

Oral History Center
The Bancroft Library

University of California
Berkeley, California

Gildo Mahones

Gildo Mahones: Innovative Pianist and Composer in the Heyday of Modern Jazz

Interviews conducted by
Caroline C. Crawford
in 2015

Copyright © 2016 by The Regents of the University of California

Since 1954 the Oral History Center of the Bancroft Library, formerly 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 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.

All uses of this manuscript are covered by a legal agreement between The Regents of the University of California and Gildo Mahones and Mary Mahones dated January 23, 2015. The manuscript is thereby made available for research purposes. All literary rights in the manuscript, including the right to publish, are reserved to The Bancroft Library of the University of California, Berkeley. Excerpts up to 1000 words from this interview may be quoted for publication without seeking permission as long as the use is non-commercial and properly cited.

Requests for permission to quote for publication should be addressed to The Bancroft Library, Head of Public Services, Mail Code 6000, University of California, Berkeley, 94720-6000, and should follow instructions available online at <http://bancroft.berkeley.edu/ROHO/collections/cite.html>

It is recommended that this oral history be cited as follows:

Gildo Mahones, "Gildo Mahones: Innovative Pianist and Composer in the Heyday of Modern Jazz" conducted by Caroline C. Crawford in 2015, Oral History Center, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 2016.



Gildo Mahones

Table of Contents—Gildo Mahones

Interview History

vi

Interview 1: January 23, 2015

Audio File 1

1

Early years in New York City, family and music: 1929-1940 — Remembering Harlem: Living behind the Apollo Theater on 126th Street — Joining a band: The Young Dukes of Rhythm — From Louis Jordan’s Tympany Five to bebop: Playing at Minton’s Playhouse with Eddie “Lockjaw” Davis — Touring the South and witnessing racism with trumpeter Joe Morris:, 1948 — Returning to Minton’s and performing with Percy Heath and Kenny Clarke: 1949-1951 — U.S. Army service during the Korean War, 1951-1953 — Impressions of 52nd Street: Bud Powell, Thelonious Monk and others

Interview 2: February 12, 2015

Audio File 2

16

Music in the Pentecostal Church — More about Kenny Clarke and Percy Heath — Leaders in Bebop: Bud Powell — Expanding the Minton’s trio to include Milt Jackson, Sonny Rollins, Jesse Drakes — The Milt Jackson Quartet and the evolution of the Modern Jazz Quartet — Drug use and jazz; bebop as protest — Performing with Lester Young at Birdland: 1953-1956 — Remembering Billie Holiday — Young in rehearsal and performance — Paul Quinichette — Lester Young and the Jazz Philharmonic

Interview 3: February 19, 2015

Audio File 3

31

Performing with and composing for the Jazz Modes: 1956-1959 — Julius Watkins, French horn, and Charlie Rouse, tenor saxophone — Rouse leaves with Monk; Mahones goes with Bennie Green, 1959 — Performing with Lambert, Hendricks & Ross, 1959-1965, setting words to jazz music — Newport Jazz Festival, 1961 — Meeting Mary Mahones — Playing with the Count Basie and Duke Ellington bands — “Jazz for Moderns” tour in Mexico with Lambert, Hendricks & Ross , 1961 — Lambert’s death and the end of Lambert, Hendricks & Ross, 1966 — Jon Hendricks’ *Evolution of the Blues Song*, with Jimmy Witherspoon, Hannah Dean and Ben Webster — Working with Ike Isaacs and O.C. Smith in Los Angeles, the late 1960s

Audio File 4

49

Dave Brubeck’s *The Real Ambassadors* in rehearsal, the Monterey Jazz Festival, 1961 — Recording for Norgran, Columbia, Prestige, Blue Note and others, “Shooting High” — A birthday party with Carmen McRae, Sarah Vaughan and Esther Phillips — Performing with Harry “Sweets” Edison — More about Lester Young — On style and influence —

Moving to Los Angeles, 1966 — Touring Japan and Europe with the versatile Benny Carter and others — Living in Oakland with a daughter and grandson — More about Harlem and the Apollo and highlights of a long career — Lester Young: Another Chitlin' Circuit tour in the 1950s — Reflections on racism

[End of Interview]

Gildo Mahones: Innovative Pianist and Composer in the Heyday of Modern Jazz

Gildo Mahones, a bop-based pianist who grew up in Harlem in the 1930s and 40s and played with virtually all the jazz greats during the 1950s and 60s, agreed to be interviewed for the jazz oral history project at UC Berkeley's Bancroft Library early in 2015 at the suggestion of Nadine Wilmot, a former interviewer in the oral history office.

Mahones was born to Puerto Rican parents in the Spanish section of East Harlem in 1929. In 1940 the family moved to an apartment behind the Apollo Theatre on 126th Street, and many of the jazz greats he heard there as a teenager, including Duke Ellington and Count Basie, he eventually performed with in the 1950s.

Mahones played piano and other percussion instruments in his parents' Pentecostal Church in his early years, and during high school he formed an ensemble called The Young Dukes of Rhythm, modeled on Louis Jordan's Tympani Five. The group played frequently during the open houses at Minton's Playhouse, where Mahones would later be hired to play in a trio with Kenny Clarke and Percy Heath.

In 1948 Mahones went on the road with trumpeter Joe Morris in the South and experienced for the first time racial segregation, something he had not seen in New York. In 1949 he was hired to perform at Minton's Playhouse in a trio that soon expanded to include Milt Jackson, Sonny Rollins and Jesse Drakes.

He left Minton's to serve in the military and in 1953, at the suggestion of Jesse Drakes, became the pianist for Lester Young's band at Birdland. He wrote dozens of songs, many of which were recorded with Young. "A dream might blossom into a song," he said when asked about composing. In the oral history Mahones describes Young's theory of playing, his particular use of language with his musicians, and his relationship with Billie Holiday.

Because Lester Young was on the road a lot, Mahones left Young in 1956 to join Charlie Rouse and Julius Watkins and the Jazz Modes quintet, performing on the side with Coleman Hawkins, Sonny Stitt, and "all the saxophone players," as he recalls.

After the group disbanded in 1959, he performed with trombonist Bennie Green for a short time and then from 1959 to 1964 was part of the trio that backed the genre-bending popular vocalese group Lambert, Hendricks & Ross, performing with them at the Newport and Monterey jazz festivals and on tour in Europe.

Mahones moved to Los Angeles in 1965 to perform with Joe Williams and Harry "Sweets" Edison at the Pied Piper club, and worked with vocalists O.C. Smith, Lou Rawls, James Moody, Big Joe Turner, and Lorez Alexandria, with whom he recorded several albums. In the 1970s he was sought after as a sideman in Southern California clubs and toured Japan and Europe with Benny Carter and with his own band. He and Mary, his wife of 45 years, eventually moved to Oakland to be near their daughter and grandson. He practices most days and performs at local clubs and galleries.

The interviews were held in the Bancroft Library and in the Mahones home in Oakland. Mary Mahones took part in some of the interviews and talked animatedly about her encounters with such great jazz figures as Count Basie. Mahones addressed a wide range of issues around jazz: growing up in Harlem, the advent of bebop and its luminaries, jazz vocalism, racism. He speaks in an easy, laid-back fashion that is as effortless as his playing style. The text was read and approved with little editing.

Caroline Crawford
Music Historian, Oral History Center
The Bancroft Library
UC Berkeley

August, 2016

Interview 1: January 23, 2015

Audio File 1

Crawford: January 23, 2015, interview number one with Gildo Mahones, for the oral history office, University of California. Let's talk about your early years.

01-00:01:11

Mahones: I was born in New York in 1929, and then I went back to Puerto Rico, and stayed in Puerto Rico for two years. And then we came back here and stayed in the States. Then my mother married. My stepfather was from Venezuela and that's how I ended up in the States. We lived there, and work was very slow for my parents. So they had these parties, called house rent parties. They would hire musicians. I remember when I was about four or five, I got to go onstage. There would be a guitar player, a drummer—bongos, congas, that type of thing.

Crawford: Could you talk about the various instruments that you remember hearing?

01-00:02:35

Mahones: I heard the conga and bongos, the guitar, and I think it was the clarinet. But I didn't know, at that time, what to call it, so I would call it flauta, which means flute. But I was wrong; it was the clarinet. They would hire musicians, [usually] a guitar player, a bongo player. Three musicians, anyway. My mother and my two aunts. They would do this maybe once a month, during the holidays and things like that. They advertised by word of mouth. My mother would buy food. They had brown sugar bags and made some kind of a liquor or something. There'd be a party and you'd charge the people to come in.

Crawford: Do you remember what the charge was?

01-00:03:16

Mahones: No, but it was very minimal. But they got food and they'd dance. In fact, we opened a dance. Me and my cousin would open the dance, the first number, and then they'd put us to bed. But I remember every time they were going to do this, I remember that they rolled up the linoleum, they would roll it up so they didn't scratch that. So that was the signal to me that something was going to happen that Saturday, or that weekend. This would happen, and then they would have card games and a little dinner. So after that, let me see. Oh, there was a piano there, because my aunt played the piano.

Crawford: At your house?

01-00:04:10

Mahones: Yes. But it was a player piano. I loved pumping the pedals. That was my job, the pedals. I remember the mechanics of that at the time. There was a lever that you pressed, when you put the roll in to play the music, and the keys would jump around. So I was fascinated by that, seeing the keys jump around.

The piano would play itself, more or less. So that was my first experience with the music. It was all Spanish music.

Crawford: What do you remember of Harlem in those days, when you were a young person?

01-00:04:55
Mahones:

Well, that was one of the first things I remember. I know we moved a lot. We stayed in Harlem for a while, and the Bronx, and I moved back to Harlem again, 126th Street, behind the Apollo. I could see the Apollo from my window, the stage door. I could see people going in and out. People would be coming out, and sometimes I could see the tap dancers. They would form a circle.

I guess they were challenging each other about the steps. So I used to see that. What happened was that later on, when I got older, I had a chance to see many acts at the Apollo. Many bands, like Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Benny Carter. All those people performed at the Apollo, so I got a chance to see them.

Crawford: Who else did you hear?

01-00:06:26
Mahones:

Duke Ellington's band, Count Basie's band, Dizzy Gillespie's band, tap dancers. Baby Laurence [Jackson] was a famous tap dancer. He was very excellent, one of the best. In fact, he was so good that he danced at Birdland — they didn't have dancers—or tap dancers, anyway. What happened was that years later, almost all those people that I saw working at the Apollo, I ended up working with them, which is very strange.

Crawford: How old did you have to be to go into the Apollo?

01-00:07:11
Mahones:

Well, you had to be with an adult to get in. But on Saturdays, they had a show that would allow all the kids to come in the afternoon. But not at night, in the afternoon.

Crawford: You came in after school?

01-00:07:30
Mahones:

Oh, when I was older, I came in after school. You had to be with an adult, if you came at night. So anyway, I had a chance to hear all these people. As it turned out later, I ended up working with a lot of them. So that was the start of me hearing live jazz. But before, it was more or less what I heard on the radio.

My aunt and my mother had a Victrola that played 78 records. You had to wind it up and all that. So that's the things I was hearing at first, until we moved to Harlem, behind the Apollo; then I heard a different type of music. It

was the blues and rhythm and blues and jazz and all that kind of stuff. So that was quite an awakening, to experience a different type of music, which I fell in love with. That's more or less the start.

Crawford: Tell me about your parents—what you remember of them, what they did for their livelihood.

01-00:08:46

Mahones: My mother worked in what they called piece work, I guess it was called.

Crawford: Sewing?

01-00:08:55

Mahones: Sewing. She would bring the work home and she would finish at the house and take it back the next day, that sort of stuff. My step-father, he worked on ships. He was like a merchant seaman and he worked on ships. That was more or less what they did.

Crawford: What about grandparents?

01-00:09:20

Mahones: Grandparents, no, they were in Puerto Rico, so I didn't know them.

Crawford: Oh, they were in Puerto Rico. Do you have any memories of Puerto Rico?

01-00:09:26

Mahones: No, not at that time, but years later, I went to Puerto Rico on tour with O.C. [Ocie Lee] Smith, the singer. I had a chance to walk around and see what was going on then.

Crawford: What was your family life like?

01-00:09:46

Mahones: Well, it was more or less very quiet, at first. Well, no, I take back that. It was just the opposite, because like I said, there were parties and all that kind of stuff was going on. I remember when I was going to kindergarten, at first I had trouble, because all we spoke was Spanish in the house.

Crawford: Spanish was your first language.

01-00:10:17

Mahones: Right, and I couldn't speak English, when I first went to school. So then they had trouble pronouncing my name. Which is Hermenegildo. They couldn't say that.

Crawford: What's your name?

01-00:10:29

Mahones: Hermenegildo. H-E-R-M-E-N-E-G-I-L-D-O. They had trouble pronouncing it, and I couldn't go into an explanation, so that didn't work out too well. So

my mother said, “Why don’t you use the last part, take the last part, Gildo?” That’s how that happened.

Crawford: It’s an usual name, isn’t it?

01-00:11:01

Mahones: Yes, right.

Crawford: So what was your family life like?

01-00:11:10

Mahones: Well, it was very nice. My mother and father were gentle people, in their way. He brought me up. I created the problems, really, because I was rebellious. As I got older, like around six or seven, or ten, there was something like a curfew. I would miss that curfew every time.

Crawford: Did you get in trouble over that?

01-00:12:01

Mahones: Yes, I got in trouble every time. I was supposed to be back by six, six-thirty or something, for dinner, and I’d show up around seven and there’d be a big to-do. This happened in the Bronx now, the ones that I’m talking about. I was hanging out with the wrong people. So she moved to Harlem. So it was like going from the frying pan into the fire. By that time, I was speaking a little better English. I was around eight or ten, something like that; I’ve forgotten which. But still, I didn’t know the slang of the language, which meant that I didn’t really hang around with the other kids. I couldn’t interpret what they were talking about, because I was learning English at the same time I was trying to learn this slang, the street talk, more or less.

That kind of slowed me down, as far as hanging out with people. So that worked in her advantage, for doing that. Then what happened after that? It was a close-knit family. I had an aunt that had several kids, five kids. She passed away, and then my mother and my two aunts took the kids. They spread around the three of them. Two went to live with my aunt and two went to live with us, and another went to live with the other aunt.

And then I had another set of cousins. Those were my cousins. Another set of cousins, and the same thing happened; the mother passed away. There were four girls, I think. Four girls and two boys. So we ended up absorbing that group, also, for a while. So the family was filled with a lot of kids, that’s what I’m trying to say.

Saturdays, since there were so many kids, they’d ship us off to the movies, just to get us out the house, I guess. So that’s how I got to the Apollo in the afternoons.

Crawford: Oh, there were films at the Apollo?

01-00:14:50

Mahones:

Yes. One film and a stage show, and maybe a comedy team would do a routine, that kind of stuff, or a tap dance. I saw a lot of shows. There were two theaters on 125th Street. One was called Sunset and one, the West End. All they showed there was old cowboy movies. But they didn't charge that much. They only charged around five cents or something like that. We stayed all day, seeing the movie a couple of times. So by the time we got home, around dinner time, it was cool. But anyway, they did this to get us out of the house, because [there was] too much noise, too many people.

