Midwest to East, the presenting world was dominated by men. But, in California, it was, you know, very, very definitely a woman's business in terms of leadership.

4-00:14:53

Meeker: Do you recall any conversations, either between yourself and Frances, or between yourself and your colleagues about that situation?

4-00:15:03

Felt: I do. Later I do. And even when I founded San Francisco Performances, because the organization that Patrick Hayes created is ISPA, International Society for the Performing Arts, which was the servicing organization for presenters, that was the first organization that I aligned myself with, and it was a male bastion. And it took a while for it to shift and now it's pretty evenly divided. That was in the seventies. No, in the eighties, '79. That world that ISPA served was very, very definitely dominated by men. And I still think that there are more men in the field than women. But women certainly have come up in terms of roles, numbers. There's no question. When you think of Debra Borda in the Los Angeles Philharmonic, before that the New York Philharmonic. Jane Moss at Lincoln Center, and now Marty Jones at the Boston Celebrity Center Series, and of course Judith Aron for many years the head of Carnegie Hall.

4-00:16:17

Meeker: Well, I mean in the sixties when you were at UCLA, do you remember there being any comment on the fact that most of the UC arts presenting organizations were run by women? I mean, it's not like it was an even distribution; it's not like they were fifty-fifty, just a sampling of the population. I mean there was a large over-representation of women in this line of work. They weren't just in the offices; it was also in the leadership positions.

4-00:16:53

Felt: Yeah, myself, I certainly was aware of this. I can't remember what Betty or Frances said, if they addressed this in their histories, because they were right there on the cutting edge, I mean, they got these jobs. I remember the whole issue of jobs in the arts which are always a lot lower paid than jobs in the public sector. I sort of equated some of that maybe for women choosing and being able to get jobs in the arts because they were maybe more willing to take pay that wasn't as high. It's interesting, I don't know. When I think of some of Frances Inglis' and Betty Connors' colleagues presenting programs throughout the country and the people they were working with then as their peers, they were men. California was kind of an anomaly. Gail Rector at Michigan, and—I'm

trying to think of different men that I knew that they worked for, their world in terms of other—with the exception of Fan Taylor in Wisconsin. She was a major leader. But the world outside California was pretty much very, very dominated by men in the field.

4-00:18:31

Meeker: Was the question of salary something that was talked about or acknowledged, that it was not particularly equal to their lines of work in arts?

4-00:18:43

Felt: You know, I don't remember. It's always—it's still with us today in terms of the differences between female pay and male pay.

4-00:18:54

Meeker: And profit and nonprofit.

4-00:18:58

Felt: And profit, yeah, it's still an issue. Things have gotten better, but it's still out there and you still read about it. And in a for-profit world, you still see the cases being brought up against major companies for this kind of discrimination. I'm just trying to see now, in terms of the UC system today. UC Berkeley's presenter is Robert Cole; UCLA's presenter is David Sefton following Michael Blachly. But before Michael was Pebbles Wadsworth, a woman. Lois Wagner at Stanford. Pebbles in Texas, in Austin. Celesta Bileci is in Santa Barbara, so that's a woman. And then Lynn Peterson in San Diego. And Brian McCurdy's in Davis. So now it's kind of more even, I think. It's gone back and forth. So maybe those years in the sixties and seventies, the fact that so many of the campuses had women—and you know, Dotty Kimball in Santa Cruz. There was one man in San Diego, Ben Patterson.

4-00:20:25

Meeker: The interviews with Betty Connors and Frances Inglis address the question only obliquely, simply because the interviewers didn't think to think to really ask those questions directly. It seemed to me that—I was trying to come up with ideas about why there would have been such a preponderance of female

leadership in these organizations, and it seemed to me that—and as somebody who was college educated, you might have something to say to this—but it seemed to me that the 1950s and sixties were this kind of peculiar place and time in which there were large numbers of female college graduates but the access to the professions, particularly before the addition of sex discrimination and the equal rights acts of the 1960s, there was much attention being paid to that lack of opportunity for these women who had achieved education and certainly were capable. And so that there were certain little slots where women could achieve leadership positions, and I wonder if there was something about nonprofit arts that allowed this. But I also want to know how it felt for women to work in these institutions understanding the limitations, if in fact there was that conscious understanding.

4-00:22:19

Felt: I guess if I sort of think about it now, and again every university setting and environment is a little different, but—and I don't know what Betty said about it—if I think about the Committee on Arts and Lectures, which is what it was called, it was a committee of the faculty, Travis Bogart was frequently the chair of it, and he was very instrumental in the artistic vision of Betty's program and Betty was very close to him. In a sense, he, as a man, was very instrumental in being a leader in that program. That's my sense. I don't know how she talked about it. She certainly was the face of Arts and Lectures out in the presenting world, and yet Travis, in his role, was very much—I don't know if I could say that she reported to him, because I don't know that. But you could still feel for sure his leadership in their working together. I think that all the UC systems had that similar kind of committee-faculty sort of role.

[phone rings, interview interruption]

4-00:23:49

Meeker: Okay, we're back on again. So do you have any additional thought about this?

4-00:23:58

Felt: Well, you know, there's always—you can go in the direction saying arts being more of the feminine side of human endeavor, I suppose. Maybe that would be an area that would be more generally acceptable to the notion of women's leadership. And yet, at the same time, you see the strongest men, whether it's Sol Hurok or some of those great legends of—the great impresario that brought Jenny Lind to this country [P. T. Barnum], all these sort of bigger-than-life men. [chuckles]

4-00:24:32

Meeker: But in relation to the leadership at the university, it sounds to me like, yes, women were in leadership roles, but their leadership was not absolute, and perhaps in matters of programming which had to do with evaluation of artistry and intellect and those kinds of issues or qualities of the university that were still dominated by men, that there was still a need to appeal to masculine power, in that context?

4-00:25:31

Felt: Well, I would say that Frances was certainly a very strong woman in many, many ways. Her power and her position was very definitely supported and shored up and endorsed by Franklin Murphy, the chancellor, and Chuck Young, the vice chancellor then and then later the chancellor. There was no question. But that's true no matter who is in that role. If you are a presenter on campus right now, like my colleague Ken Fischer in Ann Arbor, Michigan, his effectiveness and his abilities to work there is so definitely tied to the philosophy and support he can get from the head of the university. There's no question. In times when there's a head of the university that's really pro-arts, then life is great. But when you get a president whose feelings are that the arts are important but doesn't really feel that personally strongly about them, and doesn't come or doesn't endorse very much, just kind of over there, that makes a big difference in terms of the way in which the presenting programs on the campus can function.

4-00:27:00

Meeker: We have the interview you've done for the Adler series, that spends a great deal of time about your tenure at SF Opera. I'm wondering if we'd like to maybe hit some the highlights, for the sake of including it within this interview, to talk about the process by which you were hired there. Then after that, I'd like to maybe focus on—because Kurt Adler, I learned from this interview, was quite a personality and not the easiest personality, and I understand that Frances Inglis also was a big personality and not the easiest one as well. In reflecting upon what I've read about your management style, it differs quite markedly from their management style. So perhaps after talking a little bit about your move to SF Opera, maybe you could talk a little bit about his management style and how you learned to deal with people, vis-à-vis Kurt Adler.

4-00:28:16

Felt: [laughs] Okay, yes. Well, first of all, I'd like to tell one little story. It's kind of nice because it's so historic. We have a couple of things that need to be—still at UCLA?

4-00:28:40

Meeker: By all means.

4-00:28:41

Felt: One is just fun. One of the things that I experienced at UCLA which I loved was the jazz part of it. I remember Cannonball Adderley and Nat Adderley were in residence with us. That was an idea that Frances had. That was lovely and they were there for a week or something. Just to have an opportunity work with them and to see them and to enjoy their music, and get to know more about it, it was great.

Then, one year when I was there, towards the end, we finally had an engagement with Miles Davis. Everyone was very nervous because Miles was very unpredictable. He was brilliant but you never knew quite what you were going to get, whether he was going to be in a good mood or a bad mood. I learned all this from people who knew him, that he was very unpredictable, and sometimes he

would play a lot and sometimes he would hardly play at all, and he'd come out and turn his back to the audience, blow a few notes and walk off. So, guess what? I'm in charge of that concert. [laughs]

4-00:29:46

Meeker: What did being in charge mean at this point?

4-00:29:48

Felt: It meant that I was the staff person responsible for it. I was the one that went and met them and was the catalyst between the stage needs, which we had arranged for. So I was backstage making sure that the artists were okay; I had to pay Miles Davis in cash during an intermission, and just be—if there was a problem in terms of the presentation, then I was the person.

Okay, so, I was nervous. I didn't know what to expect and I had never met him. Well, as it turned out, everything went very well. He was in a good mood, he played a lot in the first half. The contract says you pay the fee at intermission, and so I told him that I had the cash for his fee and that I would pay him at intermission. He said fine. So, intermission came and I came backstage, and he said, "Let's go to the other side of the stage where it's more private so you can give me the money." So I did, and we went over there, and we were in the corner. I had a big wad of money, and I said, "Do you want to count it?" he looked at it and he said, "No, it looks about right." I said, "I need you to sign this receipt that you received it." He said fine. So he signed it. And then he looked at me and he said, "Now, I want to ask you a favor. I want to kiss you." And he just took me in his arms and he kissed me right on the mouth! And I was just stunned! I wasn't offended, but it was just like, "Whoa!" [laughter]

4-00:31:47

Meeker: What kind of kiss was it? Was it a romantic kiss?

4-00:31:52

Felt: It wasn't real, real sensual. But it was really a kiss, too. Then, that was it. He did not touch my body in any other way. He just put his arms around me. And he

just said, “Thank you.” [laughter] And that was that. So, just because it’s Miles Davis and he’s got famous lips, it’s kind of a great memory to have. [laughs].

4-00:32:18

Meeker: Sure.

4-00:32:21

Felt: Then in 1970, the very week that Kent State erupted. André Watts was playing his first concerts for us at UCLA. He was doing a concert from the main stage, the Great Artists Series, and we had engaged him to do an all student concert that was going to happen the day before, during the day, I think? I can’t remember.

4-00:32:48

Meeker: How well was he known at this point?

4-00:32:51

Felt: He was quite well known. His star arose immediately at sixteen when Leonard Bernstein tapped him to replace Glenn Gould with the New York Philharmonic, and that program was televised.

4-00:33:06

Meeker: What year was that, do you recall approximately?

4-00:33:09

Felt: Well, let’s see, I can go backwards and see. André must be fifty-eight? So, he was sixteen when this happened. So, 19—I don’t know, you can do the math.

4-00:33:29

Meeker: Early to mid-sixties. So he was still rather young.

4-00:33:34

Felt: Oh, yeah, he was! Because he’s like seven years younger than I am. And I was just thirty? So he was—

4-00:33:45

Meeker: His early twenties.

4-00:33:51

Felt: Yeah, twenty-three, twenty-four? Somewhere around there?

Anyway, Kent State had happened and lots of campuses were closed and students were protesting. That was the week that André was playing with us. So he arrived and I had a lot of interaction with him, much more than I would normally with an artist that we present for one performance. Too, and this was all around the emotional tragedy that had occurred. And whether we would go forward with the concerts or whether we would cancel them, particularly the student one. So anyway, we went forward with both of them, and the student one, André said, "I don't want to do this like business as usual, like, I just go out and play." So he came out and we talked about it. He talked on the stage. I think I introduced him.

4-00:34:35

Meeker: Was it at Royce?

4-00:34:39

Felt: Yes, it was, and he came and sat on the edge of the stage. And he said, "Before I play, let's have a conversation about what we're dealing with and what's happened this week." So that was the way he handled it. And it was very well done. And for someone his age, it was quite amazing. So, I got to know him through that circumstance, in terms of just getting to know him as a person, and he getting to know me as a person, more than I would normally. I only tell that story because he went on to be a major friend in my life, and a major person to enable me to start San Francisco Performances. And that's when I met him.

4-00:35:21

Meeker: So after this period, you stayed in touch with him on a regular basis?

4-00:35:25

Felt: Yeah, I don't have to be coy about that, what then led to a two-year romance actually, because he was coming back to play Hollywood Bowl in July. And he called me when he got to Los Angeles and he said, "Ruth, I'd like you to come to the performance at the Bowl, can you? I have tickets for you." And I said,

“Oh, I’d love to.” And so I went. I remember I went with a date, and he said, “Please come back stage after and say hello,” and I did. And so then, when we went back stage, he took me aside and he said, “Can you come with me to dinner tomorrow night? Meet me at the Ambassador Hotel and go to dinner with me and my friends.” And so I said yes, again, “I’d love to.” And so that was the beginning of a dating situation, that week when he was in Los Angeles. I think I had dinner with him that night and maybe Saturday night, and we started writing and calling each other. And that year of 1970. He would send me a ticket if I could come when he was on the road somewhere in the Midwest, I think I went to Illinois. Anyway, so, that began a romance that was obviously long distance in most of the time because he was rarely in California, and I would fly to meet him.

4-00:37:00

Meeker: Where was his home?

4-00:37:00

Felt: New York. I think so, New York. Philadelphia? New York, I think.

So we go into the San Francisco Opera story. In June of 1971, after thinking about where I was professionally, I decided that it would be very important for me to have an experience working for a producing company rather than just a presenting company and I would like to work for a theater company or symphony orchestra, something that produced the product. And I felt that would be my next step professionally. So rather than try to do this quietly without anybody knowing, I went to Frances Inglis and I talked to her about that. And she agreed that that would probably be a good thing. And I said, “Well, what I’d like to do is be able to spend the next year exploring opportunities, so I’m going to have a resume printed and send out some inquiries and talk to people about where I might get a job, but I’d like to do it openly. And I’d like you to know about it, of course.” And so that was the way we left it. And that June—

4-00:38:30

Meeker: And she responded well to that?

4-00:38:30

Felt: I think so. I don't recall her being angry particularly. You never like to lose good staff and I think she valued me, certainly, she promoted me all the way along. But I think she, as a woman, and a woman with ambition herself, had been through different job changes, she understood. So I think it was very supportive, really.

4-00:39:09

Meeker: What position did you end up?

4-00:39:10

Felt: I was like the assistant to the head of the department by the time I left. I was like her second-hand, second-in-command there.

4-00:39:19

Meeker: So you had taken on a management role by that point?

4-00:39:22

Felt: Yes, right, right. And of course, the thing about that department, it was small enough then too, where one of the advantages of working in a major operation but with a smaller staff, you get to see all aspects of it, which is very much a positive learning experience.

So then, in June, just a few weeks after I had talked to her, there was a woman, Blanche Witherspoon, who worked with us at UCLA. She was the widow of Herbert Witherspoon who had been for a short time the head of the Metropolitan Opera. And she was from California, so she had come back from New York to settle in southern California. She was working with us in the fundraising area. I'll never forget that morning in June, she was coming up to San Francisco for the opera auditions, which she came to all the time, and she said she was going to call a cab to take her to the airport. And I just said, "Well, Blanche, my car's right out here, let me just drive you. I'd be happy to." So, I did. And in driving her to the airport, I told her that I had told Frances that I was going to be looking for another job. Also because of Blanche having all these contacts in New York, I said, "If you have any advice for me or if you know of anyone that you think

would hire someone like me, I would really be appreciative of any help you could give me in the next year.” Okay, drive her to the airport, and next thing I know, two days later, Kurt Adler calls me.

4-00:41:11

Meeker: You knew him.

4-00:41:11

Felt: I knew who he was. I was in the office and the receptionist said, “There’s a call for you from Kurt Herbert Adler in San Francisco.” I thought, “My God, why is he calling me?” [chuckles] And he just, typical Kurt Adler, he said, “Well, I understand that you’re looking to change jobs. Also, I understand you’re good at what you do. I’d like you to fly up here and interview with me for my administrative assistant position.” And I was sort of stunned! [laughs] He said, “I don’t know if you know this, but Blanche Witherspoon was at this party last night after the auditions, and she came up to me after she heard me saying I was looking for someone and couldn’t find someone. She gave me your name and telephone number.” So I didn’t even know that had happened. So he says, “When can you come?” We scheduled it for July 7th I remember, and I flew up there thinking, “Oh, this is going to be such a great experience. He’ll never offer me a job; I don’t really know a lot about opera; I like it but I don’t know very much about it; I’ve been to a few in my life but that’s it. This will be great learning experience for me in terms of my pursuit of a job.”

4-00:42:34

Meeker: Why did you think that you wouldn’t be offered a job?

4-00:42:36

Felt: Well, I suppose I just didn’t—[laughs] first of all, I probably wasn’t primed for the fact that I would be interviewing so soon.

4-00:42:46

Meeker: Mmm hmm, didn’t have time to do research and—

4-00:42:49

Felt: So I didn't! I didn't even really want the job. I just thought, 'I can't turn this down as an opportunity to just sort of get into the interview process, to get experience in it. And to have an interview with him? Fantastic!'

4-00:43:05

Meeker: You didn't want it because it was an administrative position?

4-00:43:08

Felt: No, no, no. It's just that it seemed sort of out of my realm in a way. And I hadn't even adjusted yet to the fact that I was going to be leaving UCLA at some point. I just thought, 'I'm going to do this over the next year. I'm going to evaluate what's out there, what I can do, what I should do,' and I wasn't—I just thought, 'This will be a really interesting experience.' So I was very relaxed. And very curious.

I remember my appointment was at eleven. I just flew up for the day. Came from the airport and went to the opera and went into his office. He interviewed me for maybe forty-five minutes alone, and then he said, 'Well, do you have some time? Because I'd like you to just stay here if you don't mind. We'll have lunch brought in. I have lunch every day at my desk usually. And so I will have lunch for you. I'd like to conduct my business and you can see how I work.' I said fine. And I didn't have anything—he said, 'When is your flight back?' I think it was late in the afternoon. I didn't tell him that I was supposed to meet some people for coffee that I knew in San Francisco at around three, but—.

So I was in his office from eleven until three. And he conducted his business. He would then ask—because see, that's the way he worked. He would have staff come in and report to him on issues or problems. This was July, the season would be opening in September, so there was a lot of activity. And then he would ask my opinion, if I had one. Of course—[laughs]

4-00:45:05

Meeker: On what sort of issues?

4-00:45:07

Felt: Oh, I think maybe whether—because he was really a micro-manager, he knew everything. So there would be issues about the program and listing probably and issues around an interview or an artist issue or a stage direction issue. I mean, just lots of different details about opera. I remember being extremely relaxed, of course, and I didn't want to necessarily impress him because I didn't feel that I needed to. I didn't want to. I was very candid. Sometimes I had an opinion and other times I didn't have any idea. And I just said that.

So, then he got a phone call that he had to take privately. And he said, "Now this one I do have to take in private. Please excuse me." So I went out and I remember I talked to Ann Farris Darling, who had the job I would be applying for, actually being interviewed for. I said to her, "Ann, I've been in there so long, he's taking a call privately now, do you think the interview's over?" She said, "I don't know, Ruth. You better wait for a second until he finishes his call. I can't imagine that it isn't. He's certainly spent more time with you than with anybody else that he's had here." And so I said, "By the way, I need to make a phone call because I didn't expect to be here so long and I was supposed to meet someone over in North Beach for a coffee before I go back to Los Angeles." So I made the phone call to say that I would be coming but I wasn't sure exactly when. And then he was off the phone, and Ann said, "Yeah, he wants to see you again." So I went in. She said I had an appointment or I was meeting friends. He said, "I understand you have somewhere to go. Okay, well, let's just wind this up. All we need to know is when you're going to start."

4-00:47:10

Meeker: [laughter]

4-00:47:12

Felt: That's what he said! I said, "What do you mean, when am I going to start?" He said, "Well, I think we've had a good time today. I like you. Let's just make an arrangement for you to start." [laughs] Whoa! I said, "We haven't talked about money." He said, "Oh, that's not important." I said, "Well, it may not be to you,

but it is to me.” And then he came up with some numbers. He said, “Well, let’s talk about a three-year contract and let’s start with this.” I said, “Well, I think that’s fair, but I really didn’t expect this and I have to think about it.”

4-00:47:54

Meeker: Was the salary fair?

4-00:47:56

Felt: I don’t recall, I’d have to look and see what it was. It seems to me from what I was earning at UCLA, it was probably a little more and probably had some moving expenses involved in it, too. He said, “Yeah, we’ll pay for the moving of your furniture.” Anyway.

So I was sort of in a state of shock. And he said, “Well. I hope you accept. You think about it but not too long.” He was very charming. And so I left. And I walked into Ann’s office and I said, “Did you know this? He just offered me the job!” And she said, “He did?!” [laughter] “And?” And I said, “Well, I’m stunned. He offered it but I don’t know what my decision will be. I’m honored to be offered it but I don’t know what my decision will be. I have to think about it.” I didn’t expect this, certainly not so suddenly. So, I left and went and met—it actually turned out to be Sydney Goldstein, do you know Sydney? Who runs City Arts and Lectures?

4-00:49:12

Meeker: Mm-hmm.

4-00:49:14

Felt: I met her for coffee at Mama’s in Washington Square. I had just met her a month before when she had come down to UCLA, because she was representing some artists up in San Francisco. I just met her a month before and I called her when I had this interview with Kurt—Kurt Adler, Mr. Adler, I call him Kurt now, long story—but she said, “When you come, have coffee with me.” So I walked into Mama’s and saw her and she looked at me and she said, “What happened?” I said, “Well, he offered me the job!” And she said, “Oh my God! Well, you have

to take it, Ruth.” And I said, “I don’t know!” I was just so [laughs] overwhelmed. And then I went to the airport and I will never forget—

4-00:49:57

Meeker: What was her reason?

4-00:49:58

Felt: Oh, well, I mean, because she felt the opera was so important. She didn’t like opera herself but she said, “You know, it’s a major company. It’s a great job, I think. It’s gonna be tough, but you know, San Francisco. I think you should take it.” I said, “Oh, my goodness.”

I remember going to the airport and getting on—what were those flights, PSA’s?—and some of the seats you faced each other? You’re young, I don’t know if you—but in those days—

4-00:50:40

Meeker: I recall that, yeah.

4-00:50:42

Felt: —with the pink outfits with the miniskirts, the flight attendants. Yeah. Anyway, I was seated with a group, there were three seats, I was one seat with a group of five people, they were all traveling together. They were a film crew from Los Angeles, which had just been in San Francisco doing some sort of commercial, or something. They were talking and visiting and I was just in this trance. And finally, one of them said to me, “Are you okay?” because I was just in another world. “Did you just have a tragedy happen or something?” [laughs] She’s so serious! I said, “Well, I just had the most incredible day! I came up here and I interviewed with Kurt Adler at the opera for a job. I had an interview there for four hours and he offered me the job and I had no expectation I would ever be offered it and now what do I do?” [laughter] They said, “Oh my God! That’s great! Oh, the opera, Kurt Adler! Why, of course, you should take it! My goodness!” And of course, I was just getting all this pressure of that and Sydney, “God, what do I do now?” It was just so, so, so unexpected.

So I got back and I called my family, and my sister and my mom, and I called André Watts. And André said, “Ruth, well, hmm, I love San Francisco, but let me check out what it’s really like to work for Adler. I know a few people on the staff there. He’s legendary, but let’s—I’ll be happy to make some calls for you.” So in the meantime, Ann called me the next day, “This is embarrassing, Ruth, I know you’ve been offered the job, but we didn’t check any of your references. Can you give us some references?” I said, “Sure.” I remember giving them colleagues in Washington and other—I think I gave Betty Connors even because I knew her from of course working with UC Berkeley and UCLA. Anyway.

André then made some calls and talked to a couple of people he knew on the staff and he called me and said, “Look, Adler is difficult, there is no question, but from the sense that I get from the people who work there, it’s a love-hate kind of relationship, that he’s a visionary: people fear him but they also have great respect and admiration for him because the product is one of the best in the world. He’s a taskmaster. He works as hard as everybody else. So it won’t be easy.” So he said, “What would I say to you? I would say, from what I know, that it’s a great opportunity, a great company. These things don’t happen that often.”

So, I came. I moved on August 1st. Started August 15th.

4-00:54:15

Meeker: Quick turnaround.

4-00:54:18

Felt: And, it was a really heady experience. I started August 15th, the opera opened the first week of September.

4-00:54:31

Meeker: And the woman you were replacing, was she still there?

4-00:54:33

Felt: Yes, thank God, I had a month to work with her. And she was very organized. She was very good at her job. I worked side by side with her for that first month.