Crawford:

Every Saturday?

01-00:15:49

Mahones:

Not every, but most Saturdays, we'll put it that way.

Crawford:

So your folks were raising how many kids then?

01-00:15:58

Mahones:

Oh, well, my mother and two aunts, Maria and Cela, me and my sister, and two cousins in our house; and there were two cousins in my aunt's house, and two kids in the other house, so it was a whole bunch of people. Sometimes we'd all get together in one house, one apartment, and it was too many. Kids being kids, you'd run up and down the hallway, screaming and carrying on, fighting, whatever; this is too much at one time.

Crawford:

Were your aunts musical?

01-00:16:42

Mahones:

No, they weren't. Except, I'm sorry, the one that had the piano, that first played the piano and she sang, so she was good.

Crawford:

I know that you took a piano lesson when you were young, but didn't like it very much.

01-00:17:00

Mahones:

Right. Again, when we were living in the Bronx, my mother—I guess, to keep me from running around with these other people and getting in trouble—they used to go to church, and she asked the woman who was playing the piano at the church to give me lessons. So I went. The first lesson, I was learning, do-re-me-fa-sol-la-ti, that kind of stuff, the scales.

I learned the first lesson, went back the second week. I started playing it, but I made a mistake. She didn't like that. She got upset and rapped me across the knuckles with a ruler. I didn't like that. So the next week, I didn't go. I didn't go back. But I didn't tell my mother. She gave me, I think it was fifteen cents or a quarter, whatever the lesson cost, and I kept it, but I didn't go to the lesson. Then the lady called my mother, wondering where I was. "He didn't show up." That's how she found out that I hadn't gone, and there was a big to-do about that.

Crawford: You were in trouble.

01-00:18:20

Mahones: Yes, I was in trouble.

Crawford: What did you do with the quarter?

01-00:18:24

Mahones: Bought candy.

Crawford: You said you were a rebel.

01-00:18:29

Mahones: Yes, I was. I got in trouble with that. That's when she decided to move to Harlem. Then what happened, as luck would have it, one night—. It was a three-story apartment building; we were in the middle floor. The people above us had a piano and they moved out. They left the piano. They didn't want to carry it or whatever. So my mother heard about this, so she asked the super, could she get the piano, keep the piano? He said, "Well, if you can move it to your apartment, you got it."

So she was going to do this, but she didn't have any money to pay the people to move it. At that time, I was sick. I remember lying in bed. I had been working, selling newspapers. I had a paper route or whatever. I had accumulated about five dollars, which was on top of the bureau in my room. She took the five dollars and paid these two guys to move the piano into our apartment, and they did. But I was saving that to buy a camera, a little Brownie camera, which was advertised in the back of comic books. That's the money she took, so I was very upset about that. I didn't like that at all. I didn't want the piano because I had experience with the knuckle rapping.

Crawford: In other words, you decided, I'm not going to play the piano.

01-00:20:14

Mahones: Right, I'll never play that. So I remember passing the piano on the way to school every morning. I wouldn't even look at it. This went on for a while, a month or two. Finally, one day I was passing it and I stopped and I hand-pecked the scale that she had showed me. I said, "Oh, that's interesting." I kept doing that and after a while, I noticed that I could figure out a little tune. Whatever I was humming, I could play it, just with two fingers, just the melodies, like that. I got intrigued by that.

My mother had been watching all this, not saying a word. So unbeknownst to me, my stepfather and her got together, and a friend of his who worked in the ships, they asked him to dinner. He sat down at the piano and he played some arpeggios, like [Art] Tatum or Teddy Wilson or Fats Waller. I said, "Wow!" I was standing right there. I couldn't believe it. Because I heard records, but

never heard anyone at my house playing that style of music on the piano. So I said, "Wow!" I was intrigued and he agreed to give me lessons.

Crawford: Oh, he gave you lessons.

01-00:21:53

Mahones: Yes.

Crawford: But wasn't he a merchant seaman?

01-00:21:56

Mahones: Yes, but whenever the ships were in town, he gave me a lesson. He was there for a week or whatever. So I started with the music. But he was showing me some of the scales and the chords, some of the chords, how to form them. He was teaching me songs, like "Honeysuckle Rose" and "Sweet Lorraine." Regular songs, instead of the other way it worked, where the other kids go to the different type of more or less classical music. It wasn't classical music, it was, I guess, American songbook-type music. So that's how I started with music. Whenever the ships were in town, I'd fend for myself. He gave me a little book and I would practice and all that.

Crawford: How old were you now?

01-00:22:55

Mahones: I'm in my teens. I guess I must've been thirteen or fourteen or something like that.

Crawford: Where were you in school?

01-00:23:03

Mahones: I think in junior high school, I started, more or less. So that went on for a while. Then by doing that, I met some other kids around the neighborhood there, playing other instruments. One played drums. So we formed a little band, with drums, bass, and an alto player. I also sang, and we called ourselves the Young Dukes of Rhythm. That was the name of the group. You had to be pretty good, playing blues and rhythm and blues, that type of music. We also liked Louis Jordan type of music. So we used to play that.

Crawford: You wanted to play like Louis Jordan.

01-00:23:55

Mahones: Well, yes. That was decided first. The singer would sing like Louis Jordan or the blues singers of the day. So we had a pretty good group. We played dances at the school and at people's houses. They would hire us to play at birthdays. So I went to Huntington but all the time I was in, more or less, junior high school and high school. But what happened was that bebop came on the scene, that type of music, which I had never heard before.

But then a guy, a friend of mine, was more adventuresome. He always seemed to be ahead of the curve in music, which we were not. He was our age, but he always seemed to be ahead. One day he invited us to his house and he had us listen to this record, this 78. "You got to listen to this."

We sat down and he put this record on. It was Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie, and the tune was "Hot House." The other side of it was another tune called "Sho'Nuff." I was mesmerized. I said, "What is this? What is that?" I couldn't figure out what they were doing. But I liked it. I said, "I got to learn to play this. Whatever it is. I don't know what it is, but I like it." So that was my next project, trying to get as much information about this music as I could.

Crawford: That was your introduction to bebop.

01-00:26:01

Mahones: Yes, yes, bebop, right.

Crawford: What was the difference you heard?

01-00:26:06

Mahones: Well, before I was playing standards, more or less, and blues, rhythm and blues, and Louis Jordan-type music. That wasn't bebop. So there was a big difference. The chord structures, the harmonies, the melodies, the tempos, and how challenging it was just to maneuver over these solos, because so much was going on in the rhythm section and the horn section. It was usually up tempo, the music. They played slow music, but it was so different from what we had been playing. So I tried to learn as much as I could from the records.

At that time, I couldn't go to clubs, but as we got older, we went to Minton's Playhouse with the Young Dukers of Rhythm. They had an open house, where people would come up and play. It was fronted by Eddie "Lockjaw" Davis, a saxophone player. Very famous, but at that time, I didn't know who he was from Adam. He held the saxophone in such a way they called him "Lockjaw." [laughter]

We came in that club. So he'd say, "We have a young group of musicians. We'd like for you to invite them to the stand and give them a rousing applause," and whatever. So we go up and we're going to play. We played what we usually played, which was Louis Jordan -type stuff. That got a rousing applause because we were young. And then the saxophone player, Eddie Jackson, decided he wanted to play bebop because that's what they played in that place, in Minton's Playhouse, which Thelonious Monk and Charlie Parker and those people had started playing and drawing attention to their music. So he wanted to play this tune, "Cherokee," which was very challenging, at a ridiculous tempo. I tried to tell him, "Don't play this, because I don't know the bridge."

Crawford: You said that?

01-00:28:39
Mahones:

Yes. I told him, “Don’t play it.” I didn’t want to play it because I didn’t know the whole song. I just knew the first part of it, which was fairly easy to navigate. But the bridge has a series of modulations, whatnot; I didn’t know about that stuff then. So he still jumped into it. It was going fine; I could see the people out there, their reaction when we went into it. Eddie said, “They weren’t expecting us to play that song.” They looked at each other and they were smiling, having a good time. We got to the bridge, which I was dreading, and then I couldn’t play the bridge so I just made up a bridge. I played two bridges of “I Got Rhythm.” There are two versions of that bridge in “I Got Rhythm.”

I played both versions, because it’s sixteen bars, so I had to make up something for that space. They loved it, but I didn’t know—. Some of them did, but while we were playing the first part of the song, I looked out and [Harry] “Sweets” Edison was there and they were all nodding their approval—until we got to the bridge. Then they looked at each other and—.

Crawford: They realized what was going on?

01-00:30:07
Mahones:

Right. They shook their heads. So I remember that solo. The next day, I finally said, “Some way, I have to learn how to play that bridge”—I figured from a record or something—because I was determined not to let that happen again. I said, “No, no.” So that’s what happened.

Crawford: You could get a record of that easily?

01-00:30:31\
Mahones:

Yes, from my friend that introduced us to that music.

Crawford: So you were convincing on the next date.

01-00:30:43
Mahones:

Yes, I had to learn how to play that.

Crawford: Would you have been able to simply sit down at the piano without a recording and play it?

01-00:30:58
Mahones:

No. When we were hired I didn’t know the song that well. If I’d known it, we would’ve been okay. But I didn’t know the song, really.

Crawford: So you survived.

01-00:31:12
Mahones:

Yes.

Crawford: That’s a great story.

01-00:31:15

Mahones:

Oh, boy, that was funny. The funny thing, though, was later on, many years later, I worked with Eddie “Lockjaw” Davis again. And I remembered that first time. I remember, years later, I started hanging around at Minton’s Playhouse. I ended up working there.

Crawford:

When you were in high school, what was your school like? Did you have music in the school?

01-00:31:53

Mahones:

No, I didn’t have music in school. They had a music period, but there weren’t any instruments. We just had a teacher. Music appreciation, they used to call it.

Crawford:

Singing songs?

01-00:32:11

Mahones:

Yes, singing, right, right. That kind of stuff.

Crawford:

What other clubs were in your neighborhood?

01-00:32:18

Mahones:

When I finally started playing jazz, like I said, Minton’s was at 117th, 118th street. I used to go there. Then there was Small’s Paradise. I used to go there. And across the street was Connie’s [Inn]. They had sessions at Connie’s.

There was a little club called Count Basie’s. The Autobahn. I used to go there. That’s where Malcolm X was killed. Club Baron was another club. They had sessions. At 125th Street club, they had sessions and dances. A lot of these places were like dance halls, too. They had dancing on the weekends. I remember Small’s had dancing on the weekends and it was like West Indian people used to have these big dances. Johnny Sparrow and his Bows and Arrows was one group I heard in Manhattan.

I would just come and listen to the music. Connie’s was across the street from Small’s. So you would hear the music. If you were at Connie’s and you would go out to the street, you would hear the music coming from Small’s. So that was the club scene. I think at that time, some of them weren’t air conditioned, so they used to throw the doors open. Then I ended up working at Small’s later on, with the Jazz Modes.

Crawford:

How old did you have to be to go into those places?

01-00:34:14

Mahones:

Well, at that time, I must’ve been in my late teens or early twenties. I think it was probably nineteen.

Crawford:

When did you start playing with the band?

01-00:34:26
Mahones:

Oh, after the Young Dukes of Rhythm, what happened was [a tour of the South with] Joe Morris, the trumpet player. He'd worked with an arranger and composer, and he had worked with Lionel Hampton or somebody like that, at that time. He had written a song called "Anytime, Anyplace, Anywhere" and it became very popular. So he had a road tour in 1948, like they do now; do a record and go on tour. Same type thing. So he had a group of musicians in the rhythm section, and they were jazz musicians and all. This tune became popular on what they call the Chitlin' Circuit. It was mostly on the Atlantic coastline, the Chitlin' Circuit.

Crawford: Up and down the Atlantic coast?

01-00:35:43
Mahones:

Right. Atlantic coast. So we'd end up in Pensacola, Florida and tour all through the South. So for whatever reason, he had these bebop players — Philly Joe Jones, and I forgot the rest, but they were beboppers. Johnny Griffin, I think, Johnny Griffin. For some reason— either they didn't want to go or he didn't want to take them; whatever reason, I don't know, but anyway—he hired us, the rhythm section from the Young Dukes of Rhythm. So we went on this tour. Like I said, it was like a blind date, because I had never been in the South.

Crawford: You hadn't? How was it different?

01-00:36:34
Mahones:

Oh my goodness, it was *real* different. It was segregation. We traveled in two or three cars, with station wagons, the wooden ones. You remember those?

Crawford: The old Woodies.[laughter]

01-00:36:51
Mahones:

Yes. With the thing on top, the rack on top with all our bags on top, and the people crowded into three cars. We'd play all these small venues, I guess, because it was only one group, which meant we'd play theaters and maybe ballrooms, dance ballrooms, that type of stuff. And we stayed in people's houses because we couldn't stay in the hotels.

They would open the doors for us, find us homes. Some of us stayed in one house, some of us stayed in another house, that type of thing. So more or less, we stayed on the other side of the tracks, they used to call it. We would do that. Didn't have to go into the other side, is what I was trying to get at.

Crawford: How were audiences?

01-00:37:52
Mahones:

The audiences were great.

Crawford: Great?

01-00:37:54
Mahones:

Yes, they were all black audiences, so it was great. Then we had a number of certain things happen. I've forgotten what state or what town it was. We were playing at this place which was out in the woods, it seemed like. They were dancing. We were playing, but there was a rope across the room. We were on one side of that rope, white people on the other side. We were on the bottom floor dance floor; it was the balcony where the white people were. I don't know if it was midnight; near the end of the night—the rope would come down, and then everybody would mingle. First I said, "What's happening here?" I'd never seen that. I'd never seen the other thing, either [laughter]

Crawford: In Harlem, you wouldn't have seen that.

01-00:39:03
Mahones:

No, no, no. So that was strange, the first time seeing that in person.

Crawford: And you weren't aware of that before.

01-00:39:10
Mahones:

No, no. I heard people talking, though. "Don't go down there because a lot of things are going on down there." People were getting lynched and whatever. So I think that's the reason Joe Morris took us instead of the other musicians. I think, in a way. I didn't know, at that time, why. Because maybe they rebelled; they didn't want to go down there because they knew more about the situation, and we didn't.

Crawford: They wouldn't tour. They wouldn't have wanted to tour, because of that. I interviewed Norma Teagarden, Jack's sister, and she talked a lot about that, too.

01-00:39:59
Mahones:

Yes. So that was a different time, different time. Different folks, different time.

Crawford: Things are a lot better?

01-00:40:-05
Mahones:

They're much better.

Crawford: You knew by then that that music was what you wanted to do.

01-00:40:13
Mahones:

Yes, yes. Shortly after that, after working with Joe Morris, I was drafted, went into the army.

Crawford: What year was that?

01-00:40:24
Mahones:

It must've been '51, because I was there was for two years; came out in '53..