But I'll never forget when the first program came out, you know the opening program? I could show it to you because I have these bound copies. I hadn't seen that program before. The first opera production, I think it was Beverly Sills, was it *Thaïs* that year or was it *Manon*? I don't know, anyway. It was an incredible opening weekend. *Rosencavalier* Saturday night, and they only did this that night and they never did it again, third opera opens on Sunday. Three operas, three days. And the third opera was *Butterfly* and it was conducted by a young conductor named James Levine. He never came back again. He couldn't—not that he wasn't invited—but he just was too busy. It was just, ugh! My God, it was just such a heady time. And there was the masthead of the opera. It was “Kurt Herbert Adler, General Director” and right under him was “Ruth Allison Felt, Administrative Assistant.” I was first! I couldn't believe it! I thought, “This is crazy! I haven't even been here three weeks!” [laughs]

4-00:56:09

Meeker: Did that tell you something about the position that you didn't already know?

4-00:56:16

Felt: It just was in alphabetical order by position. Just it was a little stunning, I didn't realize that that's the way it would look. My job as administrative assistant and his artistic assistant, Richard Rodzinski, were like his two main children. We were with him all the time. And we didn't have to be announced, we were in and out of his office all the time regularly. We were part of the—and of course, that's why we did nothing but work. But in those early years for me, my God, it was fantastic! It was so exciting. I didn't know many people in San Francisco, I mean I knew Sydney. So it was my whole life. And it was more than enough. I learned so much.

4-00:57:17

Meeker: Well, I want to spend a little more time on that but I think that it's time—

**INTERVIEW 3: OCTOBER 6, 2004**

[Minidisc 5]

5-00:00:03

Meeker: So, we're on. What I wanted to start with today since you just did have your twenty-fifth anniversary last weekend, is maybe if you'd like give you an opportunity to reflect on some of the highlights of the evening and perhaps any of the memories that came up that stood out about the last twenty-five years that became part of the evening.

5-00:00:30

Felt: Okay, well, first of all, as these kinds of events go, they're such a huge effort and a lot of time goes into thinking about what you're going to have as content and how you're going to put it all together to reflect not only the organization, but make it entertaining for the audience. In terms of some of the things we put together, whether it was the program book itself which had a timeline along the bottom that highlighted various achievements from year '79 to the current year, to listing all the people who ever served on the board to the letters in there, you know, just the content about the artists that were part of the program. And then we also put together a little booklet that listed in alphabetical order every artist that we've ever presented. And we put together a gift CD for every guest that was a compilation of some of our recordings of some of our concerts over the years. That was the gift item for the evening. It was a lot of work, putting that—first of all, listening and selecting what we wanted to put on it, then getting the artist to approve the fact that we could use this small section of that performance. So that was part of the package.

Then, the actual artists that were part of the evening. We wanted to reflect the range of what we present. So recitals, chamber music, jazz, contemporary dance. The most fitting artist to be the recitalist was André Watts because he not only opened our first season but had been so instrumental in really supporting me in efforts to do this, and really generously donating his fee, making a contribution;

he's just a very generous and wonderful person. Plus, a great pianist. So he came, and that was just very moving. He's just such a close friend of mine. Just sharing the week with him and his wife, Joan. That was very touching.

5-00:03:04

Meeker: What pieces did he play?

5-00:03:06

Felt: He played a Chopin program. I can give you the—Nocturne Étude, I can't remember exactly all the numbers. They were short numbers. Each artist could have no more than fifteen minutes because we didn't want the program to go on forever.

Then, to represent our commitment to vocal recitals, it was just perfect too to have Frederica von Stade. Because not only is she a star—she lives here in Albany—but she did a recital on our second season and in our fourth season. And then in our twentieth anniversary, she came back with composer/pianist Jake Heggie who actually joined her at the gala and we did a concert around his music. That too was really special because he's an emerging composer, he lives in San Francisco, and we commissioned some music from him as part of our consortia of presenters, who commission every year, for that twentieth anniversary program.

Then, for chamber music, the Eroica Trio—I don't know if you know them at all?

5-00:04:25

Meeker: Oh yes.

5-00:04:25

Felt: They are fabulous musicians; we've presented them many times. The first time we presented them for our gift concert that year, introducing them to our audience that way, as a gift, free. Not only are they just fabulous players but they are so gorgeous [chuckles] and so much fun. They walked out on stage—I hadn't seen them before, I didn't go into their dressing room, I saw them when

they arrived at the theater to rehearse earlier in the day. They walked out on stage in these beautiful red dresses. And everybody just went “Oooh!” [Makes a collective gasp noise and chuckles.] It was fantastic! They played some music for piano trio by Astor Piazzolla, which was great—very energetic and tango-ish music.

But then, in between those, we had been able to get some greetings on film from some of the artists that we had presented over the years, major stars that couldn't be with us.

And then, just backing up a little bit, I wanted a master of ceremonies. I asked my good colleague Charles Hamlen who I've known since I started the organization in 1979 to be that master of ceremonies. I met him in '79 when he was just starting his own artist management business—he's from New York—and from that beginning, when he started his own small roster of artists, he then became the co-founder of what is now one of the biggest artist managements in the world, IMG Artists. Then, twelve or ten years ago, he decided that he had to do something about the AIDS epidemic, particularly how devastating it had been to the arts community and so many of his friends. So, I was the first person he actually talked to about doing this when he was still at IMG, because I had founded San Francisco Performances and he wanted to talk with me about beginnings and founding. So, I joined him as a founding board member. And Classical Action now is a very, very highly regarded, successful program, raising funds through the performing arts community to fight the AIDS epidemic. Now, Classical Action has been brought into Broadway Cares, Equity Fights AIDS. It's a division of that business so it makes it much more solid. And Charlie is just one of the greatest human beings also. And he is so highly regarded by artists, by the community, everywhere he goes.

On Monday night in New York, he was just honored by the French government. He was given a Chevalier. So, he was feted last—anyway so he came. And he was the Master of ceremonies and was also instrumental in getting the videos

that we were able to arrange for our gala. I talked with him about it in the summer. So in New York while they were there, he got a video greeting from the Russian pianist, Evgeny Kissin, who we presented in his San Francisco debut here.

5-00:07:59

Meeker: How old was he then?

5-00:08:01

Felt: It was ten years ago or so, he was like maybe just twenty or so, if he's now thirty? And of course, Kissin, he's a genius, but he's very stiff and he's very formal and so he wasn't sure what to do. He was having this done at a rehearsal studio and he was at the piano so the guy that was doing the video, the filming, said, "Well, why don't you play something?" And he said, "What should I play?" "Oh, just something, the end of something so that we have you playing—." So then, he said, "Oh! I have an idea." So he sat and he improvised "Happy Birthday." So that was the intro into that greeting section which was just perfect. Then after he made nice comments about how much he appreciates San Francisco Performances and all that, then we went to Helsinki where Dawn Upshaw was in an opera.

She had been wanting to do this in New York but could never find a time. So, Charlie arranged to get a film crew at the Opera House in Helsinki and they got her greeting. [chuckles] So here she was in costume on stage at the opera. And Dawn, I know so well. We presented her debut here too. She was just here, actually, this summer for the opera and participated in the fundraiser for John Kerry that I was part of with Michael Tilson Thomas. But anyway, she made the nicest remarks about me, about the organization, and then we went back to New York and here's Sophie Mutter, who was in New York at that point, and said a greeting. And then, we went to Salzburg, Austria, where Barbara Bonney and Thomas Hampson were on the golf course [laughs] because they are avid golfers. And so theirs was hilarious and very, very funny. And here they are out in the golf course and sending their greetings. So I guess what happened is

André played Frederica von Stade and Jake played the video greetings which Charlie introduced and then the Eroica Trio came out and performed the Piazzolla and then Charlie came out and introduced a video that highlighted some of our education programs. Because we wanted to show the audience that this is a major part of what we do. So it was some film clips from the school programs that Chris Nomura does, our baritone, as well as Stefan Harris, the jazz vibraphonist and then also the Alexander string quartet with Bob Greenberg with those Saturday morning programs. And then from that, Charlie—

Oh, then we had to have a little bit of a pause because we needed to set up the jazz and we couldn't do that with the screen down because there wasn't enough room. So then, while the ten minute pause was taking place so they could do all the set up for Stefan and the sound, then we played some cuts from the commemorative CD on the background. Some people obviously went to the bathroom and all that but we didn't want people to really exit like an intermission. So we played Richard Stoltzman's—one of his pieces that he played in his concert when he played for us in '83. It was, as he said in his intro, "I don't get a chance to play jazz very much. I really like it, but I'm not sure I'm very good at it. Tonight I have a chance to play for an audience." He did a Thelonious Monk clarinet. It was really, very, very beautiful. That went next to Marian McPartland who did a couple of selections from her 2000 concert. I had presented her back in '83, too, first time, with Teddy Wilson. It was one of our first jazz concerts. So, that was in the background.

Then Charlie said, "Okay, ladies and gentlemen, we just saw Stefan in the education film. Now, let welcome him and meet him in person." So he came out with his guys and they played one of his original pieces, which was very beautiful, kind of a subdued jazz piece, very, very beautiful. Then, after that—oh, I came out with Charlie, because we had to strike all of Stefan's stuff, all the instruments, the vibes and the drums and everything, to get ready for the dance portion. And Charlie and I talked about Classical Action and Charlie's

involvement with that and our involvement with it, because we have a challenge program that we participate in with our artists.

Every time I sign a contract with an artist, I write them a letter with a contract saying, “We’re very proud to be part of this challenge program with Classical Action to fight the AIDS epidemic,” and if they would like to designate a small percentage, 1 percent or 2 percent, then we will match it and send it to Classical Action, which then most of it comes back to the San Francisco AIDS Foundation. So, over the years, since we’ve been doing that, which is long, ten years, we’ve raised quite a bit of money, over a hundred thousand dollars I think. It’s just in small increments, but the nice way to have that be a continual sort of contribution base and also recognition base of the artists and their commitment and ours to this cause.

So then the dancers were ready—oh, I talked a little bit about Paul Taylor because they’re such an important company for us; this is their West Coast home. And then introduced the young dancers of Taylor Two, their second company. Because they are here; they do our education programs in dance. There are six dancers and so they did three movements of *Esplanade*, which is one of Paul Taylor’s signature works that he actually choreographed in 1975. It’s such a joyous work and these young dancers, they just knocked everybody out. I love that piece, I’ve seen it so many times but a lot of people in the audience—they were guests of corporations or whatever—had never seen that dance. It is really a joyous work, and to Bach, you know. So that was it. [claps hands] It all went like clockwork. It was a little longer than we wanted it to be but we didn’t have any glitches. And it just really was great. Everybody felt very, very good about it.

During the day, starting at nine-thirty in the morning, we had been setting up and getting everything ready for it with the stage and at the same time, KPIX, Channel Five was there to do some public service spots with André, so they were filming him before he rehearsed. Then KQED was beginning to do a

feature that they will eventually have on SPARK, their arts program, on San Francisco Performances and its twenty-fifth anniversary, that probably won't be until the spring. So they were there following me around. I mean I had a mike on so everything I was saying, they were getting. [laughs]

5-00:15:42

Meeker: They weren't interviewing you; they were just recording.

5-00:15:44

Felt: They were watching me deal with some of the issues that come up and right off the bat, we had one, which I had to deal with it. So it was interesting. I guess it showed me in the way I deal with problems.

5-00:15:59

Meeker: Now, are you more accustomed to having a microphone in front of your face?  
[laughter]

5-00:16:03

Felt: Yes! Yes! Yes. I just thought, okay, well, forget about it. But, anyway. So, it worked. And then the dinner was really nice. It was sold out and we exceeded our goal. This is our biggest fundraiser for our education programs. I think all in all it was really a proud evening and a very, very happy one.

5-00:16:28

Meeker: And a good way to kick off a season.

5-00:16:30

Felt: Right, right.

5-00:16:30

Meeker: Were there many of your members or long time attendees who came up to you and shared particular memories of their favorite programs or performers?

5-00:16:42

Felt: Not so much that night. It just didn't lend itself too much to that. I've certainly had some of that in the time since we've been focusing on the anniversary year. I don't know what the staff has done. There was some talk, and it's a good one,

of actually e-mailing or communication with some of our long-time subscribers—if they could share with us—and ask them to write some stuff down about some performances they particularly remember. I think that maybe that is going on right now. We talked about it.

5-00:17:27

Meeker: So it sounds like during the day of the event you were too busy being the impresario.

5-00:17:31

Felt: [laughs] Yeah. And the program itself was very different from what normally happens at our opening gala. Because say last year, our opening artist was Leif Ove Andsnes, the Norwegian pianist. He played a beautiful recital of Schumann and you know. But I just greeted him and I had nothing to do with—he walked out on stage, he played and we all applauded. But this evening, I walked out on stage with Charlie Hamlen at the outset, introduced him. Charlie was wonderful. I mean, I got feted so much. I mean, my fifteen minutes of fame, I've done it now. [laughter] And I have to say that obviously I've gotten, clearly I have an ego, but I'm kind of modest, to say the least, and some of the attention does make me feel uncomfortable so I was prepared that I got a lot of it. [chuckles] So it was fine.

5-00:18:40

Meeker: How did you deal with that?

5-00:18:42

Felt: Well, I guess, just—how should I say?—this has happened sort of along the way with San Francisco Performances particularly, in opening the season and you know, getting compliments, trying to' not be a deflator of people who want to compliment you. They're genuine and its nothing worse than to stamp on their enthusiasm or to try to squelch it because you've got this Midwestern sort of ethic that says you're not supposed to be in the spotlight or something, which very clearly is part of my heritage, which comes from a certain tradition of always being in the background. So, yeah. [laughs]

5-00:19:48

Meeker: So just kind of being a gracious recipient of—?

5-00:19:50

Felt: Yeah, and also to show your pleasure in being celebrated. I'm not sure I always pull that off. [laughter]

5-00:20:02

Meeker: Well, let's move on to a discussion really of—I don't want to spend a whole lot of time on SF Opera, unless you think that there is something that we should really focus on. But I know that you have that interview in the oral history collection already that talks about your time with Kurt Adler.

5-00:20:23

Felt: Yeah, right, and that's good. I think that, of course, I've mentioned that experience and that opportunity to work there with Adler at a time when—well, it's always been such an important institution here. But, that opportunity and to work so closely with him, to be sort of his administrative right hand, taught me so much in a broad range, because opera incorporates so many things, in terms of the performing arts.

5-00:20:13

Meeker: Well, I'm wondering maybe if you could touch on maybe the top two or three things that you learned, that you took away from the opera, that then you used to make San Francisco Performances a success.

5-00:21:08

Felt: First of all, and this was true at UCLA too, no matter what the management style was of Frances Inglis and the same with Kurt Adler, the standard, the highest quality, attention to detail, the unbelievable demand in terms of not compromising—I mean, yes, you have to compromise—but just sort of constant fighting to have it be the best. And throughout, just in all the supporting details, whether it's in communications, letters, just everything. Their styles were not always to my liking in terms of the way they treated people, but it was in the interest of really meeting the very highest standards. So that, I think for Adler,

there were things—well, I learned so many things—but one of the things that he was just very adamant about, and particularly in dealing with large groups of people whether it's the orchestra or the chorus, the stage hands, he was very tough. But he believed in not playing favorites in a sense, and he felt that we as an organization, and he as the general director, his demands would be significantly compromised if he gave one thing to one person and then refused to give it to another. For instance, with the orchestra players, he was very, very clear about establishing a solid precedent that was a policy, that wasn't compromised for some and held up for others. I remember there was a young woman that got married in the late summer. She was a favorite, she was a young violinist and very good, and her family knew Kurt Adler. She was going on her honeymoon and she asked to come back late for the rehearsal period in the fall. And we said no because there were so few orchestra rehearsals for the season and the demands on the orchestra were just extraordinary and everyone had to be there. And everybody was always asking for one reason or another to be excused from the first one or the second one, and there were no exceptions made except for death in the family or something that was just so tragic. But a honeymoon or a vacation? Sorry. No, you have to get back on time. Well, this young woman thought she could get away with it I think. She was in Europe for her honeymoon and she wired us—in those days it was telegrams—saying that she couldn't get back in time after all, that whatever happened, the flight or whatever that would get her there on time, she would miss it. So we wired back, this was Adler, he said, "Tell her, the answer is, you have to be back or you're fired."

5-00:24:59

Meeker: Whoa.

5-00:24:59

Felt: And, "What we suggest is we will buy the ticket for you and we will have that deducted from your pay along the way so that you can afford the ticket and you can be here on time." And she didn't do it. Guess what? She lost her job.

Everybody was just amazed that he would do that. Because everyone knew that she was a fabulous player and everyone knew that she was close to him and her family was, too. But he was just absolutely—he wouldn't bend. But I began to respect that and understand that because I could see. And he said to me, "You might think I'm really hard-hearted, but if I would let her get away with this, then there's going to be another one down the road where there's going to be a similar situation. And it just doesn't—." And what happened is that she and the union on her behalf, took it to arbitration. We won that arbitration. But also part of that whole process and working for him—and I was his administrator in all human relations—was keeping a file, keeping a record in terms of what had gone on. We had to warn her, we had to have that in writing, we had to have a record of her request for this leave before she left on her honeymoon and how we had told her in writing in a record that she had to be back. So we had the case all documented. There were a number of these arbitrations when I was there and I think we won them all. And they were all because he was such a stickler for not breaking precedence for certain people and setting a standard there and also keeping really good records.

5-00:27:09

Meeker: So I wonder how this particular example maybe influenced your management style that you came to develop? Is this a policy that you've come to adopt? Or—?

5-00:27:22

Felt: Well, it doesn't exactly apply exactly, but I think what it does do is, for instance, in my relationships with, for instance, artists and their management, the integrity that I maintain and honesty about the fees I pay. For instance, if I say to a name artist that this is the highest fee I pay in Herbst Theater because it's 900 seats and "If you want to perform for us, this is what you have to pay," then that is honored, and it's true. So, I'm not lying. We all negotiate fees, each circumstance is a little different, but sort of setting a measure that is legitimate and is consistent. I think I try also, in terms of my staff, the people who work for

us, to not play favorites and to be supportive but not chummy. It's a very small office, and certainly very informal. But I don't choose to go out to lunch with certain directors over others. I just don't. And sometimes, I think, well, maybe I might—not that that's a bad thing, I just feel like sometimes its really better to make everyone feel like they are equal to their peers with me. My door's open and I don't play favorites.

5-00:29:18

Meeker: So that sounds like that's very much within the tradition of what Kurt Adler was doing, particularly in relation to labor relations.

5-00:29:27

Felt: Right, right.

5-00:29:29

Meeker: How would you say that you differ from him?

5-00:29:31

Felt: Well, I'm not a—I don't shout. [laughs] And I'm much more patient with human frailty. I think the thing that I saw especially, because he had three secretaries and I had to hire and fire them, and it was like a revolving door, and I found this to be so inefficient and such a waste of everybody's time. Because, first of all, being a secretary to a man like that is probably one of the most exposed positions there can be, because everything that this person does, the boss sees, really. Whether it's a misspelled word on a letter or—it's just kind of a thankless, in the spotlight job. And he was so demanding, which I respected. But he was so unrelenting in just screaming at a mistake and really being very hard on young women who in many cases were not that experienced. So, I felt that in having to deal with this problem all the time, that you could get the results you wanted, or needed, and must have, by being much more patient and much more supportive, in terms of the work output.

5-00:31:12

Meeker: So to nurture, rather than to scream or fire?

5-00:31:17

Felt: Yeah, right, or to be more patient, or to help educate. The one thing about Adler—and I've said that in my oral history—is that he was uniform in his style. I mean, he didn't discriminate against a secretary versus a board person. He was very, very outspoken when he was not happy. And so people got screamed at all levels and he didn't stand in the back. He really just [makes explosion sound and claps hands]. So, I'm not a screamer, I'm very diplomatic, and I'm firm, I think.

Oh, the other thing that I learned from him, and I think it's really important in any endeavor: the boss needs to be aware and pay attention to the detail. I don't believe micro-management is effective really, but I think you need to make it known to people that are working for you that you are aware of what they are doing. And if you feel there is something that needs to be adjusted, by all means, of course, I talk about it. I just don't scream about it. I just, in a respectful way, talk about what I think should be done or should be changed. But I think it's so crucial, if you want quality, and the standards that you are aiming for actually implemented, you've got to pay attention and you've got to let your staff know that you're aware of what they're doing, you know, you're there. So, it's sort of that.

I think in terms of what he did at the opera, he was there all the time, he worked twenty-seven—so did we all—but everyone knew, from the super on the stage, that he was paying attention to them. Because they knew, if he didn't like something they did—they thought, “Well, he wouldn't notice me,” well, ha, ha! Don't be so sure! [laughs] So it was sort of that kind of awareness that I think really came down all the way in really putting on the stage a very, very, fine product.

5-00:33:35

Meeker: I imagine you must have had to weather a few of his outbursts. I wonder how you did that, what your strategies were.

5-00:33:47

Felt: Well, as my therapist used to say when I was going to her during that time, “He probably didn’t have to yell at you so much, Ruth, because you absolutely were a perfectionist as well.” And I worked really hard for him. I think, like any arrangement between people, there are certain styles or personalities that are more compatible. And my style, which was extremely more diplomatic—he didn’t scream at me very much, hardly at all, actually. There was one time—I think I may have related that in the oral history and there were others, too—where I disagreed with him. And then he would look at me, and he would say, “I’m the boss here. You do what I want.” [laughs] I remember in one case, it was so late, and I had been working all day on this issue, and I came in to tell him what was going to happen and he disagreed with it, and he was leaving, it was an opening night, and oh—I didn’t say anything back to him at that point. I just stood there. And he left and went home, because he had to change clothes. Then he called me half an hour later, and he said something like, “Well, I told you what I think. But do what you have to do.”

5-00:35:24

Meeker: Interesting. Oh yeah, I think this was about a bomb threat or something?

5-00:35:32

Felt: Yeah, and he was concerned about how he had re-routed the people to avoid any kind of infiltration, sort of like the terrorism today, how we were going to get the people back and forth between the stage and check and make sure we didn’t have anybody that we didn’t want. I had worked that all out with the security people and the police and came in to give him the report about how we were going to do it, and then he decided that he wanted it a different way. [laughs] After all that work, I just froze. I just said, “It’s—.” And that’s when he exploded. But then, a half-hour later, he did say, do what you have to do. So I did it the way I wanted to do it or the way we just had figured it out. None of this stuff is fail-safe. And of course, that whole night, everybody was just on pins and needles. But nothing happened.

5-00:36:28

Meeker: Probably no one more than you, because not only was the audience at stake but so was your decision.

5-00:36:35

Felt: Yes. [laughs] Right.

5-00:36:40

Meeker: Must have been difficult. You mentioned that you were going to therapy at this time. Was Adler what pushed you there?

5-00:36:47

Felt: No, I think more personal issues did. I suppose for me, I think everybody in life could benefit from a sympathetic therapist who can help you just sort out your feelings, and if you can afford it, to spend an hour every week talking to someone that listens and helps you thread through things. A lot of that therapy was around some of my personal issues, my love life and some of those kinds of things, coming to grips with—she was a psychologist of Freudian persuasion—but just going into dream analysis and trying to get a better sense of who you are based on how you were raised, and, you know. Anyway.

But, my work experience and what I was dealing with did come up. Interestingly though, at the time that I made the decision to found San Francisco Performances—oh, I made the decision to leave the opera before I made any decision about founding an organization. I was just trying to come to terms with my life and my time, which was completely monopolized by working for the opera. I remember—[Nina Lathrop] was her name—she was extremely supportive of me, as I think she was with most of her patients, trying to infuse in us an understanding of ourselves but also confidence in ourselves. Because she was extremely supportive of me and who I was. She kept saying, “You could do Adler’s job.” And I said, “No, I can’t.” And she said, “Why do say that?” Just trying to, as a woman, to a woman, give me confidence in my abilities.

5-00:38:59

Meeker: Was feminism ever explicit in this exchange, or was it something that was more implicit?

5-00:39:07

Felt: I think it was more—that was in the eighties, so probably to a degree, yeah.

5-00:39:14

Meeker: Well, you started SF Performances in '79.

5-00:39:16

Felt: Oh, sorry, this was in the seventies with the opera. I certainly had at the opera the most prominent position, with the artistic administrator. We were at the top, really. So as a woman I had a very, very good job. A very responsible one, a very powerful one. So in terms of that, and the role of a woman at the opera, that wasn't an issue. Because she was pretty clear, without even knowing specifically, just talked about me being the boss myself, running something rather than working for someone like an Adler and trying to make me feel more adventuresome or confident in my abilities there. So, I don't know if it was all talked about in terms of just the feminist, the women's movement; it was more about just women, or me, being able to have confidence to step up and consider being in a top position.

But, when I made the decision to leave the opera—and I made it very clearly one day—I hadn't really spoken in detail to my therapist about it. I just came and told her. [claps hands] I think her influence was there all along behind the scenes, sort of making me feel I could do this and leave, because that was thing with my mother, or my family, "Oh my God, how could you leave a job like this. It's such a great job. You're the second at the opera and it's a big company and you're making good money. Oh my goodness, this is crazy, Ruth. Where are you going to get another job like this? You love the arts, you know, blah." But I think, you know, Nina, my therapist was the one that was behind the scenes helping me realize that I was frustrated having to be just constantly checking in

with Kurt Herbert Adler. And not having more independence. So she was very instrumental in having me make that decision.

Then, when I did leave the opera and had all these other little forays, to decide what I wanted to do, and came up with the idea of trying San Francisco Performances, she was very, very key. I'll never forget, she said, "Ruth, I think what I'm hearing is this fear of failure. You have to get rid of that because the only failure is the failure to try. Okay, you failed, hey. And you may. Nobody's done this successfully, and you know that. You know the odds. But don't let the fear of failure stop you."

And then the other thing that was great—I was just remembering this—is that she came to one of my first concerts. I didn't know she was coming. I think it was the second one I had at Davies Hall that first season. When I went to my therapy the next week—I had seen her there, but I said, "Oh, I didn't know you were coming." And she said, "Well, I wasn't going to tell you necessarily." She was very interested in music, and her husband, [Welland Lathrop], was a choreographer and her son's a composer so she was very immersed in the music and the arts world. She said, "Now, Ruth, that was a great concert. Excuse me, but I have to tell you, I was watching you of course, in the lobby at intermission, and you have to be an actress. You can't look as scared as you did." [laughter] And I said, "Oh." And she said, "I know it's frightening. And yes, it's understandable! This was a huge concert. You're in the lobby at Davies Hall. It's your third performance that you've presented. But your audience needs to view you as part of the experience and part of the enjoyment of the fact that they're there. So no matter how scared you are or what you know that's going on backstage that may be not perfect in terms of arrangements or a problem that came up, you have to camouflage that." That was really good advice.

5-00:43:55

Meeker: So kind of create a persona of an impresario.

5-00:43:57

Felt: Yes. Mm-hmm. Sort of coaching me a little bit. I found that very interesting that I welcomed that from her. And I didn't take exception to it. I understood what she was saying because I knew what I felt like. And I didn't realize that I was displaying it in my body language or in my facial expressions, but another friend of mine—

5-00:44:24

Meeker: What were you feeling, was it fear?

5-00:44:28

Felt: Oh, just anxiety, yeah. And of course, over time, I've gotten rid of that because I do it all the time. But in the first years, this was new, not that I wasn't used to being at the opera or whatever, but just feeling so totally responsible. But I told one of my friends about it, I think. I don't know how this came up. But a friend who also was seeing Nina—because that's how I actually was referred to her—I told her about what Nina had said and she was outraged. She said, "How dare she say that to you! Weren't you really mad?" I said, "No I wasn't, I thought it was helpful." [laughter] Like, "Oh!"

5-00:45:32

Meeker: Well, we jumped ahead a little bit to talk about SF Performances. You had mentioned that there were a few little things that you'd pursued between opera and SF Performances. Maybe you could talk about those. But then after that—this is like the several-part question—I believe I read in some of the literature somewhere that you went back East and kind of toured through or at least visited some of the performing arts organizations like Washington Performing Arts Society.

5-00:45:51

Felt: Yeah, I did some research.

5-00:46:02

Meeker: Yeah, and I'm wondering if you could talk about that interim period.

5-00:46:05

Felt: Well, I left the opera in February of '79. That was my last month, or the last couple—maybe in mid-February. What had happened then, right in that same period, the presenter, Victor Wong, who had been bringing American Ballet Theater to San Francisco on a regular basis for the last few years as a presenter, went out of business. So ABT, American Ballet Theater, was desperate to have someone be their presenter in San Francisco. They went to the opera, the symphony, the ballet, asking them if one of the big organizations would do it. And the opera agreed. Kurt Adler said, "We'll hire Ruth to come back and work on this project, just be the point person for us. We'll back it. We'll take the risk. But Ruth will be the staff just for this engagement." So I did that. That was like a month job prior and the engagement and then winding it up, maybe it wasn't even that long. But I had pay then for that project. I taught a little bit at Golden Gate University. I don't know if I even got paid for that. But then—

5-00:47:24

Meeker: What'd you teach?

5-00:47:25

Felt: Arts administration. Then, unfortunately the tragedy of George Moscone and Harvey Milk's murders had happened in November of '78. And in the early part of '79. The people around Moscone's family decided they wanted to do a benefit to raise funds for Gina Moscone and the children. And they came to Kurt Adler at the opera and asked for a recommendation that could do this for him, a benefit, I think it was in April. So again, he recommended me. So I was hired then by—I don't know, it was the political entity—to actually put on a benefit performance.

5-00:48:14

Meeker: Friends of George Moscone or something?

5-00:48:15

Felt: Yeah, right. And Adler was able to get—helped me—and I knew him, too, Luciano Pavarotti to do it, be the star. So then, I worked on that in an office

downtown with some of the political staff of George Moscone and people in the political field.

5-00:48:36

Meeker: Can you say how you got Pavarotti?

5-00:48:41

Felt: Well, I can't remember now. I think I knew him very well because he had, his stardom went shooting up from the early seventies and through the seventies. I think Kurt Adler must have been instrumental in that. But the Moscone family and Moscone himself, they were very, very big opera fans. So I think maybe Gina and George Moscone had met Pavarotti probably. Because you know, actually, the Sunday before the Monday that George Moscone was shot, he was at the opera in the box, that Sunday, which was the final opera performance that season.

But then as it turned out, Luciano Pavarotti got sick and couldn't come! And guess who came—and I had nothing to do with this but it was sort of thrilling because the only time I ever was around him in person—was Frank Sinatra. Frank came and did the benefit. So then I had that period of time. I think maybe it was six weeks, I don't even recall, but where I was actually employed again. That was pretty full-time, actually, right at that moment, just getting all the details arranged for this big event.

So then, once that was over and I was out of a job, then I was eligible for unemployment [laughs] because I couldn't get it from leaving the opera because it was my choice. So then, after that Moscone job benefit, I could file for unemployment, which I did. In the meantime, I am thinking about what's the next step. I went to a headhunter, a couple of them, and was interviewed for—I thought, maybe in my naiveté, that I could get a job in the for profit world. Here I had all this experience with labor negotiations and personnel issues and managing huge groups of people at the opera. Everybody's got blinders on and we, in the nonprofit world and the arts do, too. I mean, there are certain business

skills that are universal. But I was told very candidly when I finally got an interview with a major business executive, for Shaklee because of my connections through the opera, this guy saw me because of Gary Shansby, I guess, and Claude Jarman. He said, “Ruth, I know you are extremely qualified. But I can assure you and this is really I know stupid, but anybody in business that looks at your resume will see opera and arts and just throw it in the circular file, in the trash can. Because we can’t seem to make that leap.” [chuckles] Then he said, “Why are you getting out of the arts? It seems to me that your experience would be so valuable in that field, and it’s an area you love. Why are you thinking about leaving it?” I said, “Well, you know, I’ve got lots of reasons. I just thought it would be an interesting experience to work in the for-profit world and I can make more money.” [chuckles] Then I said, “But I do have this idea about founding a new organization.” And he said, “Well, tell me about it.” And so I did, and he said, “Well, I think you should do that!” [chuckles] And I said, “Yeah, it sounds like an interesting thing to do, but my God, it’s so risky!” And this man, I can’t remember his name but he was quite encouraging. He said, “I don’t know, that sounds like a very, very worthy thing to try to do.” So then—

5-00:52:28

Meeker: I wonder what the real genesis of this idea was. I’m sorry to interrupt, but it sounds like you’re already starting to toy with this idea.

5-00:52:38

Felt: Well, what I had observed in the seventies when I worked at the opera, that the presenting field—because that’s what I had come from. I had come from UCLA where we brought in touring dance and touring recitalists and whatever. Well, I was aware that the city of San Francisco, just in the eight years that I was actually working at the opera, I saw two different organizations go out of business, therefore leaving a void. And Victor Wong was the latest one. And so I thought about that, and I thought, you know, San Francisco is such a sought-out place for artists on tour. The city really needs to have a reliable business

organization that can stay in business, and bring the best artists on tour to the city. So I believed that and I was aware of what I thought were some of the shortfalls or shortsightedness of the two businesses before. So that was sort of the idea. I felt there was a need and originally I talked to a colleague of mine, Charles Dillingham who I knew from ACT—and I knew his wife, Susan, because she worked at the opera—and we were initially thinking about doing this together. We sort of were talking about it. But then Charles Dillingham ended up being hired by a major theater company in New York. So then his participation in joining me was completely not going to happen. This was in the infant part of it, taking our baby steps, thinking about it. So I'm not exactly sure what the timeline was, but then I said, "Okay, let me do some research, okay, on the ground," you know, went to New York. Excuse me—

5-00:54:50

Meeker: Go ahead, take a pause.

[interview interruption]

5-00:54:56

Felt: I knew a lot of people in the field. I knew managers and I knew artists because I worked at UCLA and I worked at the opera all the time. So I decided to go back East and make appointments with people and specifically talk to them about presenting and the presenting scene as they would perceive it in San Francisco.

5-00:55:25

Meeker: Let's talk about that then after—so we just dropped off quickly about your trip back East, but I'm wondering, before you went back there, these two organizations in San Francisco weren't exactly organizations; they were for profit presenting companies, correct?

5-00:55:41

Felt: Well, one had a nonprofit arm. But yeah, mm-hmm.

5-00:55:48

Meeker: They were primarily for-profit.

5-00:55:49

Felt: Right, and they were really much more bringing in blockbuster types of big dance companies and much more superstars, and didn't have the same sort of institutional base of building a subscribership or a donor base as such. And so my experience, certainly with UCLA, although that was part of a university which protected it and funded it in many ways, but I think I looked at what I was going to try to do more in terms of the way an opera company or a symphony or an orchestra in this country is supported by a really strong base of subscribers that are loyal and also donors, that nonnonprofitprofit model.

5-00:56:50

Meeker: So while working at the opera, you were aware that ticket sales didn't pay for all their expenses.

5-00:56:56

Felt: Yes, and of course, in the seventies—it's just sort of mind-boggling now when you think of it—that when I started there, we didn't have a development department. We didn't have a director of development. During that time when I was there, we hired our first director of development. And the fundraising, which was always done, was done by my boss, Kurt Adler, the board, and the controller. There was a lot of money that was contributed by major patrons here in San Francisco. But—

5-00:57:24

Meeker: But it was primarily individual donors.

5-00:57:27

Felt: Mm-hmm, yeah, yeah.

5-00:57:29

Meeker: So the bulk of the funding was coming from ticket sales and individual donors.

5-00:57:33

Felt: Now, so much of that is still true, though. There's now some significant, of course, foundation support, but there's never been very much government support, although the hotel tax here in San Francisco, which I think Kurt Adler

was very definitely a force in that creation with the mayor at the time—it wasn't [Joseph] Alioto, it was before—but that whole concept of the hotel tax, a certain percentage going to the arts organizations was in place then.

5-00:58:07

Meeker: I'm trying to remember who it was. It was either [George] Christopher or [John] Shelley. It was pretty early on. So you had a sense of at least the basic income model.

5-00:58:23

Felt: Right.

5-00:58:24

Meeker: I mean you weren't—when I hear Wong, and I think there was somebody else—

5-00:58:28

Felt: John Kornfeld.

5-00:58:29

Meeker: John Kornfeld, they had a very much kind of pre-nonprofit-era impresario status. in which they were going to present large-scale performing groups, whether it was a traveling opera or symphony or dance company.

5-00:58:50

Felt: And also, you know, it's like the old Sol Hurok model which is, in terms of his high profile—he was definitely for-profit. Independent organizations that I am probably more similar to, like the Celebrity Series in Boston, and the Washington Performing Arts Society in D.C. Those are founded—say for example, Patrick Hayes in Washington, he went into business as a profit business. But then, both of those, they had to go nonprofit to survive, but they had initially started as for-profit. But as the business got more expensive and as all the different layers of people that go into the arts business got better pay and better benefits, then all the costs that they need to meet, they couldn't cover those at the box office.

5-00:59:56

Meeker: And there must have been a point at which ticket buyers would hit a threshold of how much they would pay.

5-01:00:04

Felt: That's right.

5-01:00:07

Meeker: From your anecdotal memory, I guess, was there in these organizations a period in which ticket prices were increasing and then in which they hit a plateau that you can remember?

5-01:00:21

Felt: I don't remember exactly. But you know of course, it's so hard to even imagine this but you know, I found an old opera schedule from the year that I went to work there which was 1971. Of course that's a long time ago. The ticket prices that year? It's just staggering. A box seat was sixteen dollars!

5-01:00:46

Meeker: And do you recall what they were when you left it approximately?

5-01:00:50

Felt: I could look it up, I don't know. But now, of course thirty-some-odd years later, they're a couple hundred. I don't know what they are. And I look at the ticket prices that we started out with, you know, with our recitals? You know, five dollars, ten dollars?

5-01:01:08

Meeker: But from what I've seen, those prices haven't increased to the same amount that for profit arts prices have increased. Or is that a misconception?

5-01:01:26

Felt: You know it's hard, I'd have to analyze it in more detail.

5-01:01:28

Meeker: But you haven't really engaged in the analysis.

5-01:01:30

Felt: No, I mean, we certainly gauge our prices based on comparative pricing of similar product. Our prices are probably—you know, we used to check always to see what Cal Performances charges, what Stanford, we look at what the symphony is charging, and the opera. Everybody does that. And of course, all of our prices have gone up. But so has everything else. [chuckles]

5-01:01:59

Meeker: Yeah, well, we can talk more about that when we get to the nineties. So I guess, just tell me a little bit about your trip back East.

5-01:02:07

Felt: Well, I think the most helpful was when I was in New York meeting with—I don't know if you want some more water—with Columbia Artist Management or some of the people that I knew that saw me and gave me encouragement in that. I understood why. I mean, they were interested in having a presenter in San Francisco be able to engage their artists and present them properly and pay them and all that. So there was certainly reinforcement of “Hey, yes, San Francisco is a favorite city. It would be great if you could put together an organization that would stay in business.” And then everybody said, “You have to go down—do you know Patrick Hayes? Do you know Washington Performing Arts Society?” I said, “No, I don't know Patrick.” And they said, “Well, you have to go and see him. Because he's kind of a legend, you know, he started his organization, he is gregarious and charming and a good presenter.” And so I called him and went down to Washington and met with him. And he was fabulous, I mean he was so giving, in terms of sharing with me their history, their by-laws, their budgets, and he just said, “Call me anytime,” just being extremely helpful in terms of his assessment of the business. I'll never forget one thing he told me, it was really great. He said, “Now, my philosophy is, you plan your season and you do it the way you want it based on your mission, and therefore you have it and you sell it on subscription and don't get seduced into adding something that seems like a real good thing on top of everything else you've planned. Because you can really get burned that way. Not that it isn't a great opportunity to present some surefire

thing that's beyond what you budgeted or what you planned and what your strategy is. And if it works, it's great. If it happens and it sells, then it's—but, if it doesn't, it can really then undercut all of the best-laid planning.” He said, “I did that a couple of times and got burned and I learned my lesson. So I'm just telling you don't. And it's very tempting because you will be approached. Some artist or some manager will approach you even during your season and say that they want to perform in San Francisco and, ‘Will you add this?’” So he was very strict about that. And I really have pretty much taken that to heart.

5-01:05:05

Meeker: What do suppose the lesson behind that was?

5-01:05:07

Felt: Well, I think what he experienced a couple of times is that an artist that was so excited about coming to Washington to perform, and they added it and they sold it, really, but then because it was not part of the seasonal overall, say the artist canceled for one reason or another, got sick. Not that artists on the regular season can't get sick either. But I guess what he was cautioning me on was this whole premise of a business plan and a thought out season of what you're going to do and don't get seduced, which you can in this business, into grabbing artists, hither and yon, because they want to do this. You can get yourself in big trouble because not only can it go wrong in that they don't come and then you've got all these refunds. It just also can be difficult for—depending on the size of your staff—but even for me, it was just me and an assistant and a PR person, you can wear everybody out by adding these things when you're not able to cope with them that well. I guess he was just being very, very conservative in saying your laid plans are to stick to those plans.

5-01:06:50

Meeker: Do you think that's a distinction between these nonprofit organizations and these for-profit impresarios in which they were always looking for the next big thing whereas the nonprofit organizations were thinking about the larger picture, about what the season looks like, about—

5-01:07:07

Felt: Yeah, I suppose some of that. But I think more to the point, with the nonprofit model you're really looking at building that donor base. And that in itself is a huge effort. That takes a lot of time, effort, special packages, benefits. And it's an ongoing thing. Now, I have an example of a presenter that I knew in Pasadena that was very successful, it's the Ambassador Auditorium, as part of that Worldwide Church of God. He's dead now, but the man who headed up that church, he's on television—I'm forgetting his name—but he loves the classical performing arts. And the best, I mean, he had really good taste and really knew. And he wanted on his university a first-rate theater and a series. So he built it. And he hired my friend Wayne Shilkret to run it and to build the season. I worked with Wayne a lot because many of the same artists that they presented—their series was much bigger—we presented, because we were on the West Coast. Well, what happened is that when this man died, then the university or the Worldwide Church of God, they didn't have any commitment any more to the arts. It was his commitment and he had always subsidized it through the church tithing. So that series, as successful as it was—and it had sold out all the time and the Ambassador Auditorium is gorgeous!—it failed totally in like, two years or less. Because there wasn't any kind of a donor base there, at all! Even though so many people in southern California came to that theater and that series, regularly. But the staff couldn't keep it afloat.

5-01:09:25

Meeker: Was this prior to San Francisco Performances?

5-01:09:29

Felt: No, no, I was in business then.

5-01:09:31

Meeker: Okay, all right.

5-01:09:32

Felt: Because I knew Wayne when he was there, you know—but he didn't have to raise money. The church gave it to him. He had to run a successful business, but

his operations, with fees and costs and everything and marketing, it still needed a significant subsidy, which he got from a church automatically.

5-01:09:52

Meeker: Interesting, like some arts organizations that were especially reliant on public or single corporations.

5-01:10:00

Felt: Oh yes, there is nothing more dangerous than being used to a single source of major funding. And you see this with nonprofits where there's been a community leader who as the season ends and they look at the books, and there's a deficit, and this guy writes the check. That crutch is so dangerous. Because that man, or that patron, or that woman, or that source is eventually not going to be there. And then, usually the vacuum that that leaves cannot be filled in time to keep the organization afloat.

5-01:10:48

Meeker: I'm going to change this because I don't want it to stop in the middle of our conversation.

[Minidisc 6]

6-00:00:00

Meeker: Okay, since we were talking about developing a donor base, I'm wondering if we should start talking about SF Performances and how you started bringing people together to really support the founding of this organization.

6-00:00:16

Felt: Okay, well, what happened after I met with Patrick Hayes and also talked with André Watts—he was probably in New York and in Chicago—and came back to San Francisco thinking, “Okay. I've got quite a bit of research here that I've done about the current state of presenting,” and also some of the real good advice from Patrick Hayes who was in a major city renting the Kennedy Center, which would be similar to what I would need to do, in terms of being in a major city like San Francisco, renting Herbst Theater, Davies Hall. We didn't have our

own venue, so those sort of realities even though we hadn't even started and I think {WPAS?} at that time was already over fifteen years old. At least I was armed with some real information about an organization that ours would be very similar to. Then I started talking—made appointments in San Francisco with Richard LeBlonde at the ballet; I went to go see my old boss, Kurt Adler; I went to see Betty Connors at what was then Arts and Lectures at Berkeley; I think I went to see Steve Baffrey at that point who had run a very successful festival at Stanford; I saw Peter Pastreich at the symphony; Milton Salkind at the conservatory. Just made appointments to tell people that this was the kind of thing I was thinking about, and to get their reactions. Because I wanted to be very open.

And then, as luck would have it, where I lived at 1272 Sacramento Street on Nob Hill, an apartment I rented, a year before or so, a young couple had moved in upstairs. They were from the East, from New York, but they came out to California to take the California bar, because they thought they were going to live in California and practice law there. It was one of those things where with some neighbors, you just bond with and others you don't. I really bonded with them; we just got along very well. We would frequently just have a drink together or eat or share supper or something. So they were aware of my trip, and research and I was keeping them posted a little bit on what was happening so—I guess it was July 4<sup>th</sup>, it was a holiday—and I think it was just that serendipitous. Dick and Alix Ehlers said to me, "What are you doing today?" I said, "Oh, I don't have any plans. I just have the day off." I don't remember, I wasn't working but I must have—. They said, "We're home too. You know that idea of yours to start this organization, why don't we just do that? You have to do the legal paperwork." And Alix and Dick said, "You know, we can do that for you. We've passed the bar now and we'd like to do that nonprofit incorporation. So let's just walk down to Dick's office and let's just do it today. We need three founding directors and the three of us can be that, and we'll start working and we'll do the articles of incorporation and we'll just get it going so that by the

time you want to really put this in motion, you'll have your nonprofit status, your 501(c)(3)." So that's what we did. I'll never forget walking down the hill with them and they said, "One thing you have to decide, what are you going to call this, Ruth?" I hadn't really thought about it and I just said, "Well, for the time being, let's see if San Francisco Performances is available as a name. And if it, that's where it is, and what it will be but we'll come up with something clever later." We never did. [laughter] And so we went down there, they were smart young lawyers and they did all the stuff in record time, no glitches. "Purpose of the organization: arts and education," and that whole mission that you need to have to qualify for a 501(c)(3). They just did it all. And we got the state recognition in August and I think we had our virtual 501(c)(3) from the IRS in November or within the six months that it normally takes.

Okay, so now I had a name for it [laughs] sort of by default.

And then I started putting together a little prospectus, very simple. I was always of the mind that you get more from brevity and being to the point than belaboring something to death. So I put together—I think it was just three pages, two pages of description, what the organization's mission would be, the kind of product we would present; I put together a five-year budget and my one-page resume. My mother and stepfather were printers, so I had that duplicated on just very nice, quality paper, and they did it for me. So I now had a box full of prospectuses to use and leave off with people.

6-00:06:35

Meeker: Do you have any of those left?

6-00:06:36

Felt: Mm-hmm. Yes, I do. Do you want one?

6-00:06:41

Meeker: Yeah, I'd like to see one at some point.

6-00:06:43

Felt: I have them in the office.

6-00:06:44

Meeker: Excellent.

6-00:06:45

Felt: And then I made a goal of raising a hundred thousand dollars before I did anything.

6-00:06:56

Meeker: How'd you come up with that number?

6-00:06:57

Felt: Oh, it probably had a nice ring to it, I don't know. [laughs] No, based on—the operating budget for the first year was a hundred and fifty. And of course, I was working out of my home, so there was no overhead; I bought a typewriter, that was the one expense; and I was still doing some projects, so I was still—I don't know what my finances were. We still have the ledger also. We were looking at it in terms of just this event we did at PALM [Performing Arts Library and Museum] for the archive, starting out with that year with all the names of the contributions and all the expenses and the payouts. We were looking at this ledger, it was very funny. It just brought back some memories about the vendors we paid.

So then I started virtually making calls to various people, like James Schwabacher who I knew from the opera really well, and who I knew shared my commitment to this kind of thing, recitals. Talked to Otto Meyer, who is also somebody I knew from the opera. I was introduced to the venture capitalist, Arthur Rock. He was a friend of a friend of mine, but he also was a big supporter of the opera. She suggested that I call on him. He was not the warmest and fuzziest guy but he was really an astute businessman and venture capitalist. She thought that he would be extremely valuable in terms of the questions he would ask me and just his overall very serious point of view. So he saw me and I did go there and see him and he did ask me some tough questions. And he did—

6-00:09:00

Meeker: Do you recall the questions?

6-00:09:04

Felt: I'm not sure if I do. But probably things like, "How have you put this budget together?" Really analyzing it, you know, what do you need to bring in to enable you to grow. I don't recall.

6-00:09:23

Meeker: Did you feel like you were prepared to respond to his questions at that point?

6-00:09:26

Felt: A little bit, yeah. Yes, definitely. I had then a pretty good background. I had at least thirteen years of arts experience. And I was very much on the front lines with the controls and the dollars and everything that went into the opera and making it solvent. Also, I had a fair amount, similarly, in the presenting field at UCLA. And then, I also was armed with Patrick Hayes' budgets for his organization, which was much bigger than mine, but I was looking at the percentages. I think Arthur Rock was asking me those questions, like, "Why is it that you can't get more ticket revenue? Why is this balanced the way it is? Why do you have to raise so much money?" All of those things.

Here we had the organization founded somehow, in terms of legally it was on its way; we had a name; I had made a number of contacts. Then I somehow had to launch it, in a sense. And André Watts was going to be in Oakland playing for Calvin Simmons and the Oakland Symphony—[coughs] excuse me—in the fall, in late October.