Crawford: Korea. Where did you serve?

01-00:40:40

Mahones: Oh, that's another story. What happened, they shipped us out to Fort Bragg and the 82nd Airborne. You took basic training, which I think is eight weeks, more or less, getting us ready for Korea. Then things slowed down. They didn't need another division, so we didn't go. So what they did, we took basic training again, getting ready to go. Didn't go. Basic training again.

Crawford: Three times?

01-00:41:17

Mahones: Three times, I still didn't go. So then the last time, I went home on furlough. When I came back, they shipped the whole group, the whole division, to Texas, Fort Hood, Texas. So now the real hot sun—we were living in these tents. So that was another drag. It would get very hot. Going to town, the segregation thing was over, but there was still undercurrents of that still going on in Texas, at that time. So now I'm in the motor pool.

Crawford: You didn't get to play in a band?

01-00:42:12

Mahones: Right. I was trying to get in the band, but I couldn't get in the band. So a friend of mine worked at headquarters company. At that time, they used to send directives about openings for school. I told him, "When you see anything like that, put my name on that." So there was an opening for a radio school in New Jersey, and another school in Fort Ord. So he put my name down, and they sent me to Camp Chaffee, in Arkansas.

Crawford: Oh, my goodness. [laughter]

01-00:43:12

Mahones: So I said, "Oh, man! That's even worse." I'm there taking a course in piano, the Morse code, and how to fix radios and all that type of stuff. I would go to the service club and fool around with the piano. I remember this one day, there was another guy doing the same thing. He was in another unit. So we got to be friends, because were trying to playing the piano or whatever. He turned out to be Berry Gordy.

At that time, he had an idea of taking these groups—. We used to call them bird groups, because they were vocal groups. They'd be on the corner, doo-wop, singing that kind of stuff. We used to call them bird groups. He said, "I'm going to take some of these groups, I'm going to rehearse them and I'm going to put them out on record." That became Motown. But he had it all mapped out then. So that was interesting.

Crawford: Amazing story. Well, up until now, who were the big influences in your life?

01-00:44:45
Mahones: As far as music or what?

Crawford: Otherwise, too.

01-00:44:50
Mahones: Well, I had heard Art Tatum, which I liked. He did things I liked. I had gone down to 52nd Street. Of course, I was underage, but I would buy a beer and stand way in the back.

Crawford: Where was that? Where did you go?

01-00:45:12
Mahones: 52nd Street.

Crawford: Right, and what was the club—do you remember?

01-00:45:15
Mahones: It might've been the Three Deuces or the Onyx, or it might've been The Famous Door. There were a bunch of them in a row; you could go from one to another.

Crawford: That was a big jazz center, wasn't it?

01-00:45:27
Mahones: Yes. Yes, it was. It was great.

Crawford: Bigger than Harlem?

01-00:45:31
Mahones: Well, it was just one or two blocks, all these clubs. A couple blocks, and there was about five or six clubs. You could go from one to the other. One club might have Charlie Parker and Dizzy, and the other one would have Art Tatum; another will have Buddy Rich—whoever was down there at the time playing jazz.

Crawford: Monk?

01-00:45:56
Mahones: Monk.

Crawford: Monk played a lot at Minton's, though, didn't he?

01-00:45:59
Mahones: Yes, at the beginning.

Crawford: Did you like his style?

01-00:46:08

Mahones:

Oh, that's another story. At first, I said, "What is this man doing to this piano." Because at first, I didn't like his style. I couldn't understand it. I had heard Tatum and Nat King Cole, you'd hear on the radio with his trio, and Fats Waller—I liked that kind of stuff. Then I heard Monk after I heard these other people, so it didn't resonate with me at the time.

Then I heard Bud Powell and said, "*That's* the way to go." I said, "That's it." Bud Powell, my goodness. So I heard most of the people before I heard Monk. So when I heard Monk, it didn't jive until later, I realized what was going on; and I fell in love with it then.

Crawford:

What was different about his playing?

Mahones:

Concept, tone, rhythm, everything. I got to play with the Bud Powell Trio. I was nervous but got through it. Outside the club, he said: "That was nice, but don't do it again." [laughter]

Crawford:

Well, I think today I got the amount of material that I wanted to get.

01-00:48:38

Mahones:

Okay.

Crawford:

So I think we'll break now, and then we'll start up again. Do you think you could come to Berkeley this time, in two weeks?

01-00:48:49

Mahones:

Okay, okay. Yes.

Crawford:

It's not too painful? It is a wonderful story.

01-00:49:03

Mary Mahones:

See? Great ! Awesome. Thank you so much.

Interview 2: February 12, 2015

Audio File 2

Crawford: February 12, 2015, interview number two with Gildo Mahones, for the Oral History Office. I'm sitting here in the Bancroft Library with Mr. and Mrs. Mahones, to interview Gildo Mahones. Is it Jildo or Gildo?

02-00:00:20

Mahones: Gildo.

Crawford: I wanted to start today by talking about the churches in Harlem, because I didn't ask you if your family had an affiliation with a church.

02-00:00:38

Mahones: Oh, yes. Yes. Well, I think three of them, I guess. When they first came over to the United States, they were Catholic, so they went to Catholic church. Then something happened.

Crawford: Because of the Puerto Rican connection.

02-00:00:58

Mahones: Right, yes, that's what it was. Something happened, and they went to—what do you call it? Not Baptist. What was the religion? Pente —

Crawford: Pentecostal?

02-00:01:19

Mahones: Yes, that's what it was.

Crawford: How would you describe it?

02-00:01:30

Mahones: Well, when they joined the Pentecostal church, it was almost like every evening, at 7:30, you had to go to church. Sundays, you had to go, also. I didn't like all that, of course, too much.

Crawford: Did you go?

02-00:01:52

Mahones: Well, I had no choice. But what I liked about that was—the only thing I liked—was the music.

Crawford: Tell me about the music.

02-00:02:03

Mahones: It was tambourines—I played the tambourines—and the vocals and the hymns, they were very exciting. I liked the music part, the piano player. It was very exciting.

Crawford: Piano player? Was there an organ?

- 02-00:02:20
Mahones: Once in a while, depending what church you went to. Sometimes we went to a different church and there was an organ. Most of the time it was piano.
- Crawford: Piano. And was there a choir?
- 02-00:02:30
Mahones: In some places, a small choir; in some places, they didn't have any.
- Crawford: Do you remember the name of that particular church?
- 02-00:02:41
Mahones: Let me see. I think it was John 1:3, something like that. *Juan Tres*, yes; something. I can't remember exactly.
- Crawford: Was the service it in Spanish?
- 02-00:02:57
Mahones: Yes, it was in Spanish.
- Crawford: Oh, so was your first language Spanish?
- 02-00:02:59
Mahones: Yes, Spanish, yes. I learned English in school. When I first started kindergarten, I couldn't speak English at all. So I went to the school, I started to get more into it. That's all we spoke at the house, was Spanish. In fact, as I went further and further in school and I got more acclimated to the language, I would come home from school speaking English to them and they would reply in Spanish. So that's the way that went for a while.
- Crawford: Do you remember that being hard?
- 02-00:03:51
Mahones: At the beginning, it was; but then later, it was easy.
- Crawford: Do you think that had a lot to do with your musicality, the church?
- 02-00:04:07
Mahones: Yes, because listening to the different rhythms and listening to the vocal harmonies and the excitement in the music, it probably entered my mind in a different way. So later on, I probably drew from that, in the music I composed and wrote.
- Crawford: How old were you when you started composing?
- 02-00:04:41
Mahones: Oh, well, that's another story. I guess at the beginning, I used to sing. Because we had what you call programs that we would perform for the family, like on holidays and birthdays and at Christmas time. Since there were about six of us in the family at that time—my sister and me and my four cousins—everybody

had to perform something, they had to do something. So me and my cousin Louie, we sang. He took the lead in most of the songs; I would harmonize. So the funny thing was that I would pick the right notes. I didn't know what they were, but I would pick the right notes to his lead. So it came out pretty good.

Crawford: You had a pretty good ear!

02-00:05:43

Mahones: Yes. So that's one of the things that I remember about that period in time, anyway.

Crawford: A lot of churchgoing.

02-00:05:53

Mahones: Yes, Oh, and music from the radio. The songs of the day, whatever was popular at that time, like "Don't Fence Me In," "Somebody Else Is Taking My Place," and what was the other one? Songs like that, anyway.

Crawford: It doesn't seem that a song like "Don't Fence Me In" was written by Cole Porter.

02-00:06:22

Mahones: Right, it was. Very strange. It must've been for a play or something, I guess.

Crawford: Did you like Cole Porter especially?

02-00:06:30

Mahones: Later on, a lot of things that he wrote, I loved.

Crawford: You talked about playing at Minton's Playhouse with the Young Dukes of Rhythm as a teenager, then you were hired in 1949 to play at Minton's with Percy Heath.

02-00:11:45

Mahones: Yes, this was at Minton's Playhouse. Then I started working there, when I got better. Kenny Clarke hired me to play in a trio with Percy Heath.

Crawford: Wow. Pretty good.

02-00:12:26

Mahones: Yeah, *very* good. [laughter]

Crawford: Kenny Clarke was kind of a seminal drummer, wasn't he, for bebop?

02-00:12:30

Mahones: Yes, he was. He was great.

Crawford: Talk about his playing.

02-00:12:33

Mahones: Oh, his playing was sort of different. He had the cymbal, the ride cymbal and he was the pioneer for a lot of different approaches to the drummers, at that time. He was one of the best, one of the leading exponents of that particular music at that time. I was very fortunate to play with that group. Then I think Teddy Hill was the manager — I don't know how it came about, but anyway, we expanded the group to include Milt Jackson and Sonny Rollins and Jesse Drakes on trumpet. That was the sextet. Then I started to hear a lot of music, different music. So it was like a learning experience, like going to music school,

Crawford: Percy Heath said you had to be married to the drummer.

Mahones: You do have to be close to the drummer. His feeling for the music. Connie Kay was special that way.

Crawford: You said something about being with the big time now and having to sit up straight and take notice.

02-00:14:02

Mahones: Yes. Yes, yes, that's true, because this was happening every night. It was six nights. It was stressful for me, because I was learning. Every night, something would happen that I would have to pay much attention to and learn from that experience, so the next night I wouldn't make the same mistake, like that. Learning different tunes, because these people would turn around and say, "Let's play this." So I had to learn how to play that particular song, whatever it was.

Crawford: Did you practice all the time?

02-00:14:44

Mahones: All the time, all the time.

Crawford: Percy Heath was a wonderful bass player. He went to the Modern Jazz Quartet, didn't he?

02-00:14:53

Mahones: Exactly. In fact, Milt and Kenny were the first ones, because they were playing with Dizzy Gillespie's band. It was Milt Jackson, not Percy, Ray Brown, and Kenny Clarke and John Lewis. And then when the band broke up, they all went different ways. But the first recording that they did was Milt Jackson, Ray Brown, Kenny Clarke, and John Lewis. It was called the Milt Jackson Quartet. John Lewis was going to school, I think, at the time.

The other guys, the members of that group were playing with different people. Milt and Percy were playing at Minton's, with Kenny Clarke. And John was going to school with him. When John came out, they formed a group. Not with Ray Brown, but with Percy. Somehow—I don't know if it was because

of copyright things or whatever it was—anyway, they kept the same initials, MJQ, Milt Jackson Quartet, but the Modern Jazz Quartet. That's how that came about. They performed for a long time, and Milt Jackson had the front line — it was very exciting. He had perfect pitch. They all had music, but not him.

Crawford: How long did you stay at Minton's?

02-00:16:46

Mahones: Oh, off and on. I guess a couple of years. Because then I started playing with different people and at other clubs.

Crawford: Let's talk more about some of the other clubs, other than Minton's.

02-00:21:05

Mahones: Oh, Minton's, then there was—. What was the name of that? Oh, I forgot. There was Showman's, I remember that, on 125th Street.

Crawford: Small's Paradise is one I know.

02-00:21:23

Mahones: Small's Paradise. Oh, yes, here we go. Small's Paradise, Count Basie's, Connie's Inn. There was live jam sessions at Connie's Inn and Count Basie's. There's one on 7th Avenue; I can't remember the name.

Crawford: Bucket of Blood, I heard about.

02-00:21:49

Mahones: Oh, yes, the Bucket of Blood. I played there one time and that was enough.

Crawford: You did? What was that like?

02-00:21:57

Mahones: Oh, it was a small club, but the people were from one state, I've heard. Most of the clientele were from one state down south. Anyway, all of them knew each other. But thing was, on Saturday nights, there was usually a fight or something going on. People would get hurt. So one woman came in there one time and she was screaming at this guy, her husband or whatever, for whatever reason, and they got into it, and one of them had a razor. That's how they got the name, the Bucket of Blood, because things would happen; people would get hurt.

Crawford: Where was that? What neighborhood?

02-00:22:52

Mahones: Oh, I don't know. Now, that's another one. It was in Harlem, but I can't remember the name of the place.

Crawford: How did you happen to play there?

02-00:23:03
Mahones:

Somebody was sick that played there, and I guess I took his place for that night. I never went back.

Crawford:

What was Small's Paradise like?

02-00:23:15
Mahones:

Oh, yes. They had a lot of music. It was across the street from Connie's Inn, so I saw that a lot. I played there many times, with different people. Let me see. One time I was working there with the Jazz Modes, with Julius Watkins and Charlie Rouse. I remember it was intermission and it was very hot. So we had to go outside during intermission and kind of cool off. It was during the summertime. We were standing right there in front of the club, leaning against the window, and this guy came out, not blowing a saxophone, but carrying a saxophone, making out like he was playing it. I noticed that he had come out of the club.

I said, "Charlie, that looks like your horn," to Charlie Rouse. He took a look, he went inside, and came running out and grabbed the guy, because it was his horn. The guy just walked into the club, went into the bandstand and took the saxophone and was walking out the door, down the street, and nobody had stopped him. So that was just kind of strange.

Crawford:

Well, that was good that you noticed the horn.

02-00:24:51
Mahones:

Yes! [laughter]

Crawford:

We could talk more about the leaders in bebop.

Mahones:

Yes. At first, because like I said, after we got into the bebop thing, I heard people like Al Haig and Bud Powell. That excited me. Art Tatum, it's kind of hard to imitate his music, get into it. But when I heard Bud, I said, "I like that."

Crawford:

You mentioned concept and tone. What else about Bud Powell?

02-00:25:46
Mahones:

Well, his drive and execution and melodic style. Almost sounded like a horn, like a saxophone almost, but on the piano. At that time, I heard him in Birdland. So that was very exciting. When I was coming up, he was the pinnacle. I couldn't do it!

In Boston, I played with Lester Young at Storyville, on the same bill. Every night for a week he played, and he got the same response we did. I thought it should be more! When I heard Thelonious the first time, I said, "Well, he's not playing anything, compared to Bud."

Crawford: What was it? What was lacking?