6-00:11:04

Meeker: Of 1980, right?

6-00:11:03

Felt: No, '79. And I called him, and I said, "André, would you be available to be part of a launch or an event or something? We could bring together some people and talk about the dream for this organization." As it turned out, he had in his busy schedule of performances with Oakland, there was one day, it was November 1<sup>st</sup>. He said, "I could do a lunch for you November 1<sup>st</sup>." So, with that information, I called Jim Schwabacher. Because Jimmy hadn't committed to me

at all, he just said that he was sympathetic. He was very wary as well, because he had seen a lot of this history before. Before Victor Wong, before John Kornfeld, Spencer {Barefoot?}, it goes way back. He was not convinced that it was doable.

6-00:12:05

Meeker: Didn't he also have sort of a fledgling competing organization or was doing presenting of his own?

6-00:12:11

Felt: Not then, not quite then. He does have the Schwabacher Recital Series now. But that wasn't there then. He was part of the Merola Opera Program and all of the various—and the board of the opera.

6-00:12:22

Meeker: So he was just associated with that.

6-00:12:24

Felt: But he didn't have his recital series, as it is now. But then I called him and I said, "André is available to be present at a lunch where we can talk about San Francisco Performances as a new organization." And I said, "Jimmy, would you help me with that?" And he said, "If André will do this, then I will do this. Why don't we say that Jim Schwabacher and André Watts invite you to have lunch to be introduced to San Francisco Performances. I'll do this at the yacht club, the St. Francis Yacht Club." So that's what we did. We sent out invitations and we had a lunch that day and I think maybe forty people came.

6-00:13:17

Meeker: Out of how many invitations?

6-00:13:19

Felt: Oh, probably over a hundred, I think, I'm not sure. And also Jimmy identified a woman that I didn't know who lived just on Pacific above him, Jane Newhall, a lovely woman who was wealthy, older woman, loved music and was a pianist herself, invited her to this lunch and we had her sit next to André. And we also little pledge cards after we made our presentation, if people would like to be part

of the organization and if they would be interested in making a sort of initial start up contribution. I think we raised like \$18,000 that day which is pretty good, considering. Ten of it came from Jane Newhall, though.

6-00:14:08

Meeker: Wow. [chuckles]

6-00:14:11

Felt: So that was the beginning. And then what I did—oh, boy, this was not easy—I made a phone call to everybody that had received an invitation but didn't come. Because then they had the invitation, they had the entrée to the organization. I followed up and told them about the lunch, if I got them on the phone—I didn't get everybody on the phone—and asked them if I could meet with them or if they would consider making a contribution. And I got some money just like that. And one of the checks I got was from Ray Dolby, I remember. He said, "Sorry, I didn't come to the lunch, I can't meet with you, I'm too busy, but I'll send you a thousand dollars." So I remember that I had this checklist, because it was not my favorite thing to do, but I made a goal for myself that I had to call somebody every day. [laughs] It was like checking them off.

6-00:15:15

Meeker: That can't be an easy thing to do. Was this the first time you had done something like this? So you didn't do any of these cold calls for the opera.

6-00:15:27

Felt: No, no, no. And then once I got I-don't-remember-how-much money from individuals, maybe a little over thirty, or something. And I did know that André offered, if we could get the concert series started, that he would play the first performance, and he would donate his fee. So we could make money on that concert. So I had that information. So, with that then, I contacted the San Francisco Foundation, the Irvine Foundation, and the Gerbode Foundation, because they gave startup grants to nonprofits. So I met with them and I sent them proposals. And in the spring of 1980, I did get, I think \$15,000 from each of them. So I did, and then as I saw, that I was slowly getting to where I could

get this \$100,000 if I got these grants—because that was \$45,000 and I was looking at having already maybe thirty-five to forty from individuals—I thought, “If I get these grants, I’m going to have a hundred.” So I was planning a first season. I knew André would start it, I wanted him to open it. So then, that was the first challenge was finding out when he could come. And also getting a date in Davies Symphony Hall for him.

**[Pages 134-A through 134-E from this interview have been sealed until January 2030]**

Okay, so, what had happened is I got a date from André Watts in November, November 23<sup>rd</sup>. I went to the War Memorial management—

6-00:20:11

Meeker: This is ‘79, correct, or ‘80?

6-00:20:14

Felt: No, ‘80.

6-00:20:17

Meeker: So it was founded properly in ‘79 and then your first—.

6-00:20:19

Felt: Yeah, and then the initial launching, but the first season was ‘80-’81.

6-00:20:21

Meeker: Okay, that’s what I thought.

6-00:20:23

Felt: Yeah, right. So I got a date from André when he could do it and I got, through George Matson at the War Memorial going through the Symphony staff—because the Symphony Hall was just opening that fall, it was brand new—when I could rent it for a recital. And I got November 23<sup>rd</sup>. [Soon after in February, and later, there were attempts to keep me from presenting André Watts and also deny us access to the new Davies Hall, on November 23<sup>rd</sup>. But when I refused to give up and with the assistance from André and members of my board, we were

able to go forward.] And when November 23<sup>rd</sup> came, it was just sensational. André played so beautifully, it was a huge success. I mean, it was just fantastic. But that little thing there was really, really, really painful.

6-00:33:03

Meeker: I imagine that made you more determined, though.

6-00:33:05

Felt: Oh, yeah. Yes, of course. Well, as Marian Lever, who I hired to work for Kurt Adler, secretary—she was interviewed at one point about San Francisco Performances when we started, and she said, “Well, I’ve always thought of Ruth as the toughest little mouse in San Francisco.” [chuckles] That’s what she called me.

6-00:33:29

Meeker: And that was in reference then to?

6-00:33:30

Felt: Oh, just anything. Just her experience, because I think my reputation at the San Francisco Opera was really good, but I was, by then, in my last few years there, I was really, with our labor lawyer, the main negotiator for the union contracts. And hey, you can’t be a pushover in those cases.

One of the things that I used to talk about: style. I think I was good at it because I really did have in my fiber an understanding and sympathy for organized labor, and I had a respect and I could be really tough, and push back but not in a demeaning way. That was natural to me. I think Kurt Adler had that as well. He could be very tough and he was. But he was never demeaning. I remember there was a manager for a while at the Opera who I—who was initially part of our labor negotiations. And he just made it worse. There was just something about the tone of his voice and his style that just inflamed the other side. I remember going to Kurt Adler and I said, “Can we actually sort of see if we can do this without him in the room? Because it just makes it worse.”

6-00:35:20

Meeker: What was it? I mean, was he patronizing or—?

6-00:35:23

Felt: Yeah. There's that—and it wasn't that the facts that he was putting forward weren't exactly the same ones that I would use or Kurt Adler would use. There just was a style of the way he said it to the other side that just made them mad.

6-00:35:45

Meeker: Well, when you talk about the management style that you were developing, as you were developing it and beginning to move to a role in which you were not answering to a boss but were answering to a board in which you were presenting these, do you remember drawing upon your upbringing and particularly your religious experience? I mean was that conscious at all?

6-00:36:15

Felt: I suppose in some respects, the whole value of showing respect to other people. I think that that is just part of what I really was committed to. So even in managing staff, I really try very hard—and it isn't insincere—is trying to correct someone or discipline someone in a way that doesn't diminish them or demean them as a person. And really trying to correct behavior or show how they've made errors, but in a way in which they as a person are respected so that they'll come back and feel positive about making those corrections, and indeed come through in that way. Because I think that's the side of what I've observed in any work situation, is that it is so counter-productive to have an environment where you've got a staff being so oppressed or so angry with just these pet peeves and things that they're just spending their energies grumbling around the water cooler. Who needs to do that? You want all your positive energy and all your endeavor that you're putting into this to be going forward. So, if you find yourself just completely always reliving an abuse you think was unfair by your boss or even by a colleague, all it does is ruin any kind of efficient work production.

6-00:38:22

Meeker: Would you mind if we take a short break?

6-00:38:24

Felt: No, that's fine.

[Interview interruption]

6-00:38:26

Meeker: Since we just talked about a contentious relationship, I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about how you started to develop some more compatible relationships. I have a note here that you co-presented Kiri Te Kanawa [with accent on second "a"]—is that how you pronounce her name?

6-00:38:51

Felt: Te Kanawa [corrects him, pronouncing it with an emphasis on first "a"]

6-00:38:55

Meeker: —Te Kanawa with the SF Opera—?

6-00:38:55

Felt: Right.

6-00:38:56

Meeker: —early on. And I know there were some other, like the Schwabacher debut recitals.

6-00:39:02

Felt: Which we aren't—that's not part of our organization.

6-00:39:07

Meeker: Okay. But at least how you developed a non-competitive relationship with those.

6-00:39:13

Felt: Well, I think with the initial couple of big recitals, with Kiri Te Kanawa and also Jessye Norman, that we presented with the opera, it was my relationship to present these artists in recital that—in other words, I invited these artists to do a recital. Then, the scope of the fee and the scope of what it had to be and the use of the Opera House, I was very eager to do this in partnership with the opera because of their huge audience base and also the prestige of just being a partner

with them. And that was easy because I had a close relationship with the Opera, in fact, their box office was my box office in the early years. They agreed to have box office people handle our tickets.

6-00:40:21

Meeker: Was it off-site then or was it on site?

6-00:40:23

Felt: Their box office was at the Opera House and I was just working out of my apartment, so they handled the tickets. So I have a really close relationship with the San Francisco Opera and always have. So that was just a real help for me. And they weren't really presenting recitals, occasionally, so that was something that was easily arranged.

I think in the early years what was the most challenging, of course, was that we were new and we were in a major city, and certainly people knew who I was, but still there were managements in New York and Europe who were reluctant and very concerned about letting me have the opportunity to present some of their major artists. They were wary, as they should be. I mean because everybody in our profession knows that you can get burned by an inexperienced presenter, in terms of the arrangements not being handled well, the tickets not being sold, in some cases, the fee never being paid. So there's a reason for them to be wary. So, in terms of you know, those early years, then I had to sort of establish the organization as a responsible entity. In certain cases, not as much as others because I knew the people much better from my work at the opera and all that, but some of these people I didn't know at all. And I remember one of the artists that I really wanted to present was Yo-Yo Ma, the cellist.

I had meet Yo-Yo, myself personally, just by chance really, because a young woman here in San Francisco at the time, the daughter of the composer Jacob Druckman, I had met her and she was aware of San Francisco Performances and what I was doing. Well, as it turned out, one day, 1980 or '81, she called me at home and she said, "Would you like to meet Yo-Yo Ma in a few minutes?" I

said, “Oh, I’d love to!” And she said, “He’s here with me. He’s a friend. He’s just stopping though here and we’re going to go for dinner, but I just thought it would be fun, we could stop by and have a drink at your apartment and then you could meet him.” So remember that very much, Yo-Yo came and sat in my study, and as always he was just very funny, he has a great sense of humor and totally wonderful jokes.

So he was someone I really wanted to present. But his management, ICM, I really didn’t have any real close relationship there. And they were very reluctant because Yo-Yo Ma was becoming now more and more—the buzz was out about him. So he was a prized artist to present. I had asked for him from the beginning and I wasn’t getting anywhere. I do know that my good colleague in New York, Frank Salomon, who had a small important agency of his own and represented Richard Stoltzman, for example, and Murray Periah and Peter Serkin and some string quartets—anyway, Frank and I bonded. And I know Frank was in many ways responsible for the fact that Lee Lamont from ICM allowed me to present Yo-Yo. And actually I presented him in his official, professional recital debut in San Francisco at the Herbst Theater, in January of ‘84, maybe? ‘83? I can look up the date.

But Frank went to Lee Lamont and said, “You know, we have to help Ruth Felt if we want to have a professional presenting organization survive in San Francisco. I don’t know if you know her very well, but I’ve gotten to know her and she knows what she’s doing. And if we keep resisting giving her some of our prize artists, she’s not going to be able to do this very successfully because she needs to have some of those. She’ll present them properly.” And so it was Frank’s intercession, I believe, on my behalf that helped, because I’ll never forget the guy that did the tour, you know the West Coast rep for ICM called me, and I’ll never forget, he said, “Ruth are you sitting down or standing up?” I said, “I’m standing up right now.” He said, “Sit down. We’re going to give you Yo-

Yo Ma, but this is the date. I hope you can get the theater.” [laughs] I’ll never forget it.

6-00:45:26

Meeker: And he was at Herbst.

6-00:45:29

Felt: Yeah, then, that first one, yeah. And then we brought him back, actually, a few years later, and he did two concerts. He did all the Bach Suites. Two concerts with just a day in between I think, at the Herbst, but then after that, when we can present him, it’s got to be at Davies Hall or the Opera House because he’s such a star.

But some of those. And I had the same issues with—the year that I was offered the opportunity to present Hermann Prey and Lucia Popp, the baritone and the soprano. They were here for *The Marriage of Figaro* and they wanted to do the Wolf Hugo songs the Italian Liederbuch. I was called by Harold Shaw in New York Hermann Prey’s management, saying, “They want to do this. Would you like to present it?” I said, “Oh, I’d love to present it!”

6-00:46:17

Meeker: Was this in preparation for the season, or were you breaking one of the rules?

6-00:46:21

Felt: Oh, no, no. It was going to be in the second season or the third season. No, this was during the second season, planning the third one, and this would be in the fall. And first of all, that combination, or that opportunity was never even on my radar screen because they rarely sang together, I mean, they live in Europe and—so this was just oh! Fantastic! And so I said to Harold Shaw, “Well, these are two really star singers, how much is that going to cost?” He said, “Well, they want to do it, Ruth. They just need to get paid the same, so what can you afford?” And I don’t remember the numbers exactly, but I told him that basically they’d be splitting what I could pay one artist. In those days, maybe it was \$10,000, I don’t know. I don’t remember, and I could check it. Okay, so then

Lucia Popp is represented here in America by a manager in San Francisco. And this is interesting, speaking of personalities and people. And I guess you know this story might as well be told, because it sort of tells the story of how I wouldn't give up when I was being challenged.

I went to Lucia Popp's manager, I called and I said, "Well, I've just gotten this call from Harold Shaw that when Hermann Prey and Lucia Popp are here in the fall doing *Figaro*, that they want to do the liederbuch of Wolf, and Harold said that I can present it and I want to present it, and we've got to get the date and I have to work it out with you." And she said, "Well, Ruth, I don't know how you're going to afford that." And I said, "Well, Harold Shaw seems to feel they'll both want to do it. They just need to be paid the same. And we can come up with a number that will make it affordable for us to do it." And she just said, "Well, Ruth, that may be fine, but Lucia has to get her full fee. I won't let her do it for less than her full fee."

6-00:48:28

Meeker: Let's say, just for the sake of argument, it was ten thousand split in two.

6-00:48:38

Felt: Five each, yeah. In that case it would have been at least ten each, so it would have made the fee twenty, I guess. [cross talk] In round numbers it—

6-00:48:45

Meeker: So proportionally it would have been about—?

6-00:48:46

Felt: It would have been double, and I don't think these numbers are exactly right.

So, I'll never forget. She said, "It's a great idea, Ruth, too bad you can't do it." I was just, wheew, I said, "Okay." So then I went to the symphony that night to go to a concert and I ran into her. She came up to me and she said, "Ruth, that was such a great idea, it's too bad that you can't do it." And I said, "Well, I haven't given up." And she looked at me and she said, "What do you mean?" I said, "Well, I haven't given up. I'm going to try to do this." And she said, "You can't

afford it.” And I said, “Well, maybe I can and maybe I can’t. I’ll get back to you.” And she looked at me like—“I’m going to try and get somebody to give me the money I need. If that’s what you’re asking, that’s what I’m going to try to do.”

So I went back to Harold Shaw and I told him what she had said. And I believe what we did—I said, “Harold, what do you think if I came back with an offer that gave each of them—” I don’t remember now, but offering them each seven-five, so the fee is fifteen “and I’ll try and get money from a funder here,” namely Gordon Getty, who loves vocal music. And he said, “That sounds fair, Ruth.” And I said, “Can I ask you then, if you would go to Hermann Prey and have Hermann Prey go to Lucia Popp, and we’ll just leave her manager out of this for now, until we have the terms set up?” And that’s what happened. I got the money I needed from Gordon; Harold Shaw took the offer to Hermann Prey who took it to Lucia Popp and we had a concert. And it was fabulous.

6-00:50:56

Meeker: And Lucia Popp’s manager?

6-00:50:58

Felt: She came to the concert!

6-00:50:59

Meeker: And did you have a conversation with her after you were able to pull this off?

6-00:51:04

Felt: Yeah, yeah. And she said, “Oh! I’m so glad that you didn’t give up.” [chuckles]

6-00:51:16

Meeker: Interesting. I guess one of the other things I wanted to talk about in this— actually this is more sort of your opinion, and you should feel free to correct me if I’m mistaken in having an impression like this. I’m kind of thinking about American culture in the late seventies and early eighties overall at this point. And certainly there’s cultural shifts happening all the time. But there seemed to be, particularly at that point in time, a cultural shift and a generational shift.

There seemed to be a declining interest in this serious kind of music that you were interested in presenting. I know that there were a lot of symphonies and opera companies that were having problems. I think that there was an increase in the number of nonprofit organizations at this point in time presenting this kind of music, but perhaps a shrinking audience or a shrinking commitment. Is that—?

6-00:52:29

Felt: It's one of those issues that's sort of always constantly being aired. I think that's there's truth and there's untruth and misunderstanding about the whole thing. First of all, when I started San Francisco Performances in the '79, '80 frame, clearly presenters at universities and whatever were certainly rethinking the numbers of classical music things they would present. And there was this talk that the recital tradition was dying. I think we all know what has happened to music education and arts education in our schools. There is no question about that. It is a fact. And you know that that fact in itself in terms of students and their exposure to fine arts is going to have an impact that can't be good for people who champion this kind of work, in terms of their familiarity and their just willingness to try it. But saying that, if you look at where—when I came to San Francisco in '71 to work at the opera, and you look at what happened in '70. '80, '90, in terms of the numbers of opera companies that came into business since '71, it's amazing! Not all of them have stuck it out. But San Diego, Los Angeles, Dallas, I mean they just weren't there. Seattle? And now many of them are very successful. And that means more audiences in all these places.

The same thing with symphony orchestras. Now, some of that, their numbers burgeoned and then some went out of business, like even you know Oakland, and now San Jose. Oakland's trying to come back and I think with Michael Morgan and what they're doing now, you're seeing that they're building back. And I hope San Jose can build back, too, and I think they can. So I don't think there's an answer here. I think that classical music, serious or more that genre of

music, I think it's here to stay. It'll change, and I personally believe that one of the things that has hurt us more than anything, I think the fact that our traditional institutions, and maybe also our academic, in universities and conservatories nurturing of contemporary creators and composers, has contributed to this. And it's changing now, this aversion and real abhorrence of contemporary music. It wasn't the case in the past where you had these composers who, their music was played all the time and audiences expected hear new music. We got away from that.

6-00:56:09

Meeker: What are some of the—can you be a little more specific about this?

6-00:56:13

Felt: Well, when you think of some of the artists that we just revere today, composers and performers themselves, whether they were Beethoven, Rachmaninoff, Brahms, I mean people were waiting for their latest compositions. They weren't always—particularly with Beethoven and Mozart—they weren't always understood and they weren't always wildly accepted or popular, but there was this tradition of that as a living art form. And you weren't just going to concerts hearing dead composers' music. I'm not an authority really, but then it seems there came this time in this country particularly where current creators of music were—and maybe that goes with the dissonances of the twelve-tone series and all of that kind of academic gamesmanship and trying to fit their creativity into those patterns was not—was certainly not that accessible to people's ears. There was just this aversion created to listening to new music. That is changing though. It's slow. It will be a slow path back. You're seeing a lot more vitality, I think, in terms of the work of living creators.

6-00:57:41

Meeker: Who do you think is the driving force behind that?

6-00:57:42

Felt: Well, some of it is just, you know, different compositional styles and maybe music that's a little bit easier to embrace. Because the compositional styles are

changing, the composers that are writing. And I see, if you see young people and what they respond to, they're reaching their willingness to experiment and listen to artists like Phillip Glass and Bang On A Can and John Adams and Steve Reich and—

6-00:58:36

Meeker: Kronos.

6-00:58:36

Felt: Kronos and things like that. I mean, of course, in this field, there are people that think that some of these people are just horrible. And that will always be the case. I just get such a kick out of this program that we do with Bob {Greenberg?} and the string quartet. And Bob is such a brilliant and irreverent guy. But his research about music history is always just threaded with the stuff he gets, the letters, the critiques. And we're doing this series now, repeating in Berkeley, on the Mozart-Hayden quartets. Oh my God, when he reads some of the criticisms of Mozart and this dissonant music by these so called pundits in his day, who of course, nobody's ever heard of, and how he dismisses Mozart as just this hack! Of course, it's very funny. [chuckles] History keeps repeating itself in a sense.

6-00:59:46

Meeker: One of the reasons I ask that question was not to be difficult [laughs]—and again this is something that could be borne out with more research but I'm just wondering your opinion on the subject—like I know that there were a lot of nonprofit organizations like yours being formed in the late seventies and throughout the 1980s. I somewhere saw a reference to an organization called Chamber Music America?

6-01:00:15

Felt: Oh, Chamber Music America is a service organization, and it's still in business. It doesn't present. We're members of it, actually.

6-01:00:21

Meeker: Okay. But it somehow ensures the continuation of chamber music?

6-01:00:30

Felt: Well, its mission is to serve the field: chamber musicians, recitalists, and presenters. And they have a conference in New York and that's one of the places I'm getting an award this year, as a chamber music presenter. But there have been a lot of different series that have been in business, gone out of business, absolutely.

6-01:00:51

Meeker: Mm-hmm. Well, I also think of, like, SF Jazz in San Francisco and what they're doing really is very similar to what SF Performances is, is creating an institutional home for a musical art form that otherwise might struggle.

6-01:01:10

Felt: Right. Right. Yeah, and always has. What Randall's doing—Randall Kline—here at SF Jazz is one of the few cities that is doing quite what he is doing. And you see what Wynton Marsalis and Lincoln Center Jazz are doing in New York, and that's very unusual for the jazz field. Because jazz has really found its place in clubs, primarily, and in festivals. And not in the concert hall. And of course, in the jazz world, what Lincoln Center is doing particularly, and Wynton is very controversial amongst jazz musicians. I mean, some people, jazz musicians really, disagree violently with the leadership of Wynton.

6-01:02:06

Meeker: Part of that contrast, there's also the nonprofit and for-profit. I mean the jazz festivals—and I don't know if Monterey is this way but I suspect it is—and then also clubs, it's on a for-profit model. It's very much like what earlier styles of presenting in classical music were. I kind of wonder, what was it about the historical, what was it about what you were thinking and experiencing in the late seventies and early eighties that inspired your organization? I'm thinking that there must be sort of something similar that was inspiring Randall and other presenting organizations around the country at the same time.

6-01:02:56

Felt: Ah, well, first of all, the presenting field, in the terms of the multidiscipline of presenting from the early years of Barnum and Bailey/Sol Hurok model, that

ended up really residing, and still does to a significant degree, in universities and colleges as an educational function, and also having then the institutional support of a university base and funding base. Most university presenters in those days didn't raise money. They had subscriptions and they sold tickets, but their source of support financially, in terms of meeting any shortfalls, was from the university itself. Now, that had evolved over time and you see my colleague at Ann Arbor, Michigan—where I think that series is one of the oldest in the country if not the oldest, one hundred and twenty-five years old—what they did some time ago is they made the decision to—they're part of the university but they incorporated separately, formed a board, and have a traditional nonprofit model that is identified with the university but it is totally separate from the university. Because they didn't want to be at the mercy of the winds of the budget cuts and ying and yangs of a different university president or a different university emphasis. So they wanted to do their own thing knowing that they serve the community, the university itself, but not to be tied to it financially. Now, you see Robert Cole at Cal Performances also going in that direction. Relatively new, he never had a board, now he does, and so they're following—even though they still get support and student fees and stuff from the university, they do, and they run Zellerbach—so they work for the university in a way that an independent doesn't but Robert has a board and he's raising money, from individuals, from sponsorships. He's got his own development department. So that model, you're seeing more of. And that reflects also just the realities of the business. I'm not sure, I think I'm getting a little diverted.

6-01:05:38

Meeker: Well, I mean, I guess we're definitely talking about it. I guess I'm kind of wondering and going back to—let's put it like this—do you think this trend in the way in which non profit organizations like you run and it seems like universities are beginning to move to that model, what is driving this? Is it a change in musical and artistic tastes among Americans? Does it have to do with funding strictures? Does it have to do with the increasing diversity of the American population? How do you see it? And particularly in relation to the late

seventies, early eighties when you're getting SF Performances going, what is the impetus to start something like that in the larger sense?

6-01:06:30

Felt: Well—

6-01:06:30

Meeker: I mean, did you feel like you were saving chamber music or did you feel like you were serving a need, an audience that existed in a different way than it had been in the past? Or both?

6-01:06:46

Felt: I was seeking to create something to serve a product of music that I myself personally really believed in. That's one thing. I was doing it in a community that I also knew pretty well and was aware that San Francisco and the Bay Area is a very highly educated, very cultured place. And I felt that, unlike some parts of the country where my colleagues or presenting organizations work, that each community is similar but it's also very unique. I believed and I think it's still true, that this community is very, very receptive to classical music. That's why one of the reasons that we've been able to build this series with this focus on classical recitals and chamber music. Yeah, we're bringing them quality stuff and we're running a good business, but we're serving an audience that's there. As to whether it's growing sufficiently? [chuckles] I don't know the answer to that. I've been asked this questions. They told me twenty-five years ago that we couldn't do it and we'd never make it. And here we are twenty-five years later and it's grown significantly and we have big audiences, bigger audiences. I'd have to use that as my measure and say, "Okay, that's what I know, so I'm just going to proceed on that basis as wisely as I can."

You know, it's a business, so we need to look at the realities here, and one of them is how you communicate with your audience, how do you reach those people? Not to people you know, because that's direct mail or e-mail, but how do you reach out to the people that don't know about you? Print media is really dying in a way, shrinking, newspapers are really in trouble, and the coverage

that our newspapers here give the arts has diminished dramatically. And so, we're looking at now, this new communication tool, the internet. And hey, we've got to know how to use it. We've got to really be able to use it, we've got to really be able to say, "How can we be creative with this tool? How can we really make it effective for us?" Because that's the latest thing in really touching people.

6-01:09:45

Meeker: Well, you touched on two things: education and the internet. And those are things that I definitely want to pick up more extensively in what might be our final discussion. I keep on looking down because I see the battery on here and I'm a little worried that we're going to get cut out but—

6-01:10:07

Felt: Yeah, and it's a quarter of twelve anyway, so—

6-01:10:08

Meeker: Oh! Wow, look at that. Well, I've just got a couple of other things so I'll just postpone them until next time—

6-01:10:16

Felt: All right, unless you feel we could do this because I talk forever, so—[chuckles]

6-01:10:19

Meeker: Okay, here's a relatively contained question. It just says [reading from his interview guide], "Discuss the process of choosing artists in the first decade. How did it begin and how did it change?" I know we talked about that a little bit in relation to your relationship with the management companies, but—

6-01:10:40

Felt: Yeah, well, I guess in the early days, as I said, you know, it was just proving that we could be a reliable presenting organization. And in certain cases with certain artists that were ones that I wanted particularly, that was a challenge. I'll tell you that the world is full of fabulous artists, more now than there's ever been. And we did a little thing, one of my colleagues did, of going back in *Musical America*, the directory and counting the number of string quartets that were in

that directory in one year and then seeing how that—I mean, it’s amazing how many string quartets compared to twenty years ago. The numbers are just exponential.

So, then once you get established and people know you, I’m just inundated with materials. You’ve been to my office. I try to clean it up, but I get mail, stacks of it, with CD’s, with videos—and mostly it’s unsolicited. There are so many artists that want to be presented and deserve to be presented. So, it’s a buyer’s market for me. So, all along as we’ve gotten more acknowledged to be an institution of credibility, respect, people call me, they come to San Francisco, managers, to meet with me. I used to have to go to New York or to conferences, which I still do, but I don’t even have to do that. Because first of all, we’re a respected series; we’re in a great city; people love to come here.

6-01:12:30

Meeker: Well, is there a point that that changed, where it was more a seller’s market or an artist’s market and now it’s more a presenter’s market? From your perspective at least?

6-01:12:41

Felt: Well, it didn’t take very long for us, probably just the first few years, because we showed ourselves to be a very credible presenter with good materials and artists liked working with us. We were very, very good about taking care of them and courteous and things were arranged and the piano was good and it was always tuned and, you know, things were handled well. That is what you see sometimes with European artists who don’t come to America very often, or don’t want to come; it usually will go back to a bad experience, where they came and they were presented somewhere and the arrangements were not made properly, it was not a good experience. And that spreads too, like anything in a network. If the word is out that this artist came to perform for you and there wasn’t an audience or you were treated badly, that gets back to their manager, who gets—it just spreads. So once you get that reputation—and that didn’t take too long to

establish—that you’re really a credible presenter and a quality one, then, you know, you’re just sought out all the time.

6-01:14:04

Meeker: Well, did you have any guiding principles? Once you achieved that point, what were some of the guiding principles determining what your season would look like, who you would invite to perform?

6-01:14:18

Felt: Well, I think we always followed the artistic mission in wanting to follow that recital chamber music focus in music, contemporary dance and some jazz. But also a balance of some stars as well as always introducing new artists and a mix of repertoire that would include some contemporary work and the traditional repertoire of Beethoven, Mozart, whatever that everyone loves, but always maybe in the sandwich approach, sticking that premiere in the middle. [chuckles] Not always, but pretty often, especially if the artists had that and wanted it presented.

6-01:15:06

Meeker: Did you ever have any control over the repertoire that the artists would perform?

6-01:15:11

Felt: Some. You don’t have as much when you’re not producing because usually artists that are touring have a set program that they’re really keen on performing. We want their programs to put in our brochure; we want them early. We also check them against past performances of the same works. So I don’t want to have the same—occasionally we can’t avoid it, but we don’t want to have the same music performed again or twice in the same season by different artists, which sometimes also is proposed. So there’s that. String quartets traditionally give you four programs to choose from. That’s what they’re touring that season, and you can choose which one you want. Occasionally, you can get them to mix and match it, if you have particular desires.

6-01:15:58

Meeker: What about vocal recitals?

6-01:15:59

Felt: Well, usually you have some, but they also have a particular program they want to present, and you know the thing that's very true, and I'm very aware of that, touring for artists is really tough. It is really hard work. And you know, they're on the road, they usually have a tour, if it's successful, that's pretty tight, in terms of travel day, performance day. Sometimes they do performances one right after another. They'll fly in here, they'll do San Francisco, they fly the next morning, play Los Angeles the next night. You know, it's very tight, in and out of hotels, different halls, different pianos, different—and they're center stage. They have to give, for two hours or an hour and a half, a stellar performance. And that's tough. So, I take the position. And I've never had really, rare! A peevish artist or a real prima donna. And I think it's because we really make an effort to take care of an artist: always meet them at the airport. In the old days, I used to do it, staff used to do it, now we have a car service do it. Making sure that they've got what they would like in terms of any kind of—usually for classical musicians, it's really simple, some soft drinks or water or coffee or maybe a banana or something, backstage. [chuckles] Or just always being there to greet them, making sure that things are really run smoothly.

You can always have things that go wrong with all the best laid plans, and they do, but then being right there to solve it. I'll tell you, I hear horror stories from artists on the road where they have got a date at a theater or with a presenter and they show up at the theater at the stage door and the only person there is the stage man, and there's nobody from that organization and nobody to answer questions. To me, that's just unheard of, but it does happen, more than you'd like it to.

6-01:18:15

Meeker: Well, then. Shall we stop there?

6-01:18:19

Felt: Yeah. Sure.



**INTERVIEW 4: OCTOBER 20, 2004**

[Minidisc 7]

7-00:00:04

Meeker: Okay, we're on. This is interview four of four with Ruth Felt. This is Martin Meeker. It is the 20<sup>th</sup> of October 2004. What I wanted to first start out with is if you could tell me a little bit about the staff development of SF Performances starting from basically a one-woman organization to something which—maybe go into the early or mid nineties or something—whenever you feel like it built out to the size that is today.

7-00:00:40

Felt: See, going back in my memory, I started of course in my apartment to keep overhead way down and I had working with me a colleague in public relations, Kori Lockhart who I knew from the opera. And she helped me put together the first press conference. She was a professional. She knew the business, knew the artists, and so it was really very good to have someone with that level to do that aspect of the work and actually write the copy for the first brochure, that sort of thing. And then, after that first year, I engaged another consultant in public relations to work with me in San Francisco. Her name is Anita {Mocceri?} and she also, I had met her at the opera. She had her own firm then. And so she worked with me through the second season putting together the second season brochure. And I had actually a woman that still volunteers for me, her name is Vicki Baumann. She had been a volunteer at the opera. So she used to come to my home one-day a week and just help out as a volunteer. And as I say, she's still there. She was there this week at our office. So that's kind of wonderful.

7-00:02:11

Meeker: Since that's probably the longest term of volunteer I've ever heard of, can you tell me a little bit about the work that she's done?

7-00:02:21

Felt: Oh, anything from proofreading to filing to I think, in the early days, typing. We didn't have computers then. Just anything that needed to be—send invitations, phone press releases, do mailings...

7-00:02:42

Meeker: What do you suppose keeps a long-term volunteer interested in and sustained in an organization?

7-00:02:49

Felt: Well, I think it's that person's interest in the product, clearly, because she also volunteered at the opera. And then just the friendship with me. She's probably a woman my mother's age or maybe a little younger. Her husband John is—they're San Franciscans. And in return for her work, I've always given them a full subscription to our concerts, so that's their little benefit. I think they still have the same seats that they've always had at the Herbst Theater. We invite them to come to special events as well. So it is a combination of that interest and wanting to work, wanting to be involved. And Vicki's known all the staff all these years and has become close friends with some of them. So it's just that sort of human relationship.

7-00:03:53

Meeker: I wonder overall—we can go back to the paid staff in a moment—but how would you estimate the role of volunteers in the organization overall in its history? I mean, have they provided sort of the icing on the cake or have they really contributed to the work production that's been done.

7-00:04:17

Felt: Well, I think the staff volunteers it's certainly a help. Vicki's clearly an unusual example. However, our staff, as it developed over time has been primarily all paid professional people. Of course, when you talk about volunteers, then we can go the board. They're all volunteers. And that's a different sort of entity in terms of the support of a nonprofit and very important.

7-00:04:49

Meeker: Well, let's then go back to the staff and then go to the board.

7-00:04:53

Felt: One of the things that I did in the early years in the second season. I was struggling really with how to reach audiences. [chuckles] Nothing's changed; we still struggle with it. But clearly, starting something from the beginning with no track record, just from ticket one, really, was how to effectively market what we were doing in a major city with a lot of other choices for folks. And I wanted, I really was sort of like—what's the word?—just itching to work with some creative, new ideas. I was sort of stymied on where to go.

7-00:05:39

Meeker: What were the ideas that you were stuck with?

7-00:05:39

Felt: I was trying to see how do I market what we're doing—our product, recitals, chamber music, a little series of multi-disciplines types of events—and how do we more effectively package that and reach out? In this formation period, of the early years, I was clearly talking to colleagues and meeting with people, trying to get advice. And someone then said to me, "You know, it would be great Ruth, if you could get Charlie Ziff to work with you. Charlie's in New York, but he knows San Francisco. He's been a consultant in marketing and PR for the symphony and the opera, I think. He knows this community. He's done a lot of research here. And he's really, really a brilliant marketer. And he's working with the Brooklyn Academy of Music, developing their Next Wave Festival. He's worked with a lot of contemporary dance. He's just really a great mind, really, really innovative." So I called him. I was coming to New York and he said, "Come out and see me." So, I did. His offices were in Brooklyn. I remember taking the subway out there and meeting with him and he agreed to work with me. So we set up a time for him to come into San Francisco. I'll never forget that first meeting. I was in the dining room with him, and we were going over the third season, I guess. We were talking about how we were going to package those concerts. By then the third season I think had fourteen concerts, it went

from seven to eleven to fourteen, I think. And Charlie was talking about direct mail and how we had to get a lot of mailing lists, and really good lists. I remember sort of being kind of nauseous after. Only because it was so—I hadn't thought about mailing to fifty thousand people. And he said, that's what you have to do. You have to borrow lists and maybe in some cases buy a couple of lists. He was the one that talked to me about make-your-own-series, completely giving everybody their own pick. Because we were dealing with an audience that—this was a sophisticated product and everybody we were trying to reach would clearly already be subscribers to the symphony or the opera or ACT or another organization. So I worked with Charlie, starting that third season, and he really helped me put together so much more effective materials, packaging. I'm trying to think of how long I worked with him, probably three to four years.

7-00:08:23

Meeker: So what sort of lists did you put together?

7-00:08:25

Felt: I don't recall. I know they were arts lists. In some cases we got them, some places we were turned down, first and foremost, people who go out to the arts. I don't know if we bought any lists like *New Yorker* magazine subscribers or anything like that. I'm certain we explored that, I think, of people who read certain publications. But that step with Charlie Ziff was a very instrumental one, I think, in a successful building of the organization. Then in the third—

7-00:09:04

Meeker: Well, do you suppose you were able to reach out to about fifty thousand people?

7-00:09:11

Felt: Well, I'm sure they all got our brochure. As to the returns on that, I suspect they were small. But in terms of the return that you would get on anything, it was positive, I suspect. But it was the direct mail, which was and still is one of the most effective ways. Charlie just gave me, through basic marketing professional wisdom about your biggest accomplishment is to get a subscriber and then your next big challenge is to keep that subscriber.

Oh! Yeah, I know there was one thing we did that he helped me with the idea for this, is the way in which you pay attention to customers and subscribers. I think it was in that third season or fourth season. He suggested, how can we, in a very unique way, thank your subscribers? So we came up with this idea, and I don't know if it was his, probably was. Through the florist that I knew, that I had known through the opera, we got all these roses. And I remember my hands and Vicki's hands, too, from the thorns—we made these little boutonniere type of things with a card, with a ribbon, that said "Thank you for subscribing." And we put them on the chairs of the people who subscribed at the concert. And it was so great. It was really a labor-intensive effort but people noticed, people appreciated, really understood that it was very charming. There were people who were there who didn't get a rose and then they said, "Why did you get this?" [laughs] Anyway, I'll never forget that. And that sort of drove and still drives in a way the process that I feel has maintained a certain loyalty with customers, that belief in really bonding with your audience members, particularly your subscribers who are loyal to you.

And then, just in terms of ideas about advertising, that style. There's no proven right way exactly, but there are certainly experiments that have proven to be correct and in fact do reach audiences in the way you want to. Charlie was just invaluable there, in terms of his experience, his creativity, and so that was one of the best things I did.

7-00:11:59

Meeker: In the Frances Inglis' interview, and I realize she was probably talking about the fifties and sixties, she talks about the reluctance, the real steady reluctance to advertise in newspapers because somehow that was below the art series? Like it was, "We don't really need to do this," or "we can reach people through other means as opposed to opening it up to the masses" I guess, in the newspaper? I haven't studied the advertising of the Opera, I don't know if that was a similar sentiment that was held by the opera?

7-00:12:41

Felt: I recall that. Yeah, I think what was happening, I think in those years there was this kind of—maybe it goes to the kind of elitism, snobbism of intellectual aura of the more classical performing arts, that it was not something that you stepped to the level of you know, like marketing shampoo or something. There was that sort of like, “We don’t need to stoop to that level.”

I remember, even starting San Francisco Performances, and talking about the whole marketing thing with some of my colleagues, and finding some of their supporters or board members being extremely resistant to the whole recognition of the need to really be savvy in the marketing area. I always felt from the beginning that that was crazy. Look at the world we live in and try and reach out in the most tasteful—there are certain levels of advertising and then there are levels of advertising—but you know, I never, I always was very pro-working with professionals in advertising and marketing. We did that all the way along, in terms of even getting past the tenth season, putting together a marketing committee of professionals, people that weren’t board members but asking them to volunteer their time to meet with us every other month, to review what we were doing, to give us ideas.

7-00:14:24

Meeker: Well, I’m wondering, aside from the rose, can you think of any not necessarily incidents, but examples of how these meetings or how the discussions about marketing resulted in the image of SF Performances that you wanted? And perhaps also if there was some dissent or different ideas that were coming out and some ideas that may be—

7-00:14:58

Felt: Well, I think one of the most controversial, and it still is that today, is the whole issue of tele-funding, telemarketing, using the telephone as a tool to reach out and solicit subscription sales, or donations. And we started doing that in our like—I can’t remember now—but in the earlier years, maybe tenth season. That was very controversial and I know some of my board members were really not

happy with that idea because they were not happy being phoned at home. But we made the case, first of all, that we wanted to try it but it would be tried on not a cold-calling basis. It would be only done through our office with people that we brought into our office with people either from our own staff or people that worked with us right at our desks in the office, and it would not be cold calls; it would be people who had a connection with us. We worked with professionals there and sort of creating scripts that weren't read out exactly but were you know, the campaigns were thoughtfully put together. And we still do it. And we do get results. We continually get results, and good ones. I know there has been resistance from my colleagues in the presenting field, not wanting to go there, not wanting to go to the telephone. Still, some of them don't, but I always felt, "Hey, this is working for the symphony, it's working for the opera, I think can work for us." And it always has. Now I think as we get into caller-ID and all of this stuff that's going on today, it's becoming harder and harder to get people on the phone.

7-00:16:58

Meeker: Cell phones.

7-00:16:57

Felt: Right. But now we've got e-mail in a way that we never had in those days, and that's an incredible tool. But I think all those things that—it's been a steady thread—it's the quality of the communication, the personal communication which e-mail really also provides in a strange way. It's personal and it intrusive in some respects but it offers you entrée in a way that's very good, and we're finding good results with it. And then it's always having a real person on the phone. If you call our office, you get a real person, unless it's after hours, then you get a message. But we've always wanted to have a live person on the other end of the phone.

7-00:17:52

Meeker: So you've talked a lot about people you've worked with basically on a consulting kind of basis, but what about establishing a staff of your own?

7-00:18:01

Felt: I hired my first assistant, full-time, in that third or fourth season. So it was just me and an assistant who was a young college graduate. Actually, started out to be Debbie [Deborah] O'Grady who now has been married to John Adams, the composer, for many years. But after she took the job with me, she got taken away right away by the San Francisco Symphony who realized she was really—she had done a project for them during the summer as a consultant, just a project—so then she took the job with me, she worked with me for a couple of months, and they offered her a job that she really couldn't turn down because it was paying so much more. She talked to me about it. She felt really badly about it, but I understood. I wasn't happy to lose that opportunity because she was really fantastic. But then I found another person who had just graduated from college and who moved out. Liza Mundy was her name. She had just graduated from Princeton and was really bright young woman. She worked with me for about three years, three or four years?—I can't remember, I can look it up. So then it was just the two of us, and still working with Charlie Ziff.

7-00:19:23

Meeker: At home.

7-00:19:24

Felt: At home. Yeah. We moved into an office I think the fifth season, and that was because I had a new board member who owned a building in San Francisco. He negotiated a five- year lease with us and we paid him rent but he made contributions back to us, personal ones to cover what would have been that cost. So that was at 10 United Nations Plaza on the corner of Seventh and Market, only six floors, brand new building then, nice office. Very challenging part of the city, still challenging there with all the homeless which continually got worse.

Then, let's see, I think I need to go back to the board here, because I had put together a small board in that first year. Three founding directors, and then in 1980 we added seven, so we had a board of seven to ten. And one of those board

members was Michael Sack who a CPA/accountant who I'd known at the opera when he had been controller of the opera for a couple of years. And Mike then, became the treasurer of the board, and as volunteer for I think twelve years, he did all of our financials. In other words, I wrote the checks, I kept a ledger—we still have that ledger—but he took the books every month or whenever and reconciled them; he did our obligatory 990's for the government; and then we eventually started having annual audits which he supervised with the auditors. And he did all this free. That is an amazing, amazing contribution.

So, I'm trying to think then, in moving to UN Plaza, I believe Liza was still with me then. Yes, she was. Then—well, the evolution I would have to check, but it wasn't—

7-00:21:49

Meeker: Generally broad brush strokes.

7-00:21:51

Felt: Broad—yes, and maybe within that first ten years while we were at UN Plaza, I added a third staff person. Liza left and I then replaced her. Well, Marian Kohlstedt, who still works for me—and she's retiring now this year—but she will have worked with us for twenty years. So she came in that fifth season. And I think it was just Marian and me then. When Liza left, there was someone short-term in between, and then she got offered a job at the opera [chuckles], so then it was just Marian and me, and again, working with outside professionals. Certainly still Charlie Ziff, and then Mike for all the financials, and then I hired someone to work with us particularly in fundraising. And it was in those years that UN Plaza, that we got our first computer, too. I'll never forget that because that, in terms of just the tools of any business, that was a revelation.

7-00:23:01

Meeker: How so?

7-00:23:02

Felt: Oh, just in terms of, even those early computer capacities, just the memory, and the duplication of certain letters that you send out to request funds, any kind of correspondence, just the ease of all the different printing that you can do in the memory of a computer. This development goes on today in terms of—

7-00:23:37

Meeker: So you could probably do much more in-house than you could before.

7-00:23:43

Felt: Yeah, and so much more efficiently, and so much quicker. And just cutting and pasting different segments of a grant proposal and all the different ways in which computer—we think back to the old days of carbon paper and [laughs] mimeograph machines. And so that whole development.

We moved to 500 Sutter Street in the tenth season or right about then. I think then we had one, two—I had added a fourth person by then. So we had a person focusing on development and fundraising with me, Marian working in ticketing and public relations, the press, and then we had a receptionist/office assistant. So when we moved to Sutter Street, I think there were four of us on the staff, and now there are twelve, so it's been a gradual growth. One of the areas that has expanded has been the education areas, and that sort of outreach to the community.

But actually, when I think about it, we, in addition to our main stage series at Herbst Theater and Davies Hall, in the second season, we did start our little series called "Performances at Six," which we did initially at the Sir Francis Drake Hotel on Powell Street, and then moved down to the Embarcadero where we were in a café restaurant. These were after-work series, six o'clock, one-hour concerts. For five dollars you got an hour concert and a glass of wine. That series grew from four to something, twenty-four every year. We did those down at Embarcadero for, I want to say eighteen, nineteen years until the buildings were sold from Rockefeller, New York to Boston Properties, and then we lost

the space. The space was donated to us. And then we couldn't do it there anymore. We didn't really have a space.

7-00:26:28

Meeker: What was the function of Performances at Six, because I'm thinking, when I notice that, in looking through the programs and the season literature, in some ways it seems like it preceded the educational mission?

7-00:26:41

Felt: Oh, it did, yeah.

7-00:26:42

Meeker: But was an incipient educational mission part of the vision?

7-00:26:48

Felt: Yeah, very definite, definite education. Because it was an intimate environment for an opportunity for the audience to have a close-hand relationship with the performers, and often just, you know, talked to them during the performance. Very informal, very much a listening experience.

7-00:27:15

Meeker: Is that how it happened? Did the audience respond and were there questions asked?

7-00:27:20

Felt: Sometimes those were invited, and it depended a little bit on the performers, and these were all local artists. It was also a way in which we could help and showcase, because our mission was to bring touring artists to San Francisco. And that's still our mission. But the series that we started, we did as Performances at Six, are now continued in this series we have, "Salons at the Rex," is to have that earlier hour to give people that opportunity to come right after work. I think this idea came from one of my board members who now is chair of the board, who is Gussie Stewart. I remember saying to her in that first year, "I know you love music, but as far as I know—I know you pretty well—you don't really go out to the symphony very much during the week, particularly." She said, "Well, I guess you're right, but part of it is that problem

of working and then that interval, and if I could go right out from the office maybe to something, I'd do it." And I thought that's really a great idea. A lot of people were doing noon concerts, which still go on. And I thought about that to get people during the middle of the day from their offices downtown. But then I thought, you know, it would be kind of nice to start something right after work so people could come, have a glass of wine, relax, maybe beat the traffic, if they're commuting and have that experience, right after work. So that was kind of the idea of trying to build, again reaching out to audiences, a new way of offering them a very intimate experience, offering them an opportunity to talk to the performers after the performance very easily. So it was that. So that was kind of our first foray into a slightly alternative way to present performances as well as more of a direct educational—.

7-00:29:19

Meeker: Part of education in this context can also mean outreach to new audiences or attempting to develop audience. Was that an explicit motivation for Performances at Six?

7-00:29:31

Felt: Mm-hmm. Yes, and then we would try to market our main-stage concerts very personally there, because we always had a drawing with a ticket and the winner would get a pair of tickets to something that was coming up at the Herbst Theater, for example. And we would have all of our materials. Each one—I would do at the beginning and then my staff did—I would talk a little bit about the concert coming up that they were going to hear, the artists, and then do a little promo about some of the things we had coming up at Herbst Theater or Davies.

7-00:30:12

Meeker: How many people generally attended these?

7-00:30:14

Felt: Usually, an average of seventy-five to eighty, but sometimes we had over a hundred.

7-00:30:21

Meeker: That's pretty good size.

7-00:30:23

Felt: Yeah, it is. It varied a little bit but it was every week, every Thursday night.

7-00:30:29

Meeker: Did it seem like it was a rotating crowd or—?