02-00:26:24
Mahones:

I guess maybe the speed of the notes or the dexterity. Like I said, Bud was playing like almost a saxophone would play or a trumpet player would play. I didn't get that from Monk at first. Just very sparse and different dissonant notes and intervals. Later on, by working with Milt Jackson—he would play a lot of Monk's music, like "Round About Midnight" and "Straight, No Chaser," and different things like that, and it sounded great when Milt did it.

Crawford: Who were the other bebop leaders?

02-00:28:29
Mahones:

Naturally, Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie. Then Dexter Gordon and Coleman, Coleman Hawkins. Let me see. Oh, J.J. Johnson, trombone. Very exciting. The drummers were like Max Roach, Kenny Clarke, Art Blakey. Very exciting drummers. Let's see. Who else would I say? Oh, baritone, Art Pepper

Crawford: Was there a lot of drug use?

02-00:30:27
Mahones:

Oh, yes. That was going on, too. That was the other side. A lot of guys were either imitating or were influenced by Charlie Parker. A lot of the guys that did that, they thought if they did that they would play better, but it wasn't the case. It's a funny thing because when Clifford Brown came on the scene, he didn't do anything. He was very straight about that, and he played great. So a lot of people saw that and they said, "Well, this guy can play like this, and doesn't use drugs." So a lot of them started following Clifford. I got to play with Clifford Brown, when I was performing with Lester Young at the Blackhawk Club and then Tiffany's in LA. He sang my songs, and it was as if he wrote them.

You asked me what my favorite key was to write in. It was F, and you asked about my favorite composition. It is "A Single Rose." Jon Hendricks wrote the lyrics. When I wrote the music I thought of my wife, but he wrote the lyrics and submitted the song for the film *Little Prince* and it was perfect.[laughter]

Crawford: Do you think bebop was a form of protest in any way?

02-00:31:52
Mahones:

I guess so, in a way, because when Dizzy and Bird started more or less playing their music, they were trying to make a statement, because there wasn't any opening in the music at that time, for them to play. So they got this music that was very potent. Potent, I think, is the word. That showed their capabilities of taking music and turning it around. They were almost experts, innovators of this particular music, and very forceful, very powerful, so even the people that didn't like it had to agree that there was something there. I guess that was the start of it. But later on, the way things were going in the

country at that time, a lot of the young musicians were using it in that way, to express the way they felt at the about the country, the racism and different things like that.

Crawford: I never heard Miles Davis but I heard that he and others would turn his back on the audience to express some kind of distaste.

02-00:34:06

Mahones: Yes, sometimes. But that went two ways, depending what was happening at the time, because Miles liked Lester Young. Lester, when he played, he would come up to the center, do a solo, and then he would move back. He would not turn his back, but he would move back when somebody else was playing. He said, "If I still stay in the front, the audience will pay more attention to me, instead of the person who was soloing." Miles did that, also. But sometimes, instead of walking back, he'd just turn around and face the other way.

Crawford: Oh, so you think it was the same thing.

02-00:35:10

Mahones: Yes. I think it started out that way, anyway. Maybe later on, depending on how he felt or what was going on out in the audience or what happened today, he started doing that, too. So a little bit of both things.

Crawford: When you were playing at Minton's, did people ask for specific music a lot?

02-00:35:42

Mahones: No, not really, because the musicians just played what we were going to play and that was it. It wasn't like you can come up and—. You could request certain tunes, maybe. Like they asked Milt to play "Round About Midnight" or something like that, and he would play.

Crawford: I'm remembering Dizzy said Milt got his rhythm from the Sanctified Church. Do you think that's true?

02-00:36:18

Mahones: Probably.

Crawford: Well, you went into the army. You were discharged in about 1953?

02-00:36:29

Mahones: Yes, that's when I came back. I went back to play at Minton's. Oh, I was playing at Minton's and Jesse Drakes, who used to work with Lester Young a lot, knew that Lester was coming back. At that time, he was with Jazz at the Philharmonic. He would do a tour almost every year, with Jazz at the Philharmonic. They needed a piano player, so Jesse suggested to Charlie Carpenter, who was the manager of Lester Young at the time—. He came down to Minton's to check me out. He went back and told Lester and that is how I got the gig with Lester. So that was another in my learning experience. That's another level. So now I'm at Birdland, with Lester Young.

Crawford: Before we get to Lester Young, please talk about Birdland as a club.

02-00:38:01

Mahones: Oh my goodness, the most beautiful club. On Broadway. You go downstairs, there's the club. They had a little announcer called Pee Wee [William Crayton] Marquette. He was a small person, I guess. He did the announcements. It was very funny. He would mispronounce your name. Sometimes he just couldn't get the people's names right, let's put it that way. Then they had another little side thing. He would do it on purpose, if you'd give him some money.

Crawford: You mean, you'd have to pay to have your name—?

02-00:39:05

Mahones: Right, yes, in a way, because if you didn't do it, he would mispronounce your name. Or ignore your name. Most of the time, people gave him a few dollars, whatever it was, a dollar or something, I don't know. A funny thing happened. When Connie [Kay] was working there. His name was Conrad Kirnon. That's his name. So Pee Wee could not get that together to save his life, so he would announce everybody's name. So-and-so on trumpet, so-and-so on drums—he couldn't get it together. Anyway, Connie got so mad, and he said, "Just say, Connie Kay," from the back. "Just say Connie Kay." So Pee Wee said, "Okay, Connie Kay on drums." And that's what's happened. Ever since then, Connie started calling himself Connie Kay.

Crawford: Lester Young was quite a phrase maker, wasn't he? Didn't he coin a lot of jazz phrases?

02-00:40:43

Mahones: Yes, he did. The first night was a trip, because they had given me a list full of all the songs we were going to do for the sets. So I had a little list. So he comes up to the microphone and said, "Okay." Or he'll turn around the set list. "Let's play 'Pound Cake,'" and started counting off.

Crawford: "Pound Cake?"

02-00:41:09

Mahones: Yes. I said, "Pound Cake?" I'm looking at the thing, there's no "Pound Cake" there. I'm looking. Jesse turns around and says, "There'll Never Be Another You," or something like that, a standard. Everything was fine. The next tune, he says something else that wasn't on the list either. Jesse would interpret, and it was a tune that's on the list. So that went on all night. I'm getting confused, nervous, sweat pouring down my face. But anyway, I found out later that he did that to everybody that came, that worked with him the first time.

Crawford: Didn't he come up with "cool"?

02-00:42:06

Mahones: Oh, a lot of things. "I feel a draft," was another thing. When somebody came up that he didn't like or something like that, he would feel a draft. There's so many. They escape me right now. I'm trying to think of them.

Mrs. Mahones: He had something for the cops, too, right?

Mahones: Yes, he'd call it "Bob Crosby." He said, "Bob Crosby" for the police. Oh, he had a million things.

Crawford: He didn't do that to confuse you. You knew what "Pound Cake" was.

02-00:43:03

Mahones: Right. Oh, yes. Eventually you got it. You stayed around him, you'd get it.

Crawford: Percy Heath said he could say a lot in just one note. That he knew what to throw away. What was his personality like?

02-00:43:14

Mahones: Kind of cool. Very funny. But he liked his drinking. He carried a little—not a pint, but a little bottle of his favorite thing, whatever it was at the time. I think Johnnie Walker, the red label, I think.

Crawford: Oh!

02-00:43:50

Mahones: They used to call it a chamois bag. A bag like this, he kept the bottle in there, put it in the bell of his horn and that was it.

Crawford: While he performed?

02-00:44:02

Mahones: Yes, he drank a little sip. But that was it. He didn't do anything else. Or maybe he smoked a little bit, but that was it.

Crawford: Did his playing slow down in the last years?

02-00:44:19

Mahones: Oh. People say his playing went down, but I joined in '53, so I don't know how his playing was when he was with Basie, the twenties and all that. So to me, he sounded great!

Crawford: His recordings certainly do, from the fifties.

02-00:44:46

Mahones: Yes, to me, he sounded great. I don't know what they were comparing, that period with the earlier period. I don't know what they were mostly—. I guess there were records; you could find out. But when I was there, he sounded great.

Crawford: Not a bebop stylist.

02-00:45:09
Mahones:

No, we call him more or less coming from the Swing era. But he was so inventive with his playing that a lot of the bebop players were influenced by his playing. I would say it was Coleman Hawkins, Lester Young, and then Charlie Parker, and then I would say [John] Coltrane.

Those four guys are responsible for a lot of the changes in music. Lester had a flowing style. His approach was completely different than Coleman Hawkins'. One thing I remember him saying, "Learn the lyrics of the song that you're playing." He used to harp on that. I think that influenced his playing, because he felt that when you read the lyrics and you play the melody, that's one story.

The guy that wrote the song, that's a story. So now when you solo, you have to make your own story. Follow that story, but change it around through your improvisation, so you're telling another story. You keep doing that. Depending how long you solo, you could be telling hundreds of stories.

He told hundreds of stories in his approach to playing. Other people interpret that as maybe different harmonies or different rhythms or different—. Then another thing, his control of space and time. He would start, stop in a peculiar place in the music, and then shift the momentum around, or the meter around. It was very interesting.

Aside from the stories and the shifting around of the meter, his tone was different than anybody else at that time. A lot of the younger players, like Stan Getz and Zoot Sims and Wardell Gray and stuff, they started imitating that style. That became very popular.

Crawford: Was that hard for you to follow?

02-00:48:49
Mahones:

No.

Crawford: Was Young superstitious?

Mahones: When he was gambling or anything, he would say, "I bet thirteen of my dollars. Because thirteen was supposed to be bad luck, but to him, it was the opposite, he felt. That was one of the things. I remember him harping on that.

Crawford: It is said that Count Basie fired him early on because he wouldn't play on Friday the 13th.

02-00:49:36
Mahones:

Yeah, well, I'm not surprised.

Crawford: Well, what was the relationship with Billie Holiday? She named him Prez, right?

02-00:49:49

Mahones: Yes. I think that they were like soul mates, let me put it that way, with the music. His approach was different and her approach was different. People just hadn't heard his approach, till he started doing it. The same thing with Billie Holiday. There were many singers, but her approach to singing was completely different from what was going on at the time. But it was similar to Lester Young; and his approach to music was similar to her singing. They became friends, and he called her Lady Day and she called him Prez.

Crawford: You worked with a lot of singers. What place do you give Lady Day?

02-00:50:55

Mahones: Oh. One of the top, one of the first. In terms of who was first, who was second and things like that, she would be first. Because of the timbre of her voice and the feeling, she made even a pop song sound like the blues.

Crawford: Did you ever play with her?

02-00:51:12

Mahones: I didn't work with her, but when I was playing with Prez at Birdland, he would call her up to sing. So I played many times behind her during that time. He'd call Miles up; he'd play then. Billy Eckstine, he'd call him up, or Arthur Prysock. But Billie, I remember playing behind her, because he called her up. I think she sang "Lover Man" or whatever we were playing. So that was exciting.

Crawford: She had a sad life, in many ways, didn't she?

02-00:51:55

Mahones: Yes, yes. A lot of them, life didn't treat her too well.

Crawford: Well, who was the vice prez?

02-00:52:09

Mahones: The vice prez was—. Oh, boy.

Crawford: Quinichette?

02-00:52:14

Mahones: Yeah, Paul Quinichette I remember they had a billing in Birdland. It was Paul Quinichette and Lester Young. The president and the vice prez, two groups. So I'm working there the first time. I'd come and watch ahead, because I had never heard Paul. So as it happened, I got stuck on the train, so I was late. Not late, but I wanted to get there before—. Yeah, I *was* late. So I'm running down, getting off the subway; it was a block away. I'm running and I hear this sound and wow. I say, "Wow, they started off without me." Because it

sounded just like Prez. I said, “What?” So I’m running down the stairs and it wasn’t Prez; it was Paul Quinichette.

I couldn’t tell the difference. When they played together or that close, it didn’t sound the same. So that was something.” Because from a distance, when I was coming down the steps, I thought it was Lester Young for a minute. Because he was just doing patterns and things that Prez would play. But after you listened for a while, or even when he started going deeper into a song or deeper into the solo, or I guess deeper into himself, it wasn’t Prez. It was different. Close, very close, but it wasn’t the same thing.

Crawford: Would he be with Lester Young?

02-00:54:29

Mahones: Well, they were friendly. Lester liked him, strangely enough, for playing almost like you, or playing like some people. But he liked him, so that was that.

Crawford: Was it always at Birdland?

02-00:54:52

Mahones: At that time, with Prez, because I was working with Lester. The only thing with that was—. Well, at Birdland, I worked with Prez all the time, during that period. It was usually two groups, Lester’s group and another group. So I got a chance to hear many jazz groups at the time, and played opposite them. Like Miles and his group, when he had Red Garland and Philly Joe Jones; and I think Paul Chambers, whatever it was. Then I heard the Modern Jazz Quartet, with John Lewis and Milt and Percy and Connie. Oh, and I forgot about that.

What happened was that Connie Kay was working with us and I think it was the same thing that happened with me. Lester will go with Jazz at the Philharmonic almost every year, for a tour. And during that time, we’re out of work. So the rhythm section and me, we were out of work, okay? So we would find work with other people, during that time. Or had gigs. Yes, we’d find work with other people. Then he would come back and then we’d get together again and work with Prez for three or four months or whatever it was; and then he would go again, Jazz at the Philharmonic, or he would go out to Paris by himself. So during those periods, we had to fend for ourselves, as far as work.

Crawford: Oh, that was hard, wasn’t it?

02-00:57:15

Mahones: Yes, it was kind of hard. I think that one of those periods, Connie Kay went with John Lewis and the Modern Jazz Quartet. During the last period like that, I went with Charlie Rouse and Julius Watkins.

Crawford: When Lester Young would go on the road, how did you find work? Were you in the union?

02-00:57:46

Mahones: You were in the union, but it wasn't [that] the union would find work. Being in Birdland, other people heard you play. So when you weren't playing, and they knew this, they would hire you. Word of mouth, more or less.

Crawford: So you could find work easily, but it wasn't quite consistent.

02-00:58:12

Mahones: Right, right.

Crawford: You mentioned the union. What was good about the union?

02-00:58:21

Mahones: They had some good programs. You'd go to the union and they would have work. If you signed up, you could get work in the Catskills or whatever. But I think—I'm not sure—again, the race thing was going on. A lot of the black players didn't get the good gigs, let me put it like that. The money gigs. But in other things, they were great.

Crawford: Why did you leave Lester Young?

02-00:59:21

Mahones: Oh. As I said, every year he would go on this Jazz Philharmonic whatever, and we were left on our own.

Crawford: Who was his piano player after you left?

02-00:59:38

Mahones: Oh, I don't remember. The funny thing was that I was dreading the time when I'd have to play at Birdland with another group, and it happened with the Jazz Modes. He was playing; they were his group, Jesse Drakes and whatever. I was working with the Jazz Modes opposite of them. So opening night came, I said, "This is going to be a little awkward," I thought. But he was cool.

Crawford: Was he cool?

02-01:00:22

Mahones: Yeah, he was cool. Except that he said—. I had written some compositions for the Jazz Modes, and they announced it, "Written by Gildo Mahones." So when it came down the set, "How come you didn't write any tunes when I was with you? But he was cool.

Crawford: What did you say?

02-01:00:50

Mahones: "Well, at that time, I didn't know how to do it, really."

Crawford: That's a good way to finish today!

Interview 3: February 19, 2015

Audio File 3

Crawford: February 19, 2015, interview hour number three with Gildo Mahones for the Oral History Office. We're recording, and I want to go to the Jazz Modes quintet today, in the late 1950s.

03-00:00:22

Mahones: Okay.

Crawford: Tell me how that came about.

03-00:00:25

Mahones: Well, Julius Watkins, the French horn player, and Charlie Rouse was the tenor player, we had been working together with different groups. I think the last group they worked with was Oscar Pettiford, the bass player. They had a habit of mixing different instruments, like cello and French horn and reeds. So anyway, after that group broke up, they decided to form a group together. That's how that came about. They rehearsed for a long time by themselves, just the two horns. The tenor and the French horn. They had worked out a lot of material. Julius wrote a lot of stuff and did a lot of arrangements. Then they decided to get the rhythm section. That's how I joined the group, as part of the rhythm section.

Crawford: Well, talk about the marriage of the French horn and—

03-00:01:28

Mahones: Boy, that was great, because at that point, I don't think I ever heard of a French horn and tenor player—at that time, anyway—playing bebop and jazz. I heard trombone and tenor, like J.J. Johnson and Sonny Stitt or somebody else, they had a group, but never French horns. It wouldn't have happened with anybody else but Julius, because he was really virtuoso on the French horn. Nobody else played it like him. He used to just get all over the horn. So they had a unique sound. After they rehearsed certain songs and whatnot, and built a library, we started getting gigs. That's how it happened, more or less.

Crawford: Who else was in that group?

03-00:02:30

Mahones: That group, I think it was Ron Jefferson on drums. At the beginning, when we first recorded, we didn't have a bass player, a real bass player, so we used different people like Paul Chambers and Paul West. Then as time went on, we got Martin Rivera, who had been a friend of mine from the Young Dukes of Rhythm. He was the bass player. That was the rhythm section.

Crawford: Well, another unusual combination was the harp in jazz.

03-00:03:14

Mahones: Yes.

Crawford: Who came up with that idea?

03-00:03:16

Mahones: I think that was Julius. He wanted to get a different sound. He was always looking for different sounds. We only used one vocal. We used to use her mostly like for the sound value. Not so much the words and all that, but just the sound of the vocal. Something like what Duke had used with his singers. Let's see, what else happened? Oh, I did an arrangement of "Stallion." I don't know if you heard it.

Crawford: Yes, I did, on a Jazz Modes recording. Ebullient piece! You wrote it, too.

03-00:04:00

Mahones: Yes. I did one with voices, but we never did the recording. I'm sorry we missed that one. We started recording, and something happened and we never finished it, so it never came out.

Crawford: Talk about how you went about writing "Legend."

03-00:04:21

Mahones: Well, that was after I left for Lester Young. I remember he had mentioned that I had never written anything for him when I was with the group.

Crawford: That was for him?

03-00:04:33

Mahones: This was for the Jazz Modes. I had left Lester by that time.

Crawford: And who recorded it?

03-00:04:44

Mahones: Jazz Modes.

Crawford: Jazz Modes had their own label?

03-00:04:47

Mahones: No, no, I'm sorry. I misunderstood you. It was recorded by the Jazz Modes. No, they didn't have their own label. The first recording was on Dawn Records, I think it was called. Dawn Records. It was reissued later on by, I don't know, somebody else.

Crawford: It's a beautiful song.

03-00:05:07

Mahones: Thank you.

Crawford: When you wrote that, did you notate it as you went along?

03-00:05:12
Mahones:

Yes, more or less, I did. It started out as I was taking composition lessons. That was one of the lessons; I had to come up with a composition. It started out then; but then later on, I added more sections and whatnot.

Crawford:

Where were you studying composition?

03-00:05:43
Mahones:

There was a school called the Harnet School in New York. It was in the fifties. Late fifties, middle fifties, I forget the exact dates; I can't remember. It was after I came back after the service. I didn't go to school right away. After I came out of the service with the G.I. Bill, I didn't go to school. So I had to start school somewhere quickly, or else I was going to lose it. I was trying to get into Juilliard or the High School of Music, but you had to present a composition; a classical piece. As I didn't take classical music at that time, I couldn't present anything.

Crawford:

They didn't let you in?

03-00:06:58
Mahones:

No, because you had to present a composition, like a classical piece, and you had to audition and all that playing classical music, which at that time, I wasn't ready for that. So I couldn't get in that way. So then I heard about this school, that they were teaching composition, so I said, "Oh, I'll enroll in that." So that's what happened. It was a school similar to Berklee, in Boston. A similar school.

Crawford:

Did you think about going to Berklee?

03-00:07:39
Mahones:

Well, that would've involved going out of town.

Crawford:

How long were you at this school, and when you were composing later on, how did the songs come to you?

03-00:07:45
Mahones:

Two years, I think it was at the school. Oh, the songs came to me in many ways. An idea would come and be developed into a song. A dream could blossom into a song.

Crawford:

Lovely. Well, how would you define the style of the Jazz Modes?

03-00:08:03
Mahones:

Well, let me see. It was a blend, I guess, of jazz with classical and swing. A combination of different styles of music, but primarily, since Julius did most of the writing and he had just finished getting his degree, I think in Manhattan School of Music, a lot of the music tended to be in that style, classical music. But at the same time, Charlie Rouse was a bebopper.

Crawford: Sometimes the tone sounds masculine to me, and other times very gentle. A range of moods.

03-00:08:50

Mahones: Right. That was Julius again, because he wanted dynamics. The French horn is a soft instrument, really, when you play live. Now, records, it sounds loud and all that. I guess in certain sections you could blast out. But to play fast and the things that we wanted to do, it needed to be sort of dynamic and bombastic. Bombastic like hard bop. The other version was kind of softer, but still with a lot of fire. But as far as volume, a little softer, especially since we were playing live. A lot of times, at that time, in the fifties, the amplification wasn't that good in some clubs. Some were very good, but some others weren't. So we ended up playing mostly acoustic, without the amplification.

Crawford: Do you like acoustic better?

03-00:10:08

Mahones: I liked it better, at that time especially, yes. Because [of] the pure sound; you could hear everything. But in certain clubs, you had to resort to the amplification, with the volume way up. Ron Jefferson was very good, because he could play not only different levels of volume, from very loud to very soft, but with a lot of fire and with a lot of speed. A lot of the songs were very fast. But you still had to feel the fire underneath all that to really get the mood. I tried to explain it to a German. It's just like you hear a drummer play, like a record. You're listening to a record and it's loud, and the guy's playing with all the dynamics and everything is going, but it's real loud and you turn the volume down; so you still hear all the dynamics, but it's now softer in sound. So that meant the intensity's still there, but it's just softer. So that's the way we approached it.

Crawford: Take a song like "Princess," on that recording, which is very free ranging; how much spontaneity is in that piece?

03-00:11:46

Mahones: Oh, quite a bit. Another thing about writing at that time, part of it was written and parts were improvised. But you couldn't tell where each part stopped and where the other part began. That's how close we were to the writing. In other words, when we start—either I would write a composition or arrange it, but I would leave openings for the improvisations to take place. Not in the usual places, in other words. So Julius would start playing the melody and Rouse would read melodic harmony, whatever was written. But then he would improvise certain parts. As Julius continued playing the melody, Rouse would be improvising. But you couldn't tell when he started improvising, that's what I'm trying to get at. So that's more or less how the style was born there.

Crawford: Well, let's talk about Charlie Rouse. What a wonderful musician.

03-00:13:00
Mahones:

Oh, yes. He was, like they say, an unsung hero. He was great. From the first time I heard him, he was great. But it took a while for people to really appreciate what he was doing. I don't know why that happened. But again, when Charlie left, that's what broke up the group.

Crawford:

He was the mainstay.

03-00:13:31
Mahones:

Well, after that, Julius couldn't find anybody else to fill that spot. It was hard to find somebody else, because they had been playing together for so long and they were so close. They could almost finish each other's thoughts, musically.

:

The two sounds are so different. It's something that used to happen a lot at that time in jazz. I don't know if it was economics or whether bands would raid other bands. By that I mean there's a group that's playing together, and another bandleader would listen and say, "Well, I like this guy in the rhythm section, but he's with this group." But they would raid the group and somehow persuade the guy to leave that group and join their own group. That happened a lot. Sometimes it was economic reasons.

Crawford:

A group that was doing better.

03-00:14:40
Mahones:

Yes. That happened with Rouse, because Thelonious Monk was the one that did it.

Crawford:

Oh, Thelonious Monk took him away?

03-00:14:50
Mahones:

Yes.

Crawford:

I knew he played a lot with him—. Somebody said if Charlie Rouse hadn't existed, Thelonious Monk would've created him. [laughter].

03-00:14:57
Mahones:

Right, right.

Crawford:

What was the connection?

03-00:15:03
Mahones:

Oh my goodness. Very close. I only heard three tenor players with Monk that I liked. Rouse was the best one; then Coltrane was the other one, and Johnny Griffin was another one. Those three. But Rouse fit Monk's style of Monk's playing, with the dissonance and the awkward pauses, something about Rouse's style of playing was similar, in a way. There was a horn; the other one's playing piano. But there was something that connected between those two.

Crawford: I'm thinking of "Monk's Dream," where Monk lays back a lot. Kind of like a special conversation?

03-00:15:53

Mahones: Right, right, right. Same thing between Julius and Rouse.

Crawford: You must've felt bad when Rouse left.

02-00:16:02

Mahones: Oh, yes, it was terrible. After that, everybody went their separate ways. Who did I go with? I went with Bennie Green for a while. Bennie was more melodic than others. I wrote "Shouter" for him; another song was "Green Leaves," and "Hoppin' John."

Then I joined Lambert, Hendricks & Ross [Dave Lambert, Jon Hendricks and Annie Ross]. Martin Rivera joined Junior [Julian Clifford] Mance. Ron Jefferson, the drummer, joined Les McCann out here. Let me see, who else is missing? Oh, Julius, I think, went with some big bands for a while. Quincy Jones and different bands. [Charles] Mingus and I've forgotten who else's group. It was all those big bands.

Crawford: All went with big bands.

03-00:16:43

Mahones: Yes.

Crawford: How long did Rouse play with Thelonious Monk, then?

03-00:16:47

Mahones: Oh, quite a while [1959-1970]. Larry Gales was on bass. Let me see, who was on drums? I think it was either Ben Riley—. I'm not sure. Excuse me. I think it was Ben Riley.

Crawford: We didn't talk about the harp. How do you feel about the harp in a jazz group?

03-00:17:20

Mahones: Well, in that song, it worked very well. I forgot what the song [was]. I forgot the song. In fact, I did the arrangement.

Crawford: It's on this Jazz Modes record that I have, the CD. It was, oh, there's a harp! [laughter]

03-00:17:46

Mahones: It was a standard, but I did the arrangement.

Crawford: You did the arrangement of the song? We'll fill that in later on. Let's take a break here. [tape interruption]

[Addressing Mrs. Mahones] I'd like to talk to Mary Mahones for a moment. When did you meet Gildo?

03-00:21:42

Mrs. Mahones: I met Gildo at the Newport Jazz Festival. In '61, right. You were playing for everybody.

Crawford: What was your gig at Newport?

03-00:22:06

Mahones: At that time? Lambert, Hendricks & Ross. Oh, great. I'm going to tell you the story.

Mrs. Mahones: I don't know, we just started talking.

Mahones: Yes, I think.

Mrs. Mahones: Then there was no room at the inn, so a drummer from Africa named Babatunde Olatunji had a big following of students. He saw my plight. He said, "You can have my room, because I won't be using it." So I said, "Okay, fine." I was thrilled. So anyway, I went down to the lobby and Gil was there. He said, "Where are you going?" At that time, it was to buy a pack of cigarettes. So he said, "Have you had dinner?" I said, "No." So we had dinner and that started it.

Mahones: That started it.

Mrs. Mahones: That started it immediately.

Crawford: That was a very gallant invitation.

03-00:23:31

Mrs. Mahones: He was so different from the musicians that I knew. Not a bad word, he didn't smoke, he didn't drink.

Crawford: When did you meet her parents?

Mrs. Mahones: Oh.

03-00:23:50

Mahones: Oh, that's another story. Well, it was a long time after that. Well, her father had passed by the time. So I just met her. A long time after that, before I met her mother. It was okay by then, what we had gone through.

Crawford: You'd been together for a while. When were you married?

03-00:24:16

Mahones: In '71, I think it was.

Crawford: You knew each other for a long time.

03-00:24:20

Mrs. Mahones: Oh, yes. We lived together for years in California. I came first, and he followed me six months later. I had a friend who started the Dizzy for President. She was a great jazz fanatic. So she invited me to stay at her house, and I was waiting for Gil to come out, and he did, finally.

Crawford: You were going to settle in Los Angeles?

03-00:25:03

Mahones: Well, Ike Isaacs called me. He had a gig for me in L.A. With O.C. Smith, at the Pied Piper, on Crenshaw.

Crawford: Yes.

03-00:25:17

Mrs. Mahones: I was heartbroken to leave San Francisco.

Crawford: You were in San Francisco at the time.

Mahones: But I think I stayed in San Francisco for a little while, at the houseboat. Jon Hendricks had the boat, and we stayed with him. It was the middle sixties.

Crawford: Well, maybe you'd like to tell the Count Basie story, Mary. The one about the fried chicken. Is that about the best story, Gildo?

03-00:26:08

Mahones: Oh, she has many, many stories. I don't know if that's the best one, but there's many.

Mrs. Mahones: Count Basie was in town, San Francisco, and of course, I went to see him. It was my birthday and I had a couple of friends with me. They were all like, what are you doing here? Because they knew me from New York. I said, "Well, I live here now." Then one friend said, "It's her birthday." So they told Count Basie, and Basie came over to me. He said, "Happy birthday," and he put something in my hands and he said, "Buy your friends a drink." I looked, and it was \$200.

Crawford: That was a lot of money!

Mrs. Mahones: So then in between sets, he asked me if I could meet the bus in the morning, with some fried chicken. I wasn't the greatest cook. He was still in New York. So anyway, he's telling me, "Not too much batter," and everything. I said, "Oh, please. It's fine." Now, I have to find chicken, after two in the morning,

and worry about frying this chicken and meeting the bus.” So I bring the chicken. Well, what could I do? He gave me \$200 for my birthday, right? I couldn’t say no. So I brought the chicken.

Crawford: You could’ve bought it.

03-00:27:39

Mahones: Not at two in the morning.

Crawford: Oh, probably not.

Mrs. Mahones: No. I didn’t have a car, either. So anyway, that was the story of the fried chicken and Count Basie. [laughter]

Crawford: Well, you have a Count Basie story, Gildo.