7-00:30:31

Felt: Well, we had certain people that were just really, really loyal. They just loved that. They worked in the area and some them came and went back to work.

7-00:30:41

Meeker: After their glass of wine.

7-00:30:44

Felt: Well, no, we had mineral water, too. [laughs] I don't know what they did.

And then in the early days, not only did we have the media coverage for those, we had critics that came to those. You saw them in the book. It was just amazing. We had reviews, the groups got reviewed. And also we got wineries to donate wine and it was a different wine usually every week, and sometimes wineries came and poured their own wine, and many times the wine was fabulous wine. So not only was it a musical experience, but it was a good wine tasting experience. [chuckles]

7-00:31:22

Meeker: Well, the wineries probably felt they were reaching out to a community of consumers that was more well-heeled.

7-00:31:29

Felt: Right. And then as time went on, that got to be more challenging, so we ended up in certain cases buying wine, you know, at a good price.

7-00:31:35

Meeker: Why was that more challenging?

7-00:31:38

Felt: I think just as time progressed, the wineries were being hit up more and more for donations. They still donate today. But what had been in those early years of Performances at Six more of a unique opportunity for them to market became less of an advantage for them. We always had good arrangements, but we weren't just getting automatically donated wine. One year, I think, Gallo, when they were trying to get a different image for some of their more high end product, they sponsored one half of Performances at Six, like twelve concerts, and they brought their wine, different ones, for twelve concerts.

But anyway, that was sort of the whole idea, and that same idea about early concert times is still what we're doing at the Rex. And now I'm going to try something next season with some of my weekday concerts at the Herbst. Schedule them at six-thirty so people can come right after work, have their concert, go out for a more leisurely dinner afterwards, if that's what they want to do, or they can go home early. We're going to see how that works. Because lives are—you know, things change.

7-00:33:11

Meeker: Well, it's ten o'clock, do you want to—it seems like a good spot to—

7-00:33:14

Felt: Yeah.

[interview interruption]

7-00:33:15

Meeker: And the board, I think that's where we stopped. You had mentioned the role that Michael Sack played. I'm wondering—if it's possible to sort of step back and just kind of on the spot, try to think back about what your philosophy of a board of directors was? And perhaps maybe placing it in contrast to the role that the board played at the Opera, because I imagine that was probably your closest experience with that entity.

7-00:33:52

Felt: I guess the thing is that I knew that for any nonprofit arts organization and particularly something like San Francisco Performances, which was starting out with never having done anything before, and the fact that we needed to raise money and all of that, the board of trustees was really going to be so important in terms of that growth and success. At the same time, acknowledging what their legal responsibility is in terms of being the fiduciary responsible entity and in essence, my position as the founder and the executive director/president, I report to them. That's the dynamic in a non-profit organization, is that the chief executive officer or—in this case, I was the president, normally that's probably not the case—but the general director or the executive director is hired by the board and reports to the board. And then the staff reports to the executive director.

7-00:35:05

Meeker: How did you learn this? I mean, how did you come to an understanding of this particular structure and your role vis-à-vis the board, vis-à-vis the staff?

7-00:35:15

Felt: I'm not sure if I remember exactly, but probably in terms of my experience at the Opera, being aware of an older institution with a huge board. And I know that in doing my research for founding this organization, and actually working with the young attorneys that helped me put it together, I read about and studied nonprofit structure and what the law requires. And reflecting from my own personal experience with the board at the opera. And then just reading books about nonprofit structure and different advice about what was considered healthy and positive as opposed to being negative and destructive. Because what I've always wanted to build, not only on staff, in terms of team effort and respect, but also a culture between the board and the staff and certainly myself, as the executive director and my relationship with the board, is not have it be a "them and us" type of relationship but very much a collaborative effort, where we felt we were a team and respected each other. And that is something that we have built at San Francisco Performances. We had some moments and growing

pains, I must say in some of the early years with that idea. Because you find in some organizations very contentious relationships between the board of directors or board of trustees, and the staff. And they treat the staff really terribly, the board, and you know, there's a lot of animosity. And that is exactly what I didn't want to have.

I remember at the time that I—I know I did this research because I made a decision that it would be a board of trustees, not of directors, because of the way in which those two words were defined. The board holds the organization in trust and they are trustees, in my sort of frame of reference. And their direction is in terms of setting policy and performing their fiduciary role, but the actual directing work is done through the executive director and the staff. So, I know there was a lot of thought about that whole thing. And then—

7-00:38:03

Meeker: How did people like Arthur Rock respond to that?

7-00:38:07

Felt: Well, I think the interesting thing about Arthur Rock, because he played a role with me in terms of just his interest and his very, very probing questions and clearly, his incredible intelligence and his risk-taking as an entrepreneurial venture capitalist. But then he resigned from the board in the fifth year, and he's never been really part of our organization going forward other than coming to a few performances and, you know, making a small donation just about every year. But he's never been a major donor of any significance compared to his capacity to give.

7-00:38:52

Meeker: Well, I guess what I was referring to was how did board members like Arthur Rock and perhaps others respond to the difference between board of directors and trustees?

7-00:38:59

Felt: I don't recall. I don't recall. I think it's spelled out pretty much in some of these manuals about nonprofit boards, and I probably shared that with them. But actually, I did this initially with the two founding directors; we created in the by-laws a board of trustees, as opposed to a board of directors. That's such a fine point. I remember thinking about that, because you see both things. You see organizations that have boards of directors or they have boards of trustees. They're virtually the same thing; they just have a different name. [chuckles].

7-00:39:42

Meeker: Okay.

7-00:39:41

Felt: But I think that whole sort of culture that you develop with a board, in terms of their understanding of their roles, and the understanding of how they work with the staff and how they work with each other—and it's ongoing. Over time we developed—we didn't have in the beginning limited three-year terms, and then after two three-year terms, you rotate off, which is a healthy sort of way in which you can bring in new board members and also without too much rancor, have people leave the board. Because sometimes that gets to be very, very tricky, if you don't have terms, because you get a board member who maybe is not performing their responsibilities to the level you wish they would, and then to try and move them off the board if they don't want to go off the board—very, very delicate. So if you have a policy of rotation, then that affects everyone, and everyone has to rotate off when their second term is up. We put that in place I think in the tenth season, that was a very healthy step. That was a discussion item at the board level, because there were people who didn't think that was a good idea.

7-00:41:13

Meeker: Why is that?

7-00:41:16

Felt: Because people do get very territorial. And sort of like, "Well, that's not a very good thing for the organization if you have a major board member who is so

important, and gives a lot of money and really does a good job, why would you want to force them to go off the board? Then you've lost them." Well, our position was, we don't have to lose them. They can stay involved; there's no reason they can't stay involved. They can come back on the board in a year, two years, three years if that's their interest and everyone feels that's a good idea. And that's kind of the way in which it works now for us. Some people rotate off and never come back, but they stay involved in another way or some people come back right after a year, because they really want to be back. And the board itself feels they should be back.

Anyway, I just think what we've developed with San Francisco Performances—the authorized number is thirty and we're right about twenty-nine right now. The board size goes between twenty-five and thirty usually. It's a big board, but it's not an overwhelmingly big board. And, just for example, yesterday, what we call our board development committee met and we're looking at our annual meeting coming up in May, which is the traditional place where we elect new board members and board members that are going off the board rotate off. And this particular year, of fiscal year '05, we've got six really important board members rotating off, so we've been meeting all along to have in the pipeline potential new board members to come in and be elected to replace them. And so yesterday, we reviewed where we were with these candidates and their interests and their involvement, and so that when we get to the annual meeting, we will have six good candidates to elect to replace the ones rotating off. And we do. We've got a pretty good slate. But what often happens with boards—and this happened to us too, in the early years—we didn't have a good process about evaluation of potential board members, bringing them into our family as part of a committee, or just part of the structure. So then we get down to closing in on the annual meeting where we need new trustees, and we were just scrambling. "Call this person, call that person." We didn't have a way in which we had already kind of explored, with these new people their value added, what they would expect. So now we have a pretty good system, and we've developed a

very nice pamphlet or packet of information about board responsibilities, talking about what is expected, in terms of their own personal contribution, financially, and what they are expected to raise for the organization, their responsibilities in terms of meeting attendance, conflicts of interest. All of those different things. It's amazing, some organizations don't even have that. It's kind of like a really effective, thoughtful strategic way in which you've put together your information so that you can be effective in communicating that and building an organization's board that is going to be an effective instrument for you.

7-00:45:14

Meeker: Well, I see very clearly that you've developed a sense of what you hope to get out of the board members, how SF Performances hopes to benefit from their presence on the board. Do you have any sense of how they, the board members, view what they're going to gain from participating with SF Performances?

7-00:45:36

Felt: Well, yeah, I think it's part of the whole structure of nonprofit or boards. Not just in the arts, but our whole cultural policy in this country is really the tax code and the way in which individuals, say, for example, participate in the nonprofit world. They make financial contributions, they believe in a cause, and they get rewarded themselves because they're contributing to something they value. And at the same time, the organization wants to give them back an experience that's really, very, very enriching, not only in terms of the product they feel identified with, but also in the relationships they build with their colleagues on the board and how that expands their community of people and their life experience.

7-00:46:43

Meeker: I wonder if you can provide any specific examples of how you do this?

7-00:46:47

Felt: Well, it's interesting. One of the things that's happened in our board is you see some of the people that have met, people that have become very close friends. And they met because they both served as board members of San Francisco Performances. They found a similar interest in the arts and they found they liked

each other. So those relationships, friendships which are so important in life, we've developed a way in which this organization has become the catalyst for some really special friendships.

7-00:47:28

Meeker: Do you think that's one of the intangible motivations for people to join, is that somehow you communicate to them or they get a sense that they'll be joining a group of peers?

7-00:47:40

Felt: Yes. Yeah, and what you see, too, as we've gotten older and more established is that our board recruitment has become in a sense easier and more for us, choosing from people who have come forward and said, "I'm a subscriber and a donor and I really would be very interested to know more about what is involved in becoming a board member." Because they experience our concerts or our gala the other night and they enjoyed it and they enjoyed the people they met, and so they thought, if they have some time and they'd like to do volunteer work, "This is an organization I'd like to explore, getting involved on the board." You know.

I think what you want to avoid and always have in terms of the culture that you create around your board, is you want to have it be a really positive environment and not a political one and really try to check as soon as you see it starting.

Because it's inevitable with human behavior, you're going to get people who disagree and you're going to get people with certain ego needs that are going to rub against others. You try to anticipate some of that even in your investigating who these people are who are coming forward sometimes to serve on a board.

We've certainly found cases where we've been approached by people and board members or I have made some calls about their prior board experience and the way in which they worked on a board and there have been certain cases where we have said, "Nope, we don't want to go there."

7-00:49:42

Meeker: Wow.

7-00:49:43

Felt: Because we've heard stories from staff that this person is really very, very arrogant and treats staff like slaves and doesn't respect them. Don't want that at all. So you know, you try to do your homework, just like in any situation to make sure that you're getting interesting people and people that have something to say. Change is good, but you want to change within a certain attitude, with a certain respectful attitude and that sort of thing.

7-00:50:25

Meeker: I know that foundations, particularly those committed to things like affirmative action, when they are funding organizations, are very interested in seeing diversity amongst the staff and the board. I'm wondering how you recruit and develop a diverse board, or the extent to which you can given the subject area that you guys are—?

7-00:50:56

Felt: Well, I think for us, first and foremost, I feel board members have to have a sincere interest in the product that we present. The best ones are the ones that are dedicated to music and/or dance. They're not new to it; they have a real interest. And certainly in terms of reaching out, say, to the African American community—which we did, on purpose, trying to diversify, believing it very strongly—I went to one of my board members who served on the symphony board, and they had a board member, an African American businessman on the board, and I asked my board member if we could have lunch with him and we could talk about the fact that we were interested in bringing on a professional African American who was interested in music and/or dance and, “Did he have anyone to recommend?” And he did. And we then had lunch with this man, Victor Hymes, who was a very successful financial person in San Francisco, a singer himself, a graduate of Oberlin and Stanford Business School. It took a couple years of just talking with Victor—Victor and his wife came to concerts—and then he joined the board and then he eventually became the board chair, and now his wife's on the board. But I think the healthiest development is around

that shared interest, and being strictly direct about why we're here and having an exchange, and not pushing it so fast but developing it over time.

7-00:52:52

Meeker: I wonder if you could talk a little bit more about how that's done because I know that is a large concern of most people in the nonprofit. They're committed to diversity but at the same time they may be operating or starting an organization that struggles with its foundation not being that diverse. How have you—?

7-00:53:14

Felt: Well, it's still, it's just very challenging. Because we're dealing with a very definite human behavior: "Birds of a feather flock together." [chuckles] It's so true. In this community, in San Francisco, there's so many different ethnic groups, and different diversity hubs. And they do overlap, but very often, they're more exclusive than they are inclusive. So I think as a society, generally, we have to work at it.

Well, I'll just give you an example. The Korean American community, huge community here, very, very, very large percentage of Korean Americans are interested in classical music, play instruments, are very involved and devoted to this product that we present. And we're working at this. I want to get a Korean American on my board. Because I know that this community is there and they relate to our product, but generally speaking the only time that we get a significant number of Korean Americans at our performances is when it's a Korean artist. And then you see it. But then, we have their information, we try to get them to come back in greater numbers to just music, generally. And it's very hard.

Now, we have more success with the Chinese community. We have Chinese representatives on our board. But I do think the key to getting more diversity that's really real, is bringing diversity into your board and staff, not just for diversity's sake, but because of the real commitment to the product and

knowledge that these people all have and trying to see how that family can be made more diverse, not in an artificial way.

7-00:55:33

Meeker: Well, we can certainly come back to the board issue. But now that we've brought up programming and ethnic diversity and other sorts of cultural diversity in San Francisco, that was one thing that was becoming very obvious to me reading through the clippings file, is that when there was a Korean American performer or a Chinese American performer, those local language papers would review it. When there was African American performer, the *Sun Reporter* would come along. When there was a gay dance troupe or something like that, the *Bay Area Reporter* would cover it, or an opera diva. [laughs]

7-00:56:14

Felt: Yes, exactly.

7-00:56:15

Meeker: I kind of wonder how conscious the programming has been vis-à-vis cultural and ethnic diversity in San Francisco and to what extent do you try to reach out to those communities, letting them know that they might be particularly interested in this performer that's coming along.

7-00:56:39

Felt: I'll have to say the driving programmatic arrow is all about the art. If the artist happens to be Korean or happens to be Chinese or happens to be Russian, great. Then we obviously do reach out to those communities because hey, we know the reality is the reality.

7-00:57:13

Meeker: How do you reach out?

7-00:57:14

Felt: Oh, through the contacts, you know, like in the Russian community now. With the Moscow Virtuosi, you know Tanya is our greatest sales rep—she works for us out there.

7-00:57:27

Meeker: Tanya who?

7-00:57:28

Felt: I'm trying to remember—she's a Russian and whenever we have Russian things, Tanya's in the office. She's buying groups of tickets. She's calling, she's got a network within the Russian community. She's volunteer. She doesn't work for us but—it's not just for us, it would be with symphony too, I'm sure.

7-00:57:55

Meeker: She probably also knows that the more that she brings you ticket sales, the more you are likely to bring in artists who will be of interest to her community.

7-00:58:04

Felt: Yeah, no, no, there's no question. I run a business, so the fact that the Moscow Virtuosi sells a lot of tickets here means that I would choose them again over maybe another Russian ensemble.

First of all and foremost, I know they're first class. Don't compromise the artistic standard to reach out to the diverse community, uh-uh. To me that's completely the wrong thing. Because there's plenty of fabulous artists of all ethnicities. You don't have to compromise that standard. I mean, there are first-rate artists and marginal in all ethnicities, so the first and foremost, you have to have the quality. But then, I suppose somebody could say to me, you really need to be more conscious of the marketability of the ethnic card, so to speak, in terms of your programming. And maybe that could be said. I don't know.

I have to say sincerely that I don't really purposefully—I'll just say sometimes, like last year, I said to my marketing staff and to my development staff, I said, "Oh, look at this, we have three Chinese artists. Oh. That's good. We can now reach out to this—." We had a Chinese guitarist, a Chinese pianist, and another Chinese artist, too. Two Chinese pianists! Lang Lang and Yundi Li and this fabulous Chinese classical guitarist, Xeufei Yang. And I wasn't choosing that. I was choosing them because of their artistry.

7-01:00:07

Meeker: So it's not something that's brought into the consideration up front.

7-01:00:11

Felt: Up front. Uh-uh.

7-01:00:13

Meeker: You said that there's a positive response among the Chinese community to Chinese artists that come in, and this might be sort of touchy, but I'm wondering have you ever had an experience of having a negative response among your regular core group of subscribers, who maybe aren't Chinese?

7-01:00:32

Felt: Oh, you mean to the performance, to the performer?

7-01:00:34

Meeker: Not to the performance, or just maybe even on the ticket sales side.

7-01:00:37

Felt: No, no, no.

7-01:00:39

Meeker: So it's not like—you don't get the sense that—I guess what I'm asking is that while members of certain ethnic groups, you know Russian, or Chinese, or Armenian, I think at some point, come in and attract more because of their ethnic group, the larger, undifferentiated, for lack of a better word “white audience,” you don't see a trend of them thinking that it's kind of marginal or—

7-01:01:12

Felt: No, I think the reason that it doesn't is because there is no compromise on the artistic standard. I mean, I think yes, you could see that if it was obvious that I was reaching out to different ethnic sort of enclaves because of reaching out to the ethnic audience, and if the product was compromised in some way and that it seemed to them that the artist wasn't up to the standards. But again, to me in terms what we do, and in terms of the art, there are so many fabulous artists out there of all ethnicities. And, yeah, you have to be discerning and you have to do

your homework to find—there are just lots and lots of wonderful artists that deserve to be presented.

7-01:02:06

Meeker: I wonder if there are any instances in which you've brought in artists, clearly through artistic standards, and unbeknownst to you, they brought in an audience that you maybe didn't know existed? Like a culture group, or ethnicity?

7-01:02:20

Felt: Well, I think, certain times—and this is not exactly the right example, but it could be. Last year I brought in a pianist, Marc-André Hamelin, he's Canadian, he lives in Philadelphia. He's in his forties, he's really a brilliant artist. He's a very intellectual kind of pianist, has had a lot of recordings and he does a lot of interesting obscure repertoire. So, I decided to present him, because that's the kind of pianist I like to present, and all of a sudden I realized, and I was so pleased, that there were people in the audience that I knew that rarely come to my performances at all. And not that they don't love music, they do! But they're just very picky. I said, "My God, I didn't know you were coming." They said, "Well, we weren't but, my God, Marc-André Hamline, we have all of his recordings. The thought that we could hear him live for the first time, I'm so glad that we knew about it." I guess I said, "Well, how did you find out about it?" because they didn't necessarily read the *Chronicle* or whatever. They said, "Well, the word got out, sort of internally, for the folks that really are fans of his," so there was this little word of mouth.

7-01:03:39

Meeker: So, for lack of a better word, he's like a cult performer or something.

7-01:03:44

Felt: To a certain degree, he has a certain following. But then, of course, what I found is not only did he reinforce my expectation in terms of who this artist was and what he would do, I was just so completely knocked out by the performance that I took him out for something to eat afterwards, and he was such a lovely human being, so without any kind of arrogance and so down to earth, and he had been

great with the staff backstage. And then we started talking about some of the things he was working on and—I hadn't intended to do this at all but I did!—I invited him back for two years running. And I never do that. But I did because I thought, “This is—”

7-01:04:27

Meeker: Kind of on the spot?

7-01:04:27

Felt: On the spot. First of all, I knew that I had encountered all these folks in the lobby that I was so rejoicing in the fact that they had come for him. And then I thought, “This is really a fabulous pianist.” Not that I didn't know that, but, “And also, he can come back every year and we're going to have him do a concert, but we're also going to have him do a little bit of a lecture or some kind of outreach.” Because his repertoire is so interesting. So that was—I came into the office the next day [laughing] and I said, “I'm not sure you're all going to believe what I did last night, but I've just invited Marc-André Hamelin to come back next year and the year after that.” So.

7-01:05:17

Meeker: Well, that's your prerogative.

7-01:05:18

Felt: Yeah, right. Speaking of that, that's another thing that's very interesting is that I've always in terms of the dynamic of this organization, maintained artistic control. And that isn't always the case. There are certain organizations that have artistic committees of the board that can override the executive director. I don't believe in that. I really listen to my board, and many of them have fabulous musical ears and eyes for dance and I want to hear from them. I want to know what they think, who they like, their recommendations when they travel, they go to festivals in Europe and I want to know, and I listen, I pay attention to when they come back and say, “I heard this fantastic quartet.” Very likely, if I haven't known about them, many times I do, I'll follow up and say, “One of my trustees

heard this concert and I want more information about this group.” But I make the final choice.

7-01:06:24

Meeker: I guess we can follow up on that, but first, when you say that there was a group of people at this concert, who you don't normally see out, these are people who you recognize? I mean, are they performing artists or—?

7-01:06:33

Felt: Well, one of them was my neighbor! [chuckles]

7-01:06:35

Meeker: Oh, okay, all right. So it's not like Michael Tilson Thomas shows up to this concert.

7-01:06:42

Felt: Sometimes you get musical people in the community that you're not expecting to see.

7-01:06:47

Meeker: But for this particular concert, they were just people who you knew already, but outside of the context.

7-01:06:54

Felt: Yes. Well, I mean, my neighbors next door, they came. And I know they're very interested in music. Henry's a doctor and they have a busy life and I don't see them very often at my concerts. So I was just really surprised to see them, because they didn't call me to get a ticket or anything, they just came, they bought a ticket. And they, it turns out, were really fans of Marc-Andre Hamelin as were their friends, and Marc had never been here before. So, they came.

7-01:07:23

Meeker: Actually, following up on that, not so much about your neighbors, I was following this line of you picking artists kind of in relation to audience groups. I'm wondering if audience groups have ever attempted to get to bring an artist

that would represent them or that they are particularly interested in, whether it's like an ethnic group, or whether it's a particular kind of culture group.

7-01:07:56

Felt: I have an example in the works now, actually. And yes, I get calls from different people in the community, subscribers who want to recommend certain artists, that's great, I like to hear from them. But in this case now, there's a group of people who are devoted to the harp and harp repertoire. [I] never presented a harpist in recital. But through one of our donors, who's a subscriber, who contacted me and told me there was going to be this big harp convention in San Francisco in '05 and would I consider ever presenting a harpist in recital. And I said, "Well, sure." This is an instrument that I certainly know but I've never really pursued in terms of individual harp recitalists. Then he arranged for three people that are harpists themselves, one of them I knew, to come meet with me. I said, "Why don't you have this group come to me and bring to me CD's and information about the harpists they would like to have perform here. I will listen and I hear from them why they feel these artists are exemplary." Then there's a foundation that's specifically devoted to championing the harp repertoire and harpists. And they then got confirmation that if I would choose to present a harpist on our series that this foundation would commit to supporting it up to \$5,000. So, where it stands now is, I have met with them, I have the materials, and there are three artists that they are suggesting are young artists, young competition winners in the harp. One's Italian, one's Chinese, one's American, I think, I don't know. Three young women. So I'm considering that and listening to the CD's.

Also, we have a young master's series that we do at a small hall where I introduce young artists for the first time. And bringing harp recitalists fits there, and they as a group, the harp club or whatever the group of harpists in the community, would not only be overjoyed if we were to do this but would be very helpful in selling tickets to their members and the community that they know. So that's where that stands. I haven't signed anybody up yet, but I'm

seriously considering it. And for all those reasons, that we've got a constituency, but we also have a standard that is certainly there. I mean, these three people they brought to me are fine, fine musicians. So that's where that is.

7-01:11:31

Meeker: And they would perform solo?

7-01:11:34

Felt: Yeah, in the small series.

7-01:11:38

Meeker: What's the hall where you present the small series?

7-01:11:41

Felt: Up until now, it has been at the Palace of the Legion of Honor. It's three hundred seats. This year, we've moved that series to the new JCC, the Jewish Community Center hall that seats four hundred fifty, Kanbar Hall.

7-01:11:52

Meeker: And that's new?

7-01:11:54

Felt: Yeah, this will be the first time we've used it.