03-00:28:43

Mahones: Yes. Basie’s band. A funny thing about Basie. I think I mentioned before that I lived on 126th Street, behind the Apollo, for a while, and I used to see the different bands that came through The Apollo, and the performers. Basie’s band, Duke Ellington’s band, King Carter, or Benny Carter’s band, and Dizzy Gillespie’s band and different groups. But Basie kept cropping up. I was working with different groups, but his band kept cropping up. Like when I was with Prez working at Birdland this particular time, they booked Lester Young with Basie’s band. Two groups. Now, Lester’s playing and then Basie’s supposed to go on. I had just finished playing with Lester, so I’m sitting down. They come running up to me. Basie’s on the stand, and he had to go somewhere. So they come running up to me, “You have to play.” I said, “Okay.” Basie had to do an interview with Steve Allen. He had to go across the street to do a TV show, and he had to do an interview.

So that meant I played with the band. I sat there, anyway. I had to do the thing at the end—tink, tink, tink, his signature thing. But the thing that was funny was that I remember wishing I could play with that band when I was kid and watching them play at the Apollo. I said, “It’d be great to play with that band,” Duke’s band or Basie’s band. I didn’t think it ever happens. But it happened that time.

Then it happened again when I was with Lambert, Hendricks & Ross. We did a tour of England, Germany, Scotland. About fifty-one nights, whatever it was, and it was just the Basie band and Lambert, Hendricks & Ross. I would get to play with the band, and every time, when Lambert, Hendricks & Ross got up to sing, I would have to play with the band. That was another thrill. That happened quite a few times. Do I make my career with Basie or with Duke? I was playing with other groups, but I think with Basie—. Another time was with Lou Rawls, I think. No, no, Lou Rawls was with Duke Ellington’s band.

Crawford: You knew Duke Ellington well?

03-00:31:49

Mahones: Oh, yes. I think the first time was at Newport Jazz Festival, the first time I heard the band live To be on the same program was quite an experience. Duke was very creative. His writing influenced a lot of guys: Monk, Mingus. I saw the connection.

Crawford: How was he with his musicians?

03-00:32:10

Mahones: Actually, I don't know how they did it, but people used to question him about how he did it, because it seemed like he didn't have any discipline or something. When it was time to go on the stand, he would go up; he'd be there with the drummer and bass player and he started playing and the band's nowhere to be seen. Then they'd kind of wander in one at a time. He didn't say anything; he just kept playing, until the whole band was there. Then they went into their things

So people say, "How do you put up with all this?" He said, "Well, anybody could do it with discipline." That was his answer. But at the same time, whenever he wanted to get them to do something, they would jump to it. I remember one time I was with Lou Rawls; we were doing a benefit for Martin Luther King in New York City. We did some sort of benefit.

The band was Duke Ellington's band. A lot of people. Lou Rawls, Tony Bennett, a whole bunch of singers. Anyway, I have to rehearse the band, because Lou was doing "Old Man River," which is a long piece, and which was condensed into maybe a couple of sheets. The arranger who did it, H.B. Barnum, he wrote it in such a way that it was two-four—. I forget what it was. Anyway, he condensed it.

So I'm trying to get the drummer, Duke's drummer—. He was supposed to make a break and bring the band in. Anyway, we get to the certain spot, he couldn't get it together—for whatever reason, I don't know. All the guys in Duke's band turn around and look at him. "What's the matter with you? Don't you understand what he's doing? Just follow him."

We get to the same spot, rigor mortis set in. He couldn't do it. Then the guys started losing interest and they weren't really listening to what I was saying. Then Duke walked in the room. As soon as he walked in—*whht!*—everything came.

Crawford: You were sitting in.

03-00:35:03

Mahones: And conducting. Because Lou Rawls was going to sing. I'm working with Lou Rawls. I'm rehearsing his music with Duke's band, they have to play that

night. They're carrying on, fooling around, not really listening to me. But the minute Duke walked in, that changed. Everything went down like clockwork. The drummer got everything; everything went down fine. They were just giving me a hard time, I guess.

Crawford: Where else did you play with Count Basie's band?

03-00:35:45

Mahones: Lambert, Hendricks & Ross had done albums together with the Basie Band, so they had booked this tour in England. Matter of fact, I remember working. What was it, Royal Albert Hall? Is that the place?

I remember working there. So anyway, they would do a couple of tunes by themselves. Not by themselves, but with just the rhythm section and the three voices, Lambert, Hendricks & Ross, and I played the piano. Then we'd do a couple things with the whole Basie band. Since they had done the album, that worked out pretty well. So anyway, but that happens, like I said before, with other people: Joe Williams and Basie or O.C. Smith, different singers. I was working with the singers and I would have to use whatever band was there.

Crawford: Let's talk about Lambert, Hendricks & Ross. They formed in 1957 and recorded some of Count Basie's songs, won a Grammy, and Count Basie collaborated with them?

Mahones: Oh, yes, that was something. Wonderful! I liked them because it wasn't like working for a vocal group because they were doing jazz tunes, as opposed to doing just the regular songs, standards. They were doing not only tunes by jazz players, but words to the improvisational section of the music. In other words, Horace Silver wrote "Doodlin'." Then Annie Ross put words to the instrumental and to the solos. Jon did the same thing with different songs. He did "Cousin Mary," by John Coltrane; he did "It's Sand, Man!" by Count Basie. So the music was always interesting, because it wasn't just the usual fare for a vocal group.

Crawford: It was very unusual, in that time, wasn't it?

03-00:38:22

Mahones: Oh, yes, *very* unusual. I don't think there was another group like it, at the time. In fact, there wasn't another group like it until Manhattan Transfer. Jon was very gifted at putting words [to the music]. Very gifted at that, and quick, very quick. Wow. It's amazing. I remember we used to make a joke that if somebody throws up a bunch of spoons or something in the air, wherever they fall down, whatever noise they make, he would put words to that.

Mrs. Mahones: Tell her about when we were on the houseboat and picked up Monk with Jon.

Mahones: That was funny. Monk was working at the Jazz Workshop. We were staying in Sausalito, like I said before. Then Jon was writing some lyrics to some of

his songs. So Monk came to find out what Jon had written. We picked him up in San Francisco and brought him to Sausalito.

Crawford: And he was at a club called the Jazz Workshop?

03-00:39:55

Mahones: Yes. It was across the street from the [El] Matador. North Beach. So anyway, we picked him up and brought him back to Sausalito. But the funny thing, Monk came in, he was all dressed up with his hat and his coat. Didn't take nothing off. Didn't take his hat off, didn't take his coat off.

Mrs. Mahones: And who was he with? His wife and the baroness [Pannonica de Koenigswarter].

Crawford: The baroness.

03-00:40:29

Mahones: Yes. I forgot his wife's name. But anyway, he kept pacing up and down, the whole time he was there. He never sat down. He was walking up and down, talking to Jon and saying he felt that Jon wasn't giving his music what it deserved, because he wrote it so quick. He thought it should take more time. So they were arguing about that. So I'm sitting there, watching all this. Very comical, wasn't it? But they got it together.

Crawford: It all came together. Did you play all the clubs here, pretty much?

03-00:41:15

Mahones: Yes. I remember we worked at the Workshop [on Fillmore]; we also worked at this place called Sugar Hill, which was on the same side of the street. It was small, but let me see. The bandstand, you faced the bandstand, which was in front of you. There was like a partition and the restrooms were behind the partition, I remember that. But it was a small club. It got full very quick, let me put it that way. We had a lot of fun there. We knew the owners. What was the name? Anyway, then the Both/And. There was another club, Bull Pen. I worked there, also. I worked there with O.C. Smith there for a while. Yeah, but it was very busy out here.

Crawford: It was a big jazz scene. And it was a big blues scene, too, especially in Oakland. Did you ever go over there?

03-00:42:37

Mahones: Not that much.

Crawford: To West Oakland?

03-00:42:40

Mahones: No, not that much. Not at the time; I was mostly with jazz clubs.

Crawford: Where did you perform with Lambert, Hendricks & Ross?

03-00:42:51

Mahones: Oh. Wow, they worked all over, let me put it this way. We had tours, like I said, like that one with Basie. Oh, we did another tour in, I think it was 1960 or '61. It was called Jazz for Moderns. That tour, we had Maynard Ferguson's band. Jaki Byard was playing alto, not piano, in that band; Ray Santisi was playing the piano. Chico Hamilton had a group. Ron Carter was in the group, Eric Dolphy was in the group, Chico Hamilton. He was playing. Then Chris Cotter had a trio. Then let me see who else I'm missing. Chris Cotter, Chico Hamilton. I'm missing somebody. [Dave Brubeck was on the tour].

Crawford: You said Dave Brubeck was on the tour as well, with his quartet. You'd all be touring together?

03-00:44:06

Mahones: Yes, this was like a group that toured together. In fact, they flew us from LaGuardia Airport to Mexico, was the first thing, in Juarez or one of those places that had bullfight, bull things. What do you call it?

Crawford: Bull rings?

03-00:44:24

Mahones: Yes, one of those things, yeah. We did the concert there.

Crawford: Was it in Juarez?

03-00:44:32

Mahones: Juarez, yes. Unless I'm mistaken, but I remember that. The funny thing was, Jaki Byard was having lunch and there were these three Mexican guys playing music. One would pick guitar or guitarrón, which is a big guitar, and two other guitar players, and they sang. They were serenading Jaki Byard while he ate. When he finished, then he got up, and they followed him.

So all day, they're following Jaki. He paid them. So everywhere he went, he had these three guys. Oh, it was ridiculous. In fact, I've never seen anything like that. I saw it in the movies, with Alec Guinness. Some kind of movie, *Our Man in Havana* or something, where there was three guys doing the same thing.

Crawford: So the tour originated in New York, or you were still in New York at the time.

03-00:45:45

Mahones: Yes, Jazz for Moderns originated in New York, and they took that whole group and flew them to Mexico.

Crawford: Where did you go in Mexico, besides—?

03-00:45:56

Mahones: Now, that's funny. I don't know, a couple of cities, I know that. I can't remember what they were.

Crawford: Did you have good audiences?

03-00:46:10

Mahones: Yes. They seemed to like it. Then we did several cities in the states, border-town cities. But that was one of the first tours with Lambert, Hendricks & Ross that I did. One of many.

Crawford: I heard you talking about Japan, I heard you talking about Europe. How about those tours?

03-00:46:38

Mahones: That was with Lambert, Hendricks & Ross.

Crawford: Where else did you go with Lambert, Hendricks & Ross.

03-00:46:49

Mahones: Oh, we went to Germany. We also went to Scotland. That was with the Basie band, with Lambert, Hendricks & Ross and the Basie band.

Crawford: What would the program be?

03-00:47:15

Mahones: Oh, it would be the same program we'd do any place. We didn't change anything. It was the same program. They would do certain tunes and then the band would come on and [they'd] do tunes together. The funny thing was about the food. The Basie band—not only the Basie band—weren't crazy about the food.

Crawford: The food?

03-00:47:51

Mahones: No, because—because, okay, you're playing at a concert; you have to run out and get something quick, so you go to a corner whatever it was, a restaurant or whatever. They would give you a little sandwich with just a little bit of meat. The Basie guys, they were big guys. They're looking for something. They would say, "Load it up. Put some more meat on that." The guy said, "Well, that'll cost you more." They're like, "We don't care. Just put some more stuff on there." Because what they offered you at the beginning was only—you could almost read through the—it was miniscule, I guess. [laughter]

Crawford: Well, you must've liked Germany, though, because the German food, they like meat.

03-00:48:46

Mahones: Germany was nice, yes. Germany was okay.

Crawford: How were the audiences in Germany?

03-00:48:52

Mahones: They were good. They were good.

Crawford: You didn't go to Paris?

03-00:48:56

Mahones: Not at that time.. I went to Paris with Benny Carter. That was many years later. I went to Japan with Benny, Paris, oh, and the Middle East.

Mary Mahones: Benny Carter was a great gentleman.

Crawford: You were with this group for a long time, for about five years, weren't you? With the vocal group.

03-00:49:36

Mahones: Oh, yeah, yeah, five years.

Crawford: What happened to that group?

03-00:49:43

Mahones: Well, the main thing was that Dave Lambert passed away. Being a good Samaritan, he was helping someone on the freeway, to change a tire.

Crawford: Oh, no.

03-00:50:05

Mahones: A semi came by and just—and after that, the group broke up, really. They broke up. You couldn't find another person like Dave. They had been together so long. So Annie had left earlier, too, that's another thing. Then we had her replaced with Yolande Bavan. Annie is still working, by the way, with Jimmy Worth. Then Dave passed away, so that was the end.

Crawford: Then what happened?

03-00:50:49

Mahones: For a while, we tried to keep it together. Jon tried to keep it together. We had Anne Marie Moss, a singer; Carol Sloane. Different singers tried, but it didn't work. What happened to Hendricks after that? Well, he came out here. Oh, no, before that. In 1960, John Lewis was the musical director of the Monterey Jazz Festival. John Lewis was the director.

He wanted Jon Hendricks to do a special program for the blues, on Saturday afternoon. They had a blues section on Saturdays. It was always on Saturday. Wanted Jon to write a special work for that. Because at that time—I don't know if they still do it now; I don't think so—whenever they had the Monterey or even Newport [Festival], the people that took part in those events would write special material for that event, and premiere it at that event.

So Jon, since it was the blues thing, wrote *Evolution of the Blues*, and we presented it in Monterey, on a Saturday afternoon. He had the whole thing scripted out. He had examples of the different idioms of music, starting back from Africa, to gospel, to Dixieland, on the way up. The march of time. He told a story that way. But now, to give the example of the people from Africa, he had Miriam Makeba and [Hugh] Masekela.

Crawford: Wow.

03-00:53:02

Mahones: They were the ones, because they were available at that time, so he used them for that. Then for the gospel, he had a young lady called Hannah Dean, a very good singer, a gospel singer. There was a black vocal gospel group called the Andrews Sisters [Andrews Gospel Singers]. They were black.

That was the vocal choir, whatever you'd call it. Then he had Pony Poindexter doing the part of Lester — the saxophone thing. He had Big [Clarence Horatio] Miller, a big guy that sang the blues and played a big tambourine. This big, I don't know. Let me see, who else? Oh, Jimmy Witherspoon. He had him to sing. I think Jimmy Rushing did something there, too, if I remember correctly.

Crawford: Did they film that, *Evolution of the Blues*?

03-00:54:09

Mahones: No, I don't think they filmed it. We recorded it the next day. They didn't record it that day at the festival, because some of the people had to leave, so Miriam Makeba's not in the recording. Other people were in the recording.

Anyway, so that was in 1960. Now, years later, when Jon came—after the group broke up, Lambert, Hendricks & Ross—he was living here in San Francisco. He decided to do it again, only with a smaller group. Almost like a one-man play. Just maybe four or five people, with a couple of dancers. He did it out here. For a while, I was working [on that]. Then they decided to do it as a Broadway-type show, in Westwood Playhouse.