In terms of other situations like that—

7-01:12:04

Meeker: Well, I'm just thinking—I know a few years ago, the opera presented that Armenian opera, correct? And I know that that was basically brought in by members of the Armenian community and they raised funds—

7-01:12:16

Felt: They raised a lot of money to make it possible, yeah. I think that's probably an unusual situation, clearly. I don't think—well, one of the decisions that I made when I started, and I didn't think about it so much until I was confronted with it, is that there are lots of competitions, particularly piano competitions. And everybody, so many presenters in the country get on the competition bandwagon. They present the Cliburn Competition winner or this competition

winner when they win. And I decided in my gut that I didn't want to do that. Because I think competitions are a legitimate way for artists to get attention brought to themselves, but I have a lot of mixed feelings about what that experience actually ends up being in the long run. I think it has aspects of too much too soon and exploitation. And you see a competition winner in that year after they compete and win, and then their career doesn't go anywhere. There's something wrong with this system. So I decided that I didn't want to be bombarded with all these competitions and have to—so I decided I'm not going to present competition winners the year they win. Policy, not going to go there. It's not that we won't present competition winners down the road, we do. Many of the artists that we present have won competitions but maybe five, six years ago. But I got approached by a patron family, the Chin family here in San Francisco, who were very interested in paying tribute to Robert Mann and Lucy Mann who run the Naumburg Competition Foundation. So Yanek Chin and his family came to me and said why wouldn't I present the Naumburg winner every year? The Naumburg is a very prestigious competition, and they don't just focus on one instrument: one year it's piano, one year it's cello, vocal.

7-01:14:45

Meeker: Where is this staged?

7-01:14:47

Felt: In New York. And they've had a real prestigious track record. Naumburg winners have been artist's like Richard Goode and Dawn Upshaw, and there are just lots of really, you know, who have gone on to major careers. However, I said to Yanek's family that I really don't present competition winners, in the year they win. Not that we don't, but I just didn't want to go there. But I said, "But you know, in the spirit of this gift concert that we created, that we give our subscribers every year, I would present the Naumburg competition winner if we could give it away to our subscribers as a benefit. Because you've said that you would give us a contribution if we would do this, so if you and your family want to make this possible, why don't we do that?" So that's what we do now in

December, we have one coming up. The Chiu family underwrites this concert, we present the Naumberg winner and it's free to our subscribers. It's a fabulous situation because we introduce a young artist who is very talented, we get nearly a capacity audience for an artist that nobody knows, and it's underwritten. So everybody benefits. The artist gets an incredible exposure to a wonderful audience, which would not be possible, because you know for an unknown artist, you're lucky if you can sell maybe three hundred seats, if that. So now, we get an audience between eight hundred and nine hundred. We sell a few tickets, but it's basically free. The audience is made of all of our subscribers. So now we do that.

We also have in the spring a gift concert—we've been doing that for even longer—and that came about because one year, believe it or not, we had eight cancellations. It was just an epidemic. It was just one thing after another. People cancelled for being sick, or couldn't travel. It was '91 or something, onset of the Gulf War. I don't remember. Anyway, there were just a lot of cancellations.

7-01:17:12

Meeker: Yeah, I remember there were some people who wouldn't come to the United States to perform because of that.

7-01:17:17

Felt: Yeah. There was just a whole bunch of stuff that went on. And we were virtually in touch with our subscribers to tell them constantly that the concert that they had, the artist wasn't coming and so they were getting a different artist. And so I said to the staff after this was like the fourth time around, I said, "Okay, this is really tough, but let's try to make the best of it. We're in touch with our subscribers all the time in a way that we normally aren't. So we have to make the best communication possible and the best relationships and make it as positive a thing as we can."

So that year we had an artist who is coming to play the Goldberg Variations, Ed Aldwell, a Bach specialist. I don't remember when his concert was dated, but

they discovered he was sick. They finally diagnosed it and it was Lyme disease. So then, we canceled his concert in December, I think. We rescheduled for the end of May because the doctor said, “Now that we’ve found out what it is, in six months, now that we treat him, he should be fine.” So the notice went out that “Mr. Aldwell can’t play, he’s been diagnosed with Lyme disease, but now that they know what it is, he’s being treated and we’ve rescheduled his concert for May.” Now, when we got to May, or close to May, he was recovering, but he still wasn’t strong enough to come and play. So at that point, I replaced him with Robert Levin, a fine pianist, to come and do that recital. Then in the summer, we had announced our new season, and we get a call from Aldwell, “I’m fine now. I want to come and play.” [chuckles] Well, it wasn’t part of the series. So, I had one of those in the shower flash points in the morning here, just sort of like, great idea! I thought, “Why don’t we have him come and play and we will give our subscribers who went through all this turmoil with us this last year, we’ll give it to them as a gift. It will be free.” And I went to one of my trustees who actually had introduced me to Ed Aldwell and had told me about an experience they had and hearing him play Bach in New York, which is how I originally heard about him, and I said, “This is my idea and would you make a contribution to help underwrite this concert?” They said that they thought that was a great idea, and they said they’d be happy to. So then that concert happened as a gift. The place was completely full. And it was just such an incredible experience for him, for the pianist, for the audience, so that was the beginning of an annual gift concert. And the Smiths, Camilla and George, underwrite that every year.

7-01:20:34

Meeker: How did the subscribers respond to this idea of a gift concert?

7-01:20:39

Felt: Oh, they love it!

7-01:20:40

Meeker: How did they respond actually, first of all, to all the concerts that were canceled or rescheduled?

7-01:20:45

Felt: Oh, we had a variety of responses, but I think in terms of just handling it, we did it very personally and certainly honestly. In certain cases, I think we only ended up outright canceling one. We substituted artists, I believe, in each case. And most of the time, those artists that substituted were very, very quality, obviously. And people who didn't want to come hear the substitute were given refunds.

7-01:21:18

Meeker: How do you go about finding a substitute?

7-01:21:20

Felt: Oh, you get on the phone [laughs] and find out, you know, if it's a string quartet you want another string quartet, so you get on the phone to your network of people and find out who's available. And the best way is to have a substitute of the same caliber on the same date. Sometimes, you can't do that and you have to have a replacement recital or concert on a different date. Sometimes you can actually have the same artists come but on a different date. The best result is the same date with an artist of equal stature. And then sometimes, I've had to, if a Murray Perahia cancels or something like that, you can't get a superstar available to come, that's at his level to come in the same date. So I've erred in the other direction, replaced, say, a Murray Perahia with a really outstanding younger artist. And then we've refunded or, in one case, we went and got this younger artist's CD and as part of the deal you come to the concert and you get a CD as well as a concert.

In one case, one time, Anne Sophie Mutter canceled and then she came back. She was sick, she was in the country, but she was on a big tour and she got sick. She had to cancel us and the Los Angeles recital. God bless her, she came back from Germany a month later and played for both of us. But in that cancellation, it was really very—I know we sent out her CD to the people who had tickets. We bought at cost a whole bunch of her latest recording to sort of you know say, "Thanks for sticking with us and here's a gift."

7-01:23:47

Meeker: So clearly a lot of thought goes into this.

7-01:23:52

Felt: Yeah, well, it's the same old thing, you know, your customer is really important and there's a lot of things for that customer to choose from and what you really need is their loyalty. And you need to make them really feel like they belong to the organization and that you're treating them well.

7-01:24:15

Meeker: I'm going to press pause.

[Minidisc 8]

8-00:00:04

Meeker: Okay, so I think what we should probably talk about now is the educational mission of SF Performances. And then alongside that, talk about the artist in residence program, perhaps the commissions. Maybe the commissions are a little bit different. Well, what is the educational mission and where did it come from?

8-00:00:33

Felt: It seems to me that when I started San Francisco Performances, I didn't really envision the development of a particular arts education program in schools. I believed in serving the community and serving arts and building audiences for the art forms that we would present. But as I got more involved in the presenting of artists, it was my realization as well as all of us in the professional world of the performing arts and the visual arts that what was happening, our public schools system was more and more eliminating arts education. As we saw that happen and weren't doing anything about it, all of a sudden, "My God, we have to address this, because where are our future audiences going to come from if this is neglected in everyone's experience in their education." So you saw in the eighties then arts organizations starting to address the way in which they could somehow bring arts into schools. And actually I had wanted and we saw with Performances at Six ways in which we could be more innovative in reaching out

to people with what we did, in terms of chamber music. So, in '88 actually, we started working with the Community Music Center, with their headquarters on Capp Street in the Mission, an old wonderful community center for music that teaches music to people of all ages on a sliding scale of what they can afford, it's a wonderful model. And we started bringing a few of our main stage artists to the community music center for what we called "Concerts with Conversation," an hour of actual performance interspersed with questions and answers and dialogue with the audience. It was free. So we did that and we still do it.

8-00:02:50

Meeker: How was this funded?

8-00:02:54

Felt: Just through our operating budget. The artists did it for very little money. They were here. And it was just really whether they had a day after or a day before that they could do it. And people like André Watts did it, Richard Stoltzman, Billy Taylor, Dawn Upshaw. There were a lot of artists that wanted to do this, and not all of them could because they didn't have the time. Then, in '88-'89 also, on our board was a woman named Jane Galante who was very much part of the Morrison Trust Funds that support music at San Francisco State University. She is a pianist and very dedicated to chamber music, and she was on our board, and she came to me and said that she wanted to see how the Morrison Funds and their relationship with San Francisco State and the music department at State, and she hoped San Francisco Performances could work together to actually have a resident string quartet on the faculty at San Francisco State, and how did I see that working for us? And I thought about it and we talked about it and I thought, "Well, if we had a string quartet that we shared in a small way, they could then become maybe the basis of a program that we would bring into the schools, with them, with the string quartet."

And so that then led to San Francisco State posted an application process for string quartets to apply to be the resident quartet at State and with us. And string quartets from all over the country applied and auditioned for the music

department at State. I was kept apprised of this but I wasn't in the selection process; I left it to them. So they chose the Alexander [String] Quartet. They were a New York-based quartet. I met with the Alexander, I was on the phone with them, and talked about their experience with going into schools. They had done a fair amount of it and they were comfortable going into high schools. Because in the meantime, I had met with Sally Ann Ryan of the Unified School District here, the arts person for the Unified School District to find out that what was really not being addressed at all were high school kids, that the symphony was developing this fabulous program which they have to bring music into all the elementary schools. There was some middle school attention, but nobody was doing anything in the high schools. So we decided that's what we'd do. And the Alexander Quartet was fine with that.

Sally Ann Ryan helped me select three schools that she felt we would find receptive principals and teachers, a teacher and also a very needy situation in terms of music: Mission High School, Galileo [High School], I think, and the International Studies Academy on Potrero Hill. That was the beginning in that year, '89 I think, of that concept of going into high schools, working with curriculum. They'd go into a history class, and depending on what era of history the students were studying, they'd adapt the repertoire of what they would bring, whether it was during the revolution of Napoleon's time or Beethoven, they'd adapt the composer and his era to the history they were studying and perform music. So that was the basis of that. And if it was a math class, they actually talked about mathematics and music. Or if it was science even, taking an instrument and the chemistry of that instrument, the glues, and—it was very interesting. And if it was French, it was you know, like, French repertoire. So.

And then as we developed that with the string quartet. We decided that we needed to come up with curriculum materials for the teachers to use and for the students to take away, to try to really make this as in-depth an experience as possible. I mean, it's kind of a band-aid, but to enable the students to have

something that they could prepare for and also that they could take away. So, that sort of is what we've done. The Alexander String Quartet has stayed here, they still are with us, they're still with State. It's been a great partnership. We, San Francisco Performances, couldn't have done it alone. And the fact that they are faculty members—they moved out here after two years—has been the way in which this has all been able to get started and also just sustain itself.

8-00:08:18

Meeker: Can I actually stop there? Again, this is one of those questions, I'm not trying to be difficult—Again you mention this issue that what you're trying to do seems like a band-aid to a certain extent. Particularly after Prop. 13, there is a serious decline in arts education in schools. And I know that a lot of non-profit organizations, outside of schools, and generally not receiving any taxpayers' funds because of their own mission have tried to take up the slack. I mean, the same thing I know is going on in Los Angeles, the Skirball, and this is one of the things I'm going to talk to you about them. Have there been any kind of conversations about the philosophy behind private nonprofits entering the schools to provide something that maybe those people in the nonprofits would rather have been provided through taxpayer dollars? I mean, is that an issue of conversation?

8-00:09:32

Felt: Well, I think the whole issue itself, of the professional performing artist or visual artist in addition to going out on stage and performing for an audience, having to take their artistry and their talents and become teachers, not teachers of accomplished master class students but going into the general student body, that this has been in some ways a very controversial subject. I remember when I served on the board of Chamber Music America some time ago, there was a very controversial discussion amongst CMA whether education, arts education, chamber music education was the proper purview for this service education, for the profession and for professional artists. The people who argued against it were saying, we're trained to be professional musicians, that's what we do. We

didn't come into this business to be teachers, teachers in that way, and we don't feel that we should be forced to do this. And I took the position that okay, that's valid, but if you want to be a performing professional musician, you do, you can't perform in a vacuum and you have to look at the reality of the world you live in, and we've got to do something about what's happening to the general public and how they are learning about the art that you want to give them. That's not rocket science. I took the position and that's become more the prevailing one now, that we as a profession have to look at the audiences that we want to develop. And it's not just sending out a direct mail piece anymore. I'm not sure I answered your question.

8-00:11:53

Meeker: Well, you know, now that you're talking about this, I'm trying to figure out the larger historical sweep of the role of nonprofits in public school education and this kind of attitude among artists that "I want to be an artist." Maybe saying hermetically sealed from the rest of society is a little harsh but I kind of wonder the extent to which that attitude that they could have, that I just want to be an artist, is also the product of a historical experience in which maybe—I kind of look back and I think about, well, Handel and Haydn. They weren't just artists; they were performing for their patrons. And artists are always having to perform for their patrons. It seems like this notion among artists that they're just going to be solely enmeshed in art has to be the product of a particular time. It seems like there was a historical transformation that is going on and are they participating in it.

8-00:13:13

Felt: Well, yeah, and it's also the whole democratization of society, I suppose, the opening it up. It's true that there are certain artists aren't really very good at reaching out and being teachers. Skills are skills, and we find that now, I mean, there are certain artists that are really good at this, really good teachers, and really get a lot of enrichment themselves from it. Others really don't, can't do it very well and they don't want to do it. And so not all of them can or will. We

also find people who are afraid of it, who find once they are pushed into it out of necessity, have found that they like it and they get good at it. It's like anything else. So, you know, there's no right answer in a sense, other than I think the basic reality is if you're not exposing young people through the education system to something you believe in, then somebody has to step in and try to make that happen. I would want it to eventually change, and I think it can when our society, not just for arts education but just for quality education overall—it's amazing to me that a country as enlightened supposedly as the United States, and so competitive, and wanting to be number one in the world, and whatever, can shortchange the basic training of our populace. That's kind of the founding thing of our founding fathers about public education, quality public education as the bedrock of democracy, and yet if there's anything that's being shortchanged today, it's been public education and teachers and the value that they hold in our society.

I won't get myself started on that but I think that eventually, I hope, that this is going to come back. We see a lot of lip service by politicians. And eventually, I think that we are going to have to really honor it in a really productive way. And that means throwing money at it. That's not the only way, but they can't just keep shortchanging it all the time. And then the arts I hope will also come back on that wave. [chuckles]

8-00:15:56

Meeker: And perhaps the innovation that organizations like you are doing will provide a model for the way in which arts can be reintroduced into a public school curriculum on a larger scale.

8-00:16:14

Felt: There's nothing like the up-close and powerful experience in a classroom of having students encounter a live string quartet of the standard of the Alexander Quartet. I mean, whoa. Whether you have ever heard this stuff before, people can recognize stuff that's really quality. They may not understand it, but that's pretty powerful. Or an artist, a major artist, a singer or pianist, in their class,

talking about their art and giving them examples of it. Now, if that is added, if that's the sort of icing on a situation where they've got a music class where they are learning about music or art every day three times a week. And then they have the opportunity to see a professional at that level, share with them some of their art, it makes it much more positive.

8-00:17:23

Meeker: This is a two-part question. I wonder how the educational mission relates to the grant-seeking element, and also I guess—I'm also asking you maybe to provide a little background on foundation funding and some of the historical milestones.

8-00:17:48

Felt: Well, in our case, this Alexander Quartet idea was not grant-driven. It was driven by mission and partnerships and people that we were working with, like Jane Galante with the Morrison Trust, and the commitment to music. However, then, in the nineties, we were invited, we were selected by the Lila Wallace Reader's Digest Foundation to apply for a multi-year grant that was going to serve audience development and participation through artist programs in partnership with community groups. And it was going to be a huge grant. It was like \$400,000, big money from a national foundation. We were very honored to be asked but it meant taking the model, which we had already been using the Alexander so it wasn't new to us, but adding three more artists in residence for a four-year period. So the foundation was dictating, they were going to give this money to organizations who followed their rules. We could do what we wanted with the innovation—be innovative with the model—but it was three artists working with two or three community partners over a four-year period.

So we decided to apply, and we evaluated what we did and we looked at where we thought we could have the most success in building audiences. We chose classical guitar—which is what we did, we presented classical guitar—presented jazz, we thought there was big potential there, and contemporary dance. Three areas where we thought we could build younger audiences, reach out and build our audience base. And then we started thinking about who the audiences would

be that we would put in that category. And we started talking to managers of artists we thought would be maybe likely prospects. And then we met with the artists in person to talk about what we wanted to do and develop with them—there was nothing on paper; it was how we would work in schools. And then we also started identifying community partners. It was a huge, huge effort. We selected the jazz violinist Regina Carter; we selected Manuel Barrueco, the classical guitarist; and Stephen Petronio, the American dance choreographer, New York. And then we built community partners. We had some already: Community Music Center and San Francisco State. We identified Allen Temple Baptist Church for the jazz program, an African American Church in East Oakland. We first went to Glide, here. They didn't want to participate with us, but the people at Oakland were really excited about this idea. Then we also had a neighborhood group for dance. We had several partners for the dance program.

So we put together this proposal. It was a huge prep job. And then, in January, before we even knew if we got it—but the odds were good that we would, because Wallace had sent out people to talk with us about how we developed it. Their process is that if they invite you, they think you've got the potential to do it and that the odds are good that you'll get it. We have a board staff retreat every January. And that was the topic of our board-staff retreat: this new residency model, the probability of getting the money, and then if we get it, which we think we will, implementing it, and what is that going to do to the organization and to the infrastructure. I wanted the whole board and the staff to do this together, to talk about what it meant, challenges. It was a very productive day, a lot of good questions. What came out of it—and I wasn't surprised and I knew this anyway—was that we needed to add at least one more staff position to support all of this, which we ended up doing.

8-00:22:44

Meeker: Director of education?

8-00:22:45

Felt: No, we had a director but we needed an associate to support all that work. And yeah, we got the grant. Those programs worked out. They had glitches, a couple of partners fell out with staff turnover in the partner organizations and then we didn't have the commitment of that, sort of, energy. But overall this model, with those artists, was just fabulous, fabulous for them, fabulous for us, a lot of work. So what we've done now is we've just continued that. And we were able to get a grant renewed and so we're in the final year of a new—it's been eight years. Stefon Harris, our jazz vibraphonist, and Antigoni Goni, the guitarist. We added Chris Nomura, the baritone. And along with all that, we're developing curriculum materials for the classroom teachers. And what we found along the way is arts education, in terms of foundations and corporations, is the one area that is very, very desirable in terms of what they want to fund. So it is a very good source of contributed funding from foundations and corporations, as well as individuals like it. It resonates well. Everybody understands.

8-00:24:18

Meeker: Well, there had been certain, like, several nonprofit organizations that when they get these large grants that maybe are a little bit beyond or outside their initial area of focus, they kind of collapse under the weight. Or if the grant lasts for four years, then they ramp up to be able to serve that grant and then when it's complete, they're left in a very difficult situation. I'm wondering how did you deal with this in a way that didn't become a liability?

8-00:24:55

Felt: Well, I think we're confronting again now because the Wallace grant, we're in now the final year of the second grant. I'm going to Minneapolis with my marketing director in November for the annual meeting with the Wallace folks. And I'm going to try and get an assessment of how competitive we're going to be going forward to get a renewal, renewing the grant again. Because if we don't, that leaves a huge hole. So we're always trying to anticipate that. Because we know we've got Wallace, the last year we're in, and the last year of Irvine as well, which is a big operating grant, not specifically for education. Because if

those two grants don't renew, and likely one or both won't, then that leaves us with over \$200,000 that we won't have, that we've had for the last seven or eight years. That's a lot of money to replace. But we're thinking about it. And the board's thinking about it. We've been bringing that to everybody's attention, that these grants are cycling now, and we've got to be very aware of that and how do we replace that money if we don't get renewed. So we've got a couple of places where we've already put some of that in place with another new foundation that would have maybe gone to endowment but it's going to go to operating, with this in mind. Because we need to make sure of—and then, you've got to be responsible.

I mean, these models—the first time with Wallace, it was grant-driven, in terms of that model they prescribed. We went forward with it. Some of the people that got the grants didn't. We've gone forward using the same model four years with community partners. Now, each one is a year at a time, though. We do that with the artists, saying, “If this doesn't work for you and it's not working for us, we're not going to do it for four years just because we said we would.” That's the intent, but we take it and we renew it a year at a time. So we may have to cut back some of these programs if the funding falls out. Certainly, we're working overtime not to have that happen. So, we're just—.

8-00:27:23

Meeker: Is there a sense on the part of the funding agencies, like the Wallace Foundation, that these educational programs will pay off in very real terms for the stability of the organization in the future?

8-00:27:39

Felt: Mm-hmm. And they've got this new coinage that the foundations come up with, “audience participation” is the new one. And that used to be audience development, now it's audience participation because they've analyzed it and it's not necessarily just people in seats, in terms of the way in which people participate with your organization. So they see these types of more innovative

outreach projects as the way in which an organization ultimately and long-term sustains its base, through bringing new people into the fold.

8-00:28:22

Meeker: Has there been a way or an attempt to test whether that in fact happens?

8-00:28:27

Felt: Yes. But it's a very imperfect science.

8-00:28:31

Meeker: Yeah.

8-00:28:31

Felt: It's really impossible in many ways to actually measure the impact that you would have with a student in a class hearing a string quartet. We can't. But we do know in certain times the kind of responses we get through sometimes letters. Because the students have to write something. And sometimes you're really pleasantly surprised because you feel like you've been talking to a blank face, and that what comes back is that it penetrated. It wasn't just staring into space; there was something that was communicated. So as to how that translates? I don't know.

8-00:29:25

Meeker: Well, I mean, that is a question that is floating about, and not only in the nonprofit sector and the funding sector but also the governmental sector. I mean the attempt to quantify everything that students do and to see progress. Do you sort of feel like that's a system that you're encountering? In the schools as well, because how do you—?

8-00:29:50

Felt: Well, Melanie Smith, who is our director of education, she meets with the other directors of arts organizations here on a regular basis, as well as networking throughout the country and with our colleagues at foundations, about analysis and measurement and how you quantify. And I have to tell you, it's all over the map, and there isn't a solution really. I think we try to do our idea of polling, so to speak, in terms of our audiences, and in many ways to try and get a better fix

on what they do, what they like, who they are, and then in terms of the students, too, what they're getting from this. And we try to document it. And in terms of the poetry program that we've developed with our singer in the school, that's been really very rewarding. We have the poems of the students, we have them on video and we see them sort of flourish in their confidence and their ability to express themselves.

8-00:31:07

Meeker: But those aren't as easily quantifiable, or are they?

8-00:31:10

Felt: Uh-uh, uh-uh.

8-00:31:09

Meeker: Well, ever since, I think it was the 1950s since the Ford Foundation started funding nonprofit arts organizations, from my understanding of the history, most of the funding has been seed grants, to get organizations started to build a membership base, so it will be self-perpetuating. As a result, according to some people, of this change in dynamic, moving from profit to nonprofit model, there has been a move away from, for example, ticket sales accounting, anywhere from 40 to 60 percent of the operation. Whereas in a for-profit model, it would have to be 100 percent plus if it was going to survive. Is there any sense, coming from both your experience and from contact with people in the foundations, do people consider that model a sustainable model? Or is there an attempt to move away from it? As you experience this question about funding for the future and the way in which it's been funded in the past.

8-00:32:32

Felt: Well, I guess, just in going all the way back to the monarchies of old, and painting and music and art, it always has had to have patronage. And in this country, we haven't felt comfortable, maybe because of the association of rebelling against monarchy and elitism, there never was a, quote, "cultural policy" or the tax base that supported the arts like it did in Europe after the monarchies sort of went away. But the huge subsidy that you would give the arts

in England, France, Germany, et cetera, never happened here. And we basically have a way in which we've given our tax deductions, that's the way we support causes and nonprofits. I guess maybe because I'm used to that system, I see that being pretty healthy ultimately, because it forces non-profit causes to really reach out and raise money from a broad base. And it gives individuals a way in which their wealth or their capacity to give, an opportunity to do that and get a tax break. I don't think the tax break is always the thing that motivates, and it probably isn't. And the healthiest situation for any nonprofit, no matter what, is to have a broad base of support. I think where you see organizations really getting in trouble is when they are too beholden to one source. And that still happens. You see those organizations very often just going under because that one source goes away.