Crawford: That must be what I'm thinking about.

03-00:55:35

Mahones: Yes. That was a big production, with the dancers and the singers and the whole thing.

Mrs. Mahones: It was brilliant.

Mahones: That's where I came in, doing the music at Westwood Playhouse.

Crawford: You were living in Los Angeles?

03-00:55:53
Mahones:

Well, I was living out in Los Angeles after I joined Ike Isaacs at the Pied Piper, with O.C. Smith, as I told you. Isaacs called, I was living in San Francisco, and later on drummer Jimmie Smith came—he was in the original trio with Lambert, Hendricks & Ross, so it was easy.

Crawford:

You eventually had the same rhythm section.

03-00:56:09
Mahones:

Yes. Well, what happened was that after Annie left the group, she went to England. After we went to England, Annie didn't come back with us; she stayed. Okay. Then Ike left the group. He went with Joe Williams and Sweets Edison. They had a group and they were touring. I stayed working with Jon for a while, out here, just me. Before that, I was working with Ike Isaacs, at the Pied Piper on Crenshaw for about almost a year. It was the same rhythm section that we had with Lambert, Hendricks & Ross—Ike on bass, myself on piano, and Jimmie Smith on drums.

So we stayed there. And O.C. Smith was the singer. Now, I met O.C. when we did the tour with Basie that I told you about before, with Lambert, Hendricks and Ross. O.C. was the singer. It wasn't Joe Williams, it was O.C. Smith.

So I knew him from that, and I think I had met him years ago, when he was in the service. Was it the navy? I think it was the navy. He was in shore patrol, whatever you call it. One of those guys. But I remember him coming to Showman's with us, on 125th Street when we were in the service. I remember that. That was the very first time I met him. Years later, then we did that tour with Basie. Then when I came out to L.A., then I worked with him again in L.A., at the Pied Piper. Then we worked together on Divisadero, at the Both/And.

I stayed at the Pied Piper about a year and then Lou Rawls invited me to come with him for a couple of years. Then I got a lot of calls from New York — from Sonny Stitt, Art Farmer and others. I would get the rhythm section for them and we'd perform together. In Los Angeles I worked at the Maple Drive Club, a supper club in Beverly Hills. Phil Wright got me the gig and we were there for years on Tuesdays. I added bass and drums.

Crawford:

Late sixties.

03-00:58:55
Mahones:

Oh, wow. Do you remember? Late sixties? I think I have it somewhere here. Late sixties. Oh my goodness, that flew by.

Mrs. Mahones:

O.C. was a great guy. We all had an apartment, and I used to cook. Every night, he was very appreciative. He would bring me up a little bottle of wine or something. Ike Isaacs was always like, "What are you putting in this?" Always looking over my shoulder. Ike was just always getting on my nerves,

and O.C. was just this beautiful guy. He had the girls coming left and right. If we were going to the airport, taking one back, picking another one up. He was really a ladies' man. And a sweetheart. I met a lot of girlfriends that way.

Crawford: Well, that might be pretty common in jazz; would you say?

03-01:00:06

Mrs. Mahones: Yes, exactly.

Crawford: A long marriage like yours, that's pretty extraordinary. Well, that's a good place to end today.

Interview 4, March 11, 2015

Audio File 4

- Crawford: March 11, 2015, interview number four with Mr. Gildo Mahones, for the Bancroft Library Oral History Office. I'd like to start today with something that is really interesting to me, which is that you recorded *The Real Ambassadors*.
- Mahones: Let me see. *The Real Ambassadors*?
- Crawford: That was an opera by Dave Brubeck, and it starred Louis Armstrong.
- 04-00:00:36
Mahones: Oh. No, okay.
- Crawford: Is that right?
- 04-00:00:40
Mahones: No, not quite right. I didn't record that. They used different records that they had recorded with other people.
- Crawford: Oh, and your recording was part of that?
- 04-00:00:54
Mahones: No, no. *The Real Ambassadors*. Let me see, maybe I'm confused.
- Crawford: It was performed only once, I think, at the Monterey Jazz Festival, and then once again in the 1990s.
- 04-00:01:06
Mahones: Yes, yes, yes. I remember—
- Crawford: What was your part in that?
- 04-00:01:09
Mahones: When Louis Armstrong and Carmen McRae worked with Lambert, Hendricks & Ross. They had a little side tune, and I was in that section.
- Crawford: That was a recording session?
- 04-00:01:21
Mahones: Yes.
- Crawford: It's interesting because Dave Brubeck, when I interviewed him, lamented that he couldn't record the performance, because he didn't have \$700. He said, "I would've had to sell my car."
- 04-00:01:33
Mahones: Oh my goodness. [laughter]

Crawford: Is the recording of a rehearsal?

04-00:01:37

Mahones: I think it was a rehearsal, yes. [Dave Brubeck was on hand to perform at the premiere].

Crawford: With Satchmo.

04-00:01:41

Mahones: Oh, well, he was great. He was great. I really had a good time with him at the rehearsal.

Crawford: Did you?

04-00:01:48

Mahones: Yes, yes. He was amazing. Yes, I remember he liked to smoke his little special brand.

Crawford: What was that? Oh, you mean pot.

04-00:02:05

Mahones: Yes, but it was like a cigar the way he rolled it. It was amazing. I remember that. I said, "Wow!"

Crawford: Did you have any?

04-00:02:19

Mahones: I think I tried a little bit, yes.

Crawford: Did you like it?

04-00:02:22

Mahones: No. [laughter]

Crawford: One of the lyrics is, "In my humble way, I'm the USA." He had a wonderful sense of humor.

04-00:02:33

Mahones: Oh, yes, yes, he was quite the character. He was quite outspoken and very funny at times.

Crawford: Did you like the piece?

04-00:02:42

Mahones: Yes, it was nice. I enjoyed it.

Crawford: There's a song in there called "Summer Song," beautiful song.

04-00:02:50
Mahones:

I remember that. I think we rehearsed at the—was it the Fairmont Theater? Not the Fairmont. We had a rehearsal here in San Francisco, I remember that. We rehearsed here, then we went to Monterey and did it there. Yes, I think—If it was the Lambert, Hendricks & Ross, I was there. I remember that. I can't remember all the particulars, but I remember doing that, yes.

Yes. Actually, I can't remember. It was segments. I remember playing with Lambert, Hendricks & Ross, whatever that section was. Then he did the rest. I would just play that section, whatever it was.

Crawford: What did you think of his playing?

04-00:11:23
Mahones:

Oh, he was great. Especially his harmonic playing was very good, and his soloing was great, also. His harmony was very interesting. I liked his ballads, because he had a special approach, a different approach to the harmony on his ballad songs.

Crawford: It was not recorded, as I mentioned, something he regretted.

04-00:03:28
Mahones:

I think the same thing happened when Jon did *Evolution of the Blues*. We couldn't record it at the time, but we recorded it a day after. But we lost some of the people that were on the original program. They had to substitute somebody else for the recording.

Crawford: There's a documentary called *1959 Was the Year That Jazz Changed*. Who would you say are the signal people that changed jazz forever in 1959?

04-00:06:39
Mahones:

Well, probably Coltrane, I'm sure. Then Ornette Coleman and Miles. Wayne Shorter, Bird. Naturally, Bird. And Dizzy, naturally. Those were the first, and the others came later, that I mentioned.

Crawford: Would you mention Mingus?

04-00:07:06
Mahones:

Yes, Mingus, definitely.

Crawford: Did you ever perform with Mingus?

04-00:07:10
Mahones:

No, I never performed with Mingus, but I knew him and we talked; but I never performed with him.

Crawford: I wanted to talk to you at about your recordings. Your first recording was *Lester's Here*, with Lester Young in 1953, a quintet session for Norman Granz

Norgran label. And among the many others There is *Walkin' and Talkin'* with Bennie Green in 1959, and you recorded on your own for Prestige a lot in the 1960s, including *I'm Shooting High* and *The Great Gildo*. Was that with your trio?

04-00:09:36'

Mahones:

Yes. Yes, that was the trio. We did it for Prestige, and it was like a double album. We recorded two albums, and they released it as one, one package, I remember that.

Mrs. Mahones:

What was on it?

Mahones:

Oh, my goodness. Quite a few ballads, because I used to like Billie Holiday. And Gloria Lynne was also popular at that time, so I did one of her songs.

Crawford:

We talked about Billie Holiday.

04-00:10:12

Mahones:

I did things associated with her. Oh, boy. And then some originals. That's a while back.

Crawford:

I counted, nineteen albums, including one for Interplay in 1990.

04-00:10:30

Mahones:

Oh my goodness.

Crawford:

That's a lot of recording.

04-00:10:32

Mahones:

Yes, I was lucky. I was lucky. I did some with Frank Foster, Booker Ervin. I did quite a few with Witherspoon. *Mean Old Frisco* and *Baby, Baby, Baby*; those were with Witherspoon.

Crawford:

The Frank Foster was for the Blue Note label, in 1956; *Here Comes Frank Foster*, who was a tenor sax player with Count Basie, That was a pretty good record company, wasn't it?

-00:12:49

Mahones:

Yes. Oh, Blue Note. The thing with Frank Foster was for Blue Note, and we did another one with Bennie Green, the trombone player, as you mentioned.

Crawford:

Walkin' and Talkin'.

04-00:13:05

Mahones:

Yes, yes. I had some originals that I did for that album. I remember one called "Green Leaves."

Crawford:

Yes, wonderful tune. *Lester's Here* is a favorite of mine.

- 04-00:13:36
Mahones: Quintet.
- Crawford: You played “Tenderly.” A beautiful solo on that song.
- 04-00:13:44
Mahones: “Tenderly,” yes.
- Crawford: Was that impromptu, during a piece, that Lester Young would gesture for you to do a solo? Or was that all worked out ahead?
- 04-00:14:01
Mahones: No, no. Let me see. No, that was just for the song, and he would take his solo, and he would either nod to one of us—either the trumpet player, Jesse Drakes or myself—and we could take the solo.
- Crawford: Who was the drummer.
- 04-00:14:19
Mahones: I think it might’ve been Connie Kay, I think, at that time. Connie Kay. I think Gene Ramey or John Ore was the bass player. [Connie Kay, Jesse Drakes, Gene Ramey, Young and Mahones].
- Crawford: There were several 1960s albums with Lambert, Hendricks & Ross for Columbia.
- You told me that the group was so popular with the lounge show in Las Vegas, that they had to limit and finally eliminate performances—it was cutting into the gambling at the Flamingo Hotel!
- Do you remember Leimert Park, by any chance?
- Mrs. Mahones: Sure.
- Mahones: Yes. It wasn’t far from where we worked.
- Mrs. Mahones: A couple blocks.
- Crawford: At Christmastime, I was curious; I wanted to go down and see the old jazz places. And a man named Jose Rivera came up and introduced himself to us. I have a beautiful daughter who caught his eye. He introduced himself to us and he was walking us around and showing us all the places, and he said he had played in the neighborhood with Count Basie.
- 04-00:16:22
Mahones: Well, I think we went to a place—. Billy Higgins, at one time, had a club there. I think now, and Barbara Morrison has a club there now.
- Crawford: What was that like in the heyday?

04-00:17:03

Mahones:

Well, at that time, I was working at the Pied Piper, like I said, and we used to walk—. They weren't very big, but there were jazz clubs. At that time, they also had the Parisian Room, which was on La Brea. That was a very good club. I worked there for quite a while. Red [James Wesley] Holloway had the band and I was working with him.

They would bring different artists from out of town, like Arthur Prysock. I remember working with him, because they called me. No. It wasn't Arthur Prysock, it was Johnny Hartman that was there at the time. He wanted to do a thing by Duke Ellington, "Lush Life." Whoever was working there at the time couldn't play it, so they called me out and I worked it out, because I had worked with him before in New York. I worked for many artists at the Parisian Room.

Then there was another club called the It Club, which later became Marla's Memory Lane. No, it was called Memory Lane. It was run by two brothers, and then Marla came on the scene later. But that was a nice club.

Mrs. Mahones: Marla Gibbs.

Mahones: Marla Gibbs, right.

Crawford: Was that the main jazz area, was Central Avenue pretty quiet by the time you arrived??

04-00:18:56

Mahones:

I wasn't there when Central Avenue was going on. When I got to the Pied Piper, I don't think much was going on at Central Avenue at that time, when I got there. It happened before I got there. But when I was working around town, it was the Parisian Room; Pied Piper; Marla's Memory Lane; the It Club, another club; and let me see what else. I think that was about it, more or less.

Mrs. Mahones: Tell Caroline about the time when Carmen and Sarah were at the same club when you played. It was someone's birthday.

Mahones: Oh, yes. That was Marla's' Memory Lane. I was working there, I think with Esther Phillips. It either was her birthday or Carmen's or Sarah's. But they all came at the stage at one time.

Crawford: Sarah Vaughan?

04-00:19:58

Mahones:

Sarah Vaughan, Carmen McRae, Esther Phillips, Nancy Wilson, and a few others that I can't remember. They all were there and sang. So that was great.

Crawford: And you played with Sweets.

04-00:20:13
Mahones:

Oh, yes, I played with Sweets. Before I came out here, I worked with Joe Williams, in Florida, for a while. Then Sweets and Joe had a group, and they left New York, to go on the road. They came out here, to the Pied Piper. But before that, I worked with Sweets in New York. In fact, by working with Lester and the Jazz Modes and Lambert, Hendricks & Ross, other people would see you working with them; so when they were off, I had a chance to work with several of the people that were in town at that time. It might've been Coleman Hawkins or whoever was free at that time, would give me a call and I would work with them. So I had a chance to work with many people and many singers.

Crawford: Who did you like to work with most, can you say? You worked with virtually all the living saxophone players, I think.

04-00:21:28
Mahones:

I worked with a lot of saxophone players. I was thinking; I said, "Wait a minute, all the saxophone players." It was either Sonny Stitt or, like I say, Coleman Hawkins or Frank Foster or Eddie "Lockjaw" Davis. And a few trumpet players.

Crawford: You mentioned Sonny Criss.

04-00:21:49
Mahones:

Sonny Criss. That was the first one I worked with when I came out here, was Sonny Criss. Well, that was another story, because we were working, doing special programs for the Board of Education, playing at schools, like auditoriums. We'd go and give a few shows for kids. But the school was paying us directly, or was paying Sonny directly. So we were one of the first groups that did that. Then somehow the union got involved, when they heard about it because they felt that they weren't getting their fair share. So the whole thing changed around and they started doing it, the union. Which was okay, later on.

Crawford: You've said the union took good care of you.

04-00:22:53
Mahones:

Yes, they did. But they were just surprised that this was going on and they didn't know anything about it; that's what I'm trying to say.

Crawford: When did you join the union?

04-00:23:06
Mahones:

Oh, I joined the union in New York, 802. Then I just transferred out here, to Local 47, when I came out here.

Crawford: The two unions went together in, what, 1960? Was the coverage as good after?

- 04-00:23:21
Mahones: It was better, better. Yes, they did more, so it was better.
- Crawford: That's good. Well, Sweets was named by Lester Young?
- 04-00:23:31
Mahones: Yes.
- Crawford: And Lady Day. Did he have a nickname for you?
- 04-00:23:41
Mahones:y Lady Drakes was the trumpet player.
- Crawford: Oh, everything was Lady?
- 04-00:23:49
Mahones: Lady, yes.
- Crawford: So you were Lady Gildo?
- 04-00:23:51
Mahones: Right. Lady Kay, whatever.[laughter]He just had his original way of talking, dressing—everything—playing. Everything was original. For Lester, everything was original. And in fact, he had that porkpie hat with the brim. That was original; nobody had— I've only seen one person wear that hat. It was in this TV program, *Breaking Bad*. The guy called Walter White, he had a brim, porkpie hat. I remember Lester, he had the hat; and in the wintertime, he had this coat, a long coat, almost like a duster, that came down to his ankles. So when he walked down the street, people were just, what's happening? With the hat and the coat.
- Crawford: Could you say more about his style? They said about Sweets, that if you heard five notes, you'd know who it was.
- 04-00:25:12
Mahones: Right, right, exactly. Exactly, with Lester. If you heard just a few notes—just the sound that he got from the horn, and the phrases—you knew it was him. In fact, it became so popular that many saxophone players started copying him. He was kind of the first of a school, but then so many were doing it that he felt here people were making more money than he was. They were playing his style. They became famous. Stan Getz, Zoot Sims—you could name them.
- They eventually developed their own style; but they were influenced by him, let me put it that way. But they developed their style later on. I heard that he played, I think it was, violin. He played drums, that was one thing, and he played violin, and I don't know if it was trumpet. So many instruments. So maybe he got influenced from those things, also. Oh, I think he was so inventive that he was able to incorporate some of those features into his playing. I don't know.

Crawford: Who would you say your style is like?

Mahones: When I was coming up, I liked a lot of people. Especially Art, but I couldn't play like him.

Crawford: Art Tatum. You said you couldn't "do it," that is you couldn't play like he played.

04-00:29:17

Mahones: Yes.

Mrs. Mahones: Red Garland, they always compared him to.

Mahones: Well, Nat Cole, I liked. I liked his playing. And I liked Red. Who knows? Because you're influenced by what you hear. Not that you directly try to imitate them, but it might seep into your consciousness, who knows?

Crawford: Yes. That's the best way to say it, I think.

04-00:29:45

Mahones: Yes.

Crawford: Well, I'd like you to talk about some of the California clubs, the famous Lighthouse [at Hermosa Beach].

04-00:29:53

Mahones: Oh, yeah. When I came out here, I started working at the Lighthouse. Then I got to play with a lot of people, like Art Farmer.

Mrs. Mahones: Dexter Gordon.

Mahones: Dexter. Even [James] Moody, when he came out. Oh, a lot of people would come out. They would come out here, play at the Lighthouse, and since they knew that I was out here, they would call me up to get the rhythm section. So I would work with them, two weeks or whatever, for their stint at the Lighthouse. So I got a chance to play with a lot of people from back East, plus the people that were out here already. So that was nice.

Crawford: What was so special about that club? Of course, it wasn't a lighthouse.

04-00:30:41

Mahones: It wasn't a Lighthouse. That was just the name that they gave it.

Crawford: Did you ever play at the Balboa Pavilion?

04-00:31:13

Mahones: No, I don't think so.

Crawford: That's where I first heard jazz, as a teenager.

04-00:31:18
Mahones:

Yes. There was another club that opened later. It was at Fisherman's Wharf or whatever they call it.

Crawford:

When we talked about the "Jazz Moderns" tour in Mexico you mentioned Japan and Europe. How about your Japan tours?

04-00:31:42
Mahones:

Okay. Japan? Oh. The first time, I went to Japan with this wonderful singer, Lorez Alexandria. I went with her, just me and her, and we picked up the rhythm section. I think that was in the early seventies. I can't remember the year.

Then I went back, with Benny Carter, I think in '73. Benny Carter. In that group, it was Benny Carter, Larry Gales on bass, Duffy Jackson on drums, and myself. We did a tour of Japan. Then I went back several times with Lorez, different times, and did tours in Japan. Then I went back and did a solo for a while in Japan.

Crawford:

Who sponsored you?

04-00:32:52
Mahones:

Well, it was a Japanese lady, I think. I can't remember the name. But she had a thing where she would make all the arrangements, and we will take care of the arrangements between the two countries, and we would go back and forth like that.

Crawford:

So those were private tours. Pretty well paid?

04-00:33:15
Mahones:

Those were private tours, yes. It was nice.

Mrs. Mahones:

We'd go for six weeks and stay for six weeks, and then go back. I enjoyed it. Yes, it was different, but I enjoyed it. Except the first few times, it was stressful, because the language was different, everything was different. But then after a while, she started booking us with either a duo—. So at least there'd be two people in the group, so you had somebody to hang out with and talk and whatnot. But the first time, it was kind of stressful, let me put it like that

But then after a while, unless you met some Japanese people—some of them spoke English. We met some wonderful people. They were great.

Crawford:

They love jazz, don't they?

04-00:34:44
Mahones:

Yes, and they love jazz. Oh, they knew all about the music and really enjoyed it, and they showed their appreciation and they were very knowledgeable about the music. So that was great.

Crawford: Did you like it as well as touring in Europe?

04-00:35:06

Mahones: I probably liked it more, at that time. Because Europe was different. Let me see. We went to Amsterdam and Belgium, and then we did the tour with [the] Basie band in England. Also France, with Benny Carter. At the Méridien Hotel in France. Mary was there. That was very nice.

Crawford: It's a good venue, isn't it? You know who I heard sing there, probably ten years ago? Sugar Pie DeSanto. She's a blues singer. She comes from here. The French *loved* her. I think she was about seventy then.

04-00:35:55

Mahones: Oh, wow. Yes. With Benny, they loved Benny Carter. He was great.

Mrs. Mahones: And Spanky Wilson.

Crawford: You did some recording in Japan?

04-00:36:15

Mahones: Oh, in Japan. Did some recordings there. Then they came out here to L.A. and we did some recordings there, which were released by the Japanese company. They were released in Japan. In fact, they weren't released here at all. That was the only drag, because they didn't release them here.

Crawford: We could talk more about clubs where you performed.

04-00:37:15

Mahones: Certain clubs were more like supper clubs. You know what I mean by that? Other clubs dealt with just jazz, the music, as opposed to something else. Well, let me put it this way. In New York, it was like Birdland, 52nd Street, clubs like that; and then you had the East Side, where they had clubs, but they were more like dinner-type clubs. Very expensive. The menu was great. But especially in the East Side, they catered mostly to piano players.

Crawford: What clubs are you referring to?

04-00:38:19

Mahones: Basin Street East or something like that. So they were great clubs, but they didn't have big bands. Usually it was just piano, but very big pianists. In fact, there was a club out here, where I worked for a while, called Maple Drive, in Beverly Hills. Dudley Moore, I think, bought it—or started it.

Anyway. I worked there with another group, led by Phil Wright, also a pianist, from New York—from the Bronx, I think. A great piano player. He was the A&R man, I think, or president of MRC Records, I think they were called. He got me gigs in California with New York musicians. I'd get the rhythm section and we'd perform. He did things for Nancy Wilson.

Mrs. Mahones: Arranged.

Mahones: Yes, arranged. He's a very good arranger, also. But anyway, he was working at this club and then he got me the job there, also. We used to alternate different nights at the club, for years. But that was more like a supper club. Very good cuisine, very good food, and just piano.

Crawford: You eventually moved to Pasadena.

04-00:40:08

Mahones: Then we moved to Pasadena, yes.

Mrs. Mahones: From Los Angeles.

Mahones: It was Hayward Avenue, [close to Crenshaw] near Fairfax. At that time, I was on the road. I think it was in Chicago. I was doing *Evolution of the Blues* in Chicago—and she found a house here, while I was on the road.

Mrs. Mahones: We found the house because of a friend's wife. They lived in Pasadena, and she wanted me out there.

Crawford: Well, then, what made you decide to move to Oakland?

04-00:41:56

Mahones: Oh, our daughter Danielle. She gave birth to a grandson in 2011.

Crawford: She's musical; she plays classical piano, you told me.

04-00:42:21

Mahones: Yeah, she plays piano, classical. She's very good.

Mrs. Mahones: And flute.

Mahones: And flute; I forgot about the flute.

Crawford: Well, a good place to wrap up the interview would be to talk more about the Apollo Theater, your memories, and what you consider to be the highlights of your long career.

04-00:42:41

Mahones: In, I think, 1940, as I told you, we moved to Harlem. I was born in East Harlem, the Spanish section. I was used to that music. But in 1940, we moved to 126th Street, right behind the Apollo. That was another type of music, and that influenced [me]. At the time, I wasn't playing, but I was listening. Listening and hearing the music, and going to the Apollo to see different acts, because we couldn't go to clubs. I wasn't old enough to go to the clubs, at that time, but we could go and hear the stage shows. They had people like Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Benny Carter—all types of big bands, sometimes led by pianists.

Then I had a chance to see the great singers and great dancers. Saw Redd Foxx with Slappy White; saw “Baby Laurence” [Jackson] a great tap dancer; and many others. So that stayed in my mind, so when finally I started learning the piano, you remember all these influences, you remember all these people and what you saw, and that will seep into your playing.

The great thing was, when I was a kid I imagined playing with a big band, because I’d see Duke and Basie. They’d have this big band and the sounds would come back at you. So now, I’m playing at Birdland with Lester Young, who I probably saw at the Apollo, also, and opposite us would be Count Basie.

So I got a chance to hear that close up, right there on the same stage. That was a great thrill, because here I’d always imagined what it would be, so now I had a chance to experience it. For forty-five minutes, the band was in front of me and I was playing the piano with the Count Basie band, so that was brilliant.

Then I got a chance to do it again with the Basie band when we went to England with Lambert, Hendricks & Ross, on the Count Basie tour. That was the same thing and it was over a month, a couple of months that I had a chance to do that every night.

And then with Duke, many years later. Lambert, Hendricks & Ross did an album that was dedicated to the music of Duke Ellington, and when we had a tour with the Ellington band, when they got onstage, I would play with the band. Between the Apollo and Birdland and Minton’s Playhouse, I got a chance to play with a lot of different people. So that was great.

Crawford: All the great ones.

04-00:47:10
Mahones:

All the great ones. Especially at Minton’s, with Kenny Clarke, Percy Heath on bass, Milt Jackson and Jesse Drakes on trumpet and Sonny Rollins. That was the group. Naturally, all their friends would come by and different musicians would come by and sit in.

Crawford: What a great career you have had.

04-00:47:49
Mahones:

Well, it was a lot of fun. There were a lot of people. I got a chance to play with a lot of people. Then when I worked with Lester and Lester was with the Jazz at the Philharmonic, we were off and we got a chance to play with other people while he was doing this. Either Lockjaw or Foster, whoever was free, they would call us and we would do the gig. So that was great. Then with the singers, the same thing: Carol Sloane, Anne Marie Moss, Esther Phillips—a whole bunch of them.

Crawford: Was there generally a lot of rehearsals for these sessions?

04-00:48:53
Mahones:

Oh, sometimes we would rehearse. Depending on what the gig called for. If it was an extended gig, we would have to rehearse the repertoire, more or less. So that would call for rehearsal. But if it was just that they came upon the gig to sit in, that was different.

One time with Lambert, Hendricks & Ross, we were working at The Apollo, and Gloria Lynne was on the bill. Now, I forgot the rest of the people. Oh, Moms Mabley was on the bill. And John Levy, that's right. John Levy was the bass player that used to work with George Shearing, but then became like a manager. He had his own business. He managed different people, like Ahmad Jamal. He still managed George Shearing and Nancy Wilson.

This is at the early stage. We're doing this show and he wanted to present Nancy, introduce Nancy, and they added her to the show. But she didn't have a rhythm section, so we ended up playing for Nancy her first time in New York, at that time. So that was interesting, also.

Crawford: Do you still see these people?

04-00:50:38
Mahones:

Not lately. But I used to.

Crawford: Nancy Wilson goes to Monterey sometimes, doesn't she? Do you go?

Mrs. Mahones: Used to.

Crawford: Well, you played there, of course.

04-00:50:52
Mahones:

Oh, yes, yes. In fact, as I mentioned we used to do the tour. When I was with Lambert, Hendricks & Ross, we did the tour from Newport. We'd do that back east, then we'd fly out here to do the Monterey Jazz Festival, almost every year for quite a [while]. For the five years that they were together, anyhow. Every year there was a premiere in Monterey. Later they stopped. It got to be ordinary after a while.

04-00:52:42
Mahones:

Did I mention about when went [on tour] with Lester Young and Ruth Brown?

Crawford: No, we haven't talked about that.

04-00:52:52
Mahones:

It was in 1953. Ruth Brown, The Clovers, and Dusty Fletcher and Wynonie Harris and Stuffy Bryant, the tap dancer, and Lester Young's quintet and Joe Louis. That was the revue at The Apollo. They took the whole show—we

went by bus, chartered bus—all the way from New York to Pensacola, Florida, the Chitlin' Circuit. Leonard Reed was the producer.

We performed in large theaters and small clubs and stayed in people's homes. The food was great — it was home cooking. We didn't go out much — just hung around with each other. The program varied from night to night, and we toured about two months in all.

Crawford: Well, Joe Louis must've been the headliner, right?

04-00:53:51

Mahones: Right. And Buddy Johnson. I forgot Buddy Johnson and Ella Johnson.

Crawford: You told me you were very young when you went on your first tour, and you were really surprised how the South was.

04-00:54:11

Mahones: Oh, yes. That was with Joe Morris. The same tour, the Chitlin' Circuit, only smaller venues, because it's only just Joe Morris. It wasn't a big show, and we traveled by cars; where with the other show, we traveled by chartered bus. But it was the same thing, as far as where you could stay and where you could eat, the restaurants and all that.

Crawford: That was a few years later.

04-00:54:48

Mahones: Yes. It had improved, but not all the way. With Joe, it was in the late forties or early fifties. No, late forties, like '48 or '49. With Prez and that tour, it was in '53, I, I think, joined Prez, so it must've been in the early fifties.

Crawford: Is the racial situation much improved now here?

04-00:55:24

Mahones: Now? Oh, yes, I'm sure.

Crawford: I think so, too.

04-00:55:27

Mahones: Oh, yes.

Crawford: Satchmo had a lyric in *The Real Ambassadors*. It went something like, "Segregation is now an illegality; soon we'll be different only by our personality." I hope that will happen.

04-00:55:44

Mrs. Mahones: Yes, right.

Mahones: Ferguson, Missouri. It's a different story, I mean. It has changed, but then you wonder. Sometimes it seems like we're going back.

Crawford: Is it a hopeful thing that people are protesting? People won't accept it.

04-00:56:23

Mahones: Yes, that's true. That's true.

[End of Interview]