I think that somehow I can't see our government—I think they have a role, like through the National Endowment for the Arts, definitely in providing support for the arts. But I can't imagine it ever getting huge because I don't think that's the mentality of this country. And I'm not sure it even should. So that's sort of where I am at this point. I think, based on my experience with San Francisco Performances, and it's a valid one, is that we've built something from scratch in a very busy arts community and we have a healthy mix of supporters and we're in fiscally good shape around a product that supposedly from some people's perspective, is dying. I don't know. So, I can be kind of Pollyanna-ish, I guess maybe, on informed basis, in terms of the future.

8-00:35:41

Meeker: I think it's that perspective that is very valuable. There is this perspective that the art forms that you're promoting are dying. And having empirical evidence to the contrary and explaining how you've done that, I think, is the real value of this interview. I think it's some of these issues that I've been trying to get at.

8-00:36:07

Felt: Right. I guess that one of the things that we haven't touched on is the whole area of new work and living creators and commissioning. We do some of that, and

I'm very committed to that, and I think from my perspective, one of sort of part of classical music's Achilles' heel, so to speak, is what has been in the twentieth century, this resistance to the work of living composers. And that in the long run, that's actually been a mistake, because yeah, audiences at some point were really big and out there for Mozart and Beethoven as they still are, but the fact that major institutions—symphony-orchestras and opera houses and whatever—have not been willing to present a lot of living work, work of living composers, that ultimately I think has undermined the work of younger artists coming into the field. That's just a simplistic answer. I mean there are so many complexities about this.

But I see some of that changing now. Not only the style of the composers that are writing today are less academic and maybe—but some of their work is more accessible. And it's certainly more accessible to younger ears. And for certain older ears, it's not at all. [chuckles] But I think as a living art form, living art forms need to be living. And we certainly treasure all the greats from our past and will never want to let them go away but I think we have to also have a constant infusion of new sounds and new work.

8-00:38:06

Meeker: Is there a way in which the commissions and the living artists interacted with or influenced the educational program?

8-00:38:18

Felt: You mean what we're doing?

8-00:38:20

Meeker: Yeah. I mean if the idea perhaps is for the commissions to bring new art and artists who might seem more relevant to people who are growing up today, who without some education may not understand the relevance of a Handel to—?

8-00:38:45

Felt: I think that each time that our artists go into schools, depending on what they're going to be bringing, there's always an aspect—maybe not always—but maybe

a contemporary piece or something like that. I remember one of our first experiences with the Alexander Quartet at Mission High School, one of the first sessions we did out there. There had been a miscommunication about the length of the session and which students were going to be part of it. And it turned out from what we thought was going to be a small classroom situation, was a bigger assembly of three classes in a great room at the top of Mission High School which is this old school. So it was this great amphitheater type of—it was maybe three hundred kids rather than seventy or sixty or something. And the quartet had thought and I had thought that the session was going to be like fifty minutes and it turned out it was going to be two-class sessions. So the quartet said, “What do we do now? Because we prepared to do—.” I just remember that they said that maybe what we should do is we should play the full quartet based on the “Kreutzer Sonata” of Janáček which is based on Tolstoy’s story of jealousy, you know the husband murders his wife when she—. So what they did, rather than play just a movement of it or something, because normally the programs were introductions and not to subject the students to a long piece where their listening would be tested. We thought, “Well, let’s go with this. They can tell the story. It has a story. And there’s a place at the end where you are supposed to be able to discern when he shoots her in the music, not clearly, but—so they talked about Janáček and his time as a twentieth century composer, the Kreutzer Sonata story, Beethoven’s Kreutzer Sonata for Violin is famous.

But it was amazing what happened that afternoon, because after the session where they played some Beethoven and Mozart I think, they played this full piece. It’s twenty minutes. And they were told it’s going to be twenty minutes. Oh! They had these kids in their hands. Those kids were really listening. And they really liked it and they liked it better. They liked those sounds and they liked that contemporary idiom and that language for the string quartet much better than they liked Mozart. And, of course, I guess they got enmeshed in the story, too, of emotions and jealousy and things that they could relate to. So.

But you know, some of the same kinds of things that you see Bang On A Can Ensemble doing with Philip Glass. They have a huge following of young people. And they're crossover audiences too, that also relate to rock and rap and you know, so.

8-00:42:25

Meeker: Do you see that with this perhaps increasing crossover and increasing willingness to experiment among composers and performers of serious music or classical music, that SF Performances might in the future move into directions that it previously didn't, such as spoken word performances or world music or something along those lines?

8-00:42:51

Felt: Very possibly. I guess what I've always tried to do in terms of programming focus, especially in an area like this where there is so much available, unlike some of my colleague presenters who are located in a smaller Midwestern—like my colleague at Hancher Auditorium in Iowa. They serve that community with miles around it and they're the only thing, so they're bringing in everything because they don't have a world music presenter or they don't have a Broadway presenter. And they're in a university so they're trying to serve this great range of needs in their audience base. That's valid, you know, that's really valid. But for us, we're in a rich, rich environment here. Not only in terms of what we want to do in terms of our own artistic commitments but also just our own business realities of what is our competitive advantage and disadvantage.

So, as a presenter of the performing arts, there's no restriction of bringing in more theater or world music. We can do anything, really, as long as as an organization, we're committed to it, and our organization buys into it. I feel very strongly about not bending to trends, just to be trendy. I don't think that works in the long run. I'm a very long-range thinker and believe in having a commitment and sticking to it. Until you've been proven pretty significantly that it's not going to work, but you can't just try it one year and see something that didn't quite work and abandon it. So, I don't know. I think that yes, there is certainly

reason to think that we would move and embrace other directions. Our mission has stayed pretty consistent. We're probably doing a little more of the kind of thing like the Philip Glass film programs. That's an area that I'm very interested in. I'd like to do more film and music because I think that they're partners; they're great film music projects. There's great experiment in that area with filmmakers and composers. So, you know, love to be able to do more there.

8-00:45:40

Meeker: I'm wondering if we can switch gears just a little bit and talk a little bit about how your leading SF Performances was influenced, both you and the organization, by some of the more significant events in San Francisco's history over the past twenty-five years. In particular, just three that I'm thinking of that maybe you could reflect on, is the AIDS crisis, the earthquake, and dot-com boom and subsequent collapse, if not bust. I'm somebody who grew up in the Bay Area and those are the things that really strike me as some of the more important elements. You know, how they affected perhaps your personal outlook on the fate of the nonprofit, but also, just—

8-00:46:46

Felt: Well, let's see, I don't know where to actually—

8-00:46:50

Meeker: Well, let me actually start, one program—I could be reading too much into this—but one of the programs, you had theme years it seemed like. And one was '84, something like "Not a Moment to Waste" or something like that. Did that have anything to do with the AIDS crisis at that point?

8-00:47:11

Felt: Uh-uh, I don't think so.

8-00:47:13

Meeker: Okay.

8-00:47:13

Felt: Well, we experimented with the whole idea a little bit of themes. A lot of presenters are doing that particularly well. It's easier to do around a festival

format, because it's true that thematic programming and programming around themes, whether it's around one composer's work or around a national movement does focus the audience in on something and it does prove to really create interest and create attendance. There's no question. So we've experimented with that and in many ways, we probably should do more of that because it does have incredible educational value as well as building audiences.

I'm trying to think of when did my friend Charlie Hamlen leave IMG Artists. I guess it was 1990-91? And he left being one of the really successful artist managements, to just step away, and had to get into the AIDS fight. Because of all the artists and people he knew that had been, you know, had died from it, and the crisis that it was. And I'm the first person he talked to because he knew me well and also I had started an organization and I was on his founding board. We still are very supportive of that effort through our challenge program with Classical Action.

8-00:49:04

Meeker: Which you described earlier.

8-00:49:06

Felt: Yeah, where we match the funds that our artists give and then send it to Classical Action. And then most of the money comes back here to, at this point, the San Francisco AIDS Foundation. And then I was very instrumental in the benefit here that was done with San Francisco Performances, the opera, symphony, and the ballet. That was to raise money for the AIDS fight and the visibility of the AIDS fight.

So, yeah, I mean, I think personally—Charlie Ziff, my good friend, died of AIDS. And so many people I was personally touched by, in terms of the loss. And of course the ongoing struggle to confront human prejudice and bigotry just around the whole issue of homosexuality. That's been something that any of us who are close to people who are gay—and I have been in the sixties and so forth when it wasn't really that much of a public issue—it's always been something

very personal for me in terms of my outrage, I guess, in terms of just how narrow society is. That something that's so normal, just—and the AIDS thing just compounded it. Because AIDS is not a homosexual disease; it's a human disease. And it became such a punitive thing, not only in its tragic deaths, but just in the way it was labeled, a terrible thing.

8-00:51:08

Meeker: Well, in relation to the way in which it's labeled, when you did participate in Classical Action, and were staging some of these benefits trying to get some of these artists involved, did you encounter any difficulty on the part of the artists, or reluctance to work with this cause?

8-00:51:29

Felt: Not really. I think the arts community, probably 99.9 percent is very tolerant and certainly, not in any way homophobic. Certainly there are aspects of it, but it's certainly not in any way prevalent at all. And for my organization—and I know that San Francisco Performances and our board—that would have been the case in some arts organizations, but our board was extremely open and very willing to commit a certain amount of our dollars to this fight. And I know a lot of my colleagues couldn't get their board to go there. Some of it is just because they don't support other nonprofit causes, but our board, in San Francisco, in this area, were of the mind that this is a very urgent issue and it needs to be addressed and it needs to have credibility and respect and we wanted to put some of our money there.

8-00:52:44

Meeker: So there was perhaps a feeling among the board that they had something to contribute through SF Performances, like you said, credibility and respect?

8-00:52:56

Felt: Yeah, and that's one of the whole issues I think, of the Challenge program is that it's just a small amount of money really, but it's again one of those long-term things. Over time, it's cumulative. And then, when we have an artist that says yes, we have the Classical Action logo on the program page and it says that this

artist is donating a certain percentage of their fee to the Classical Actions Performing Arts Against AIDS, and San Francisco Performances is matching that gift. So it's just an awareness thing, constantly, at a very, very high level. So, again, San Francisco is different. It always has been in terms of its tolerance and its welcoming of people, and so as an organization doing what we're doing with AIDS, is very well accepted, not a problem at all. In some communities it would be. I know some colleagues that wanted to do the same thing we did in their organizations and they couldn't.

8-00:54:02

Meeker: Hmm. Interesting. I'm wondering maybe if you could talk about the dot-com experience, which really is a request to talk about economic cycles, which began well before—there were ups and downs throughout the 1980s as well as the 1990s.

8-00:54:23

Felt: Yeah, and we started out in the early eighties, there was a downturn, remember? Yeah, so I'm very well aware. And then of course the booms of the nineties, for everybody, with the stock market and dot-com, whoa, that was great. I mean, it was very competitive, of course, still but there was a lot of money that was out there to get, a lot more money.

8-00:54:46

Meeker: Was there, in fact? I mean, from your experience, did it influence the sheer number of donations or the amount of donations or subscribers or along those lines?

8-00:55:01

Felt: Yeah, I mean, audience bases were growing and subscribers and donors and, in certain cases, marketing sponsorships from dot-coms. These from cold calls, we got a couple of them just through an e-mail, an e-mail proposal. That was pretty amazing. [laughs] So, yeah. And then we, fortunately, had the good—it was just timing—but at the time that we were looking at our twentieth anniversary, I wanted to really build an endowment of some size for the organization. So we

launched that in 1998, you know, hiring a consulting firm, doing the research, and creating a six-million-dollar campaign. And we did it at the end of the nineties, thank God. Because we were able to benefit from those last two years of the bubble before the stock market crashed or had its downturn. So, we still haven't reached our six million goal but we're at about three point five going towards four. That's bigger than our operating budget.

So, in terms of a presenting organization, and a relatively new one, that's a very, very positive thing to have. So that we benefited clearly from the ability of our major donor base to step up and make stock gifts and pledges at the end of the nineties, because things were looking so good. Yeah, there's no question. And then as soon as the stock market went—and we all were affected by that whether we were affected in our mutual funds or our pension plans or whatever—then we just pulled way back on the endowment campaign. We still have one but it's not aggressive anymore because we had to sustain the annual fund. And we did, we did sustain the annual fund. And we've come through these years without a deficit yet. I don't know if we're still going to be able to say that at the end of this year. [laughs]

8-00:57:11

Meeker: Knock on wood, right?

8-00:57:13

Felt: We've had deficits in the past but the last five or six years, we haven't.

8-00:57:18

Meeker: Has going forward and experiencing this particularly high and then particularly low point, are there any lessons that you've learned or anything that you'd like to pass on to your successor? [laughs]

8-00:57:37

Felt: Oh, there are lots of lessons, lots and lots, I guess. Some of the basics are still there, the very sound basics: the need for planning and sticking to those plans,

and the old advice that I got the first year, you know, plan a season and stick to it and don't add these sure-fire things.

8-00:58:07

Meeker: Wasn't there a temptation to? Because I know at some point, I can't remember if it was '97 or '98, I was a poor, unemployed graduate student living in San Francisco, but there seemed around me this real sense that everything was possible and money did grow on trees. I imagine—[laughs] perhaps you're a bit wiser, but there were probably people around you who felt the same way in which, "Oh, we should bring this in; it's an opportunity to make lots of money."

8-00:58:39

Felt: Yeah, I guess, maybe in that kind of buoyant mood of possibility, especially when you're not being challenged so much economically, of course you would be inclined to take those kinds of risks. Why, who wouldn't? And sometimes, that's a good idea. I've been very mindful also of resources. And I mean labor, I mean human resource, staff. I think one of the things you alluded to is when I said when I was being burned out at the opera, working twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week [chuckles] sort of speaking as an exaggeration. But my philosophy for my staff is that I really want for all of us to work really productively and efficiently during normal office hours. We have to work performances and on weekends and that's part of our business, and I hope for most of us it is considered a benefit a lot of the time because we enjoy the product. But I don't want to see a lot of overtime office hours during the week when we don't have a performance but people aren't getting their jobs done. I don't want to see people burning out their energy at ten o'clock at night over the computer. I want people out at five o'clock if they can. I want efficient use of time, because I experienced in politics and at the Opera this kind of mentality that I saw and felt. There was so much work to do, but I felt it was a lot of waste of time. And then people would be working way into the evening. And that sort of got self-perpetuated, because you sort of knew you could do that and you

would do that. And so then you just didn't work that hard during normal business hours. So, there's that dance.

Now, for me personally—so I'm always trying to protect my resources and realize that by adding something, I don't care how sure-fire it is, that means people have to staff it. And you have to look at what resources you've got and how you're going to give people vacations and reasonable working hours, and so that's another resistant point for me.

And then you asked me about my own time. Well, I love my work. But, it's different when you're the boss really, because I make my own schedule. And my own season that I curate, if I put five performances in a week, which I don't like to do—sometimes I have to because of the artist I want and the way in which their tour falls and whatever—then okay, I did it. [laughs] And my staff has to deal with that, but it's kind of—if you feel comfortable being in charge, and that has its own stresses, then it's a lot easier on me than when I was reporting to Kurt Herbert Adler, who was in charge. Also, the decision-making process is really very much more efficient. Because I realized that when I first left the opera and started working on this at home, thinking, “You know, I'm not working very hard.” And then I realized, that part of the ease of it—and I was working hard—was that I was making the decision, and it was done, and I didn't have to then make the case to Kurt Adler and wait around for him to make the decision. That sometimes took two to three days. [chuckle]

8-01:02:37

Meeker: And belabor something so that you could make sure that you were presenting the right decision to him.

8-01:02:42

Felt: Yeah, right. So that could sometimes get you in trouble because you make your own decision and it's the wrong one, and it should have been aired more. But there is that sort of dynamic that makes being in charge less stressful.

8-01:02:54

Meeker: And so it's not so much a question of working fewer hours per week but that you get greater enjoyment out of those hours that you work?

8-01:03:07

Felt: Yeah, and then I'm not spending nights waiting around to report to someone. I'm going home. I tend—I do a lot of work in a way, here at home, but it's not office work. It's reading work; it's listening to music; it's stuff I enjoy. I sometimes have to work at home, but rarely. I have a computer here, but I don't use it very much. I prefer not to. I prefer to have home been home. Yeah, I'm reading lots of stuff about the field at home.

8-01:03:43

Meeker: What do you read?

8-01:03:44

Felt: Well, publications, you know, magazines.

8-01:03:46

Meeker: Trade publications.

8-01:03:48

Felt: Yeah, or arts, international arts magazines, newspapers.

8-01:03:56

Meeker: In order to keep up with reviews of—

8-01:03:58

Felt: Yeah, and what's happening in the field. And then I try to maintain a pretty good involvement in fiction and history and stuff that doesn't relate specifically to my work because I love reading and that sort of thing.

And then, you know, my personal life, I was married for a short time and that didn't work out, but you know that sometimes—.

8-01:04:27

Meeker: What years?

8-01:04:30

Felt: '87 to '92. But what came from that is my husband that I married had a son who was six when I married him and met him, and so now, David and I have just maintained a very close relationship, he's still very much a part of my life. He's now in his twenties.

8-01:04:59

Meeker: Otherwise, you never really sought to have children of your own?

8-01:05:03

Felt: No, I didn't. I'm not that—it wasn't something I didn't want to do, but the circumstances with a partner didn't—by the time I married, I was too old. And my maternal instincts were certainly there but not such that I would have pursued being a single mother or adopting or anything, which a number of my friends and people that I know have done, who didn't have successful marriages or didn't marry and wanted to have children. They've pursued adoption and that sort of thing, and I never was inclined to do that.

So I just gave birth to an organization.

8-01:05:50

Meeker: [laughs] How many times have you said that in the past?

8-01:05:54

Felt: What?

8-01:05:55

Meeker: How many times have you said that in the past?

8-01:05:56

Felt: Gave birth to an organization? I don't know, maybe—I don't know.

8-01:06:00

Meeker: I mean, is it something that you regularly—do you think of it in those terms generally?

8-01:06:04

Felt: I sort of thought about it more in terms of my estate planning. Because I turn sixty-five this year and a few years ago I really got into—especially around our endowment—estates and wills and all of that. I'm certainly not a wealthy person at all, but I do have some assets. And one of my main ones is this house, this property. So then, it was the determination of where I leave—I'm not married and I don't have a partner, and my stepson David is well provided for and my sister and brother-in-law are very wealthy, and my niece is very well provided for. So it wasn't like I had family to leave things that needed anything.

So basically I put together an estate plan where I gave certain things I treasure to friends, or paintings, or things that I feel very personal about that I feel they would treasure as well. And then I gave a little bit of something to my stepson and my niece, just as a gesture because I want to. But everything else is going to San Francisco Performances. And I thought of it then, I said, "Well, why not? It's what I gave birth to, I guess," so to speak I gave it to San Francisco Performances first, but if San Francisco Performances isn't around, because it's possible it won't be, who knows, or if its mission had changed markedly, then I would choose the money to go to—and I named two other organizations, one in the East and one here, that are old and established and are very dedicated to music and dance. So I wanted any money that I would have left to go to those causes. So that's sort of where it is now.

My estate plans are not irrevocable, so that if I—I love this story of one of my donors, she's ninety-two, she's fabulous. She's just fallen in love and she's traveling with her latest—she's just a remarkable woman and all of a sudden—she was married and divorced and now at ninety-two, she has a new love of her life. [laughs] So I figured, well—

8-01:09:01

Meeker: [laughs] You never know.

8-01:09:03

Felt: Maybe in my eighties or something, if I'm healthy, I'll get married or something! So then, who knows, life could change. [lots of laughter]

8-01:09:15

Meeker: Gosh, we've gotten pretty far here and we're kind of getting close to the end, but I guess, well, one of the things I wanted to ask, and putting it bluntly, has success spoiled SF Performances? And really what I'm asking is how has it changed from being a fledgling to being an established organization? What's easier? What's more difficult? Are critics less forgiving than they used to be? Is the audience less forgiving or artists more expensive? I mean, what are some of the main changes you've seen over the twenty-five years in the organization?

8-01:10:10

Felt: Well, in terms of the—

8-01:10:14

Meeker: As the result of it being established.

8-01:10:16

Felt: Oh, established?

8-01:10:16

Meeker: Yeah.

8-01:10:16

Felt: Well, one of our main challenges, and it continues, is having people know who we are, that's a struggle for any presenting organization because we end up being so identified with the artists that we present rather than the organization name as such. And without our own venue, like Carnegie Hall or whatever, and with a name like San Francisco Performances, which is so generic, we will always have that challenge. But now, twenty-five years later, we certainly have built up a recognition factor that's significantly higher profile than where we started in the beginning. But it never goes away and it never will. But, at least, that's certainly an improvement. But at the same time, the organization has grown and the product we present and the budget has grown so the challenge is

bigger. So we have more recognition, more people know who we are, and then of course, we get more feedback. And now, with technology and online e-mail, we're certainly finding ourselves—and we like it, actually—more accessible to people to give us their opinions. I think that's healthy, actually, I like it.

I think what we're trying not to lose, and I don't think we really have, is the sense of being a small organization of major, international impact, which I think is now acknowledged. We're recognized internationally. But at the same time, being small, we have the ability to really have an intimate connection with people in our community in a way that some of the bigger organizations cannot. And you know, in terms of just—we're all just reeling from this right now—any of us, I don't care what business you're in, how are we reaching and communicating to the people out there in our community? Newspapers, that's changed so markedly. We have them but we have fewer of them. There's certainly much less coverage of the arts in print. We're dealing with online technology, websites. Where is that going to go? How are we effectively going to market what we do, all of those things. Some things change but sometimes nothing changes. It was a challenge back there in the first year; it's still a challenge. And that I think will always be the case.

8-01:13:06

Meeker: Do you think audiences and critics have come to expect more? Or not?

8-01:13:14

Felt: You know, I don't know. I think some of the same things about our fellow human beings are very true; they're very, very easily seduced by—we all are—by popular things, by stars, by impressions. I think that's pretty much the same. I guess it would be hard to say that what we've been discussing here hasn't had a long-term effect. I think. God, it must. Just in terms of the lack of arts in the schools. It's got to have—it's been a couple of generations now where that has been diminishing. And it would be foolish to say it hasn't had an impact. It has.

8-01:14:12

Meeker: Well and there's also no public figure like Leonard Bernstein or Toscanini or something.

8-01:14:19

Felt: Yeah, Michael Tilson Thomas is trying to step into that. And of course, the recording industry, my God! What a change that's going through. Major record companies, I think they've really got themselves in trouble. Because there's so many alternatives now, so many ways of burning CDs, and so many things, iPods, and it's just—in all of the online technology and the way in which artists can make their own recordings. That is really a major change. So the industry's changing, but as to how that ultimately affects the live performance experience, it really doesn't. What I want it to do, and I think it can, it can enhance our ability to bring in audiences because they can listen to stuff, and new stuff, so they're not totally being the victims of what the big recording companies want to record. But we're just in the infancy of all this new stuff.

8-01:15:23

Meeker: Interesting. I think the disc is probably approaching its end and we're a little past twelve-thirty. But before I end, is there anything that you'd like to add? There's so much that we haven't covered still.

8-01:15:42

Felt: I know, I know.

8-01:15:43

Meeker: And I also want to say that if you can't think of any sort of profound finishing statement right now [laughter], which is not what I'm trying to get out of you, that if after the sponsor of the interview reads it and feels like there's things missing, I'm certainly willing to come back and finish up and do another hour or something like that.

8-01:16:12

Felt: Right. Well, Martin, sitting here twenty-five years later, having this opportunity to talk to you, and be a subject of an oral history with the Bancroft Library, of all

places, what a prestigious place, of course, in looking back with incredible certainty that I made the right choice in taking the chance I did. So, if what I did can serve as another example of the whole concept of being an entrepreneur and taking risk and searching out to do something different because you really believe in it, that's great. And I was forty years old when I did it. Mid-life crisis? I don't know. [laughter]

8-01:17:18

Meeker: Excellent.

[End of Interview]

## **Martin Meeker**

Martin Meeker is Associate Academic Specialist with the Regional Oral History Office, UC Berkeley. In 2000, Meeker received his doctorate in U.S. history from the University of Southern California. He has taught in the history department at San Francisco State University and in the departments of history, undergraduate interdisciplinary studies, and American Studies at UC Berkeley and he has worked as a processing archivist at the GLBT Historical Society in San Francisco. He has published numerous reviews and encyclopedia articles and he has published essays in the *Journal of the History of Sexuality* and the *Journal of Women's History*. His book, *Contacts Desired Gay and Lesbian Communications and Community, 1940s-1970s*, shall be published by the University of Chicago Press in fall 2005. His current research focuses on the history of human rights/human relations commissions in the United States.

