

Regional Oral History Office
The Bancroft Library

University of California
Berkeley, California

Allen Smith
JAZZ TRUMPETER AND EDUCATOR

Interviews conducted by
Caroline Crawford
in 2005

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Allen Smith (courtesy Allen Smith)

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ALLEN SMITH INTERVIEW HISTORY

Allen Smith was born in the steel mill town of Midland, Pennsylvania, on August 11, 1925. The family was a musical one: His father was a choir director, his mother a pianist, and an uncle performed with Fats Waller. Smith took up the trumpet, and his school PTA awarded him with an instrument he still has today.

The family moved to Stockton, California, in 1943, the year Smith was drafted into the U.S. Navy. Smith hoped to play in a Navy band, and by a stroke of the serendipity that so often marked his life, he was not only assigned to his cousin's band, but took the place of none other than Clark Terry and performed during the war with the renowned Navy Hellcat Band at Barber's Point, Hawaii.

After the war he earned a master's degree in education from San Francisco State University while performing in clubs in the Fillmore District—the only area in San Francisco where African Americans could perform at the time—and worked as an elementary school teacher and principal in San Francisco schools from 1950 to 1985.

In the late 1950s Smith took a leave of absence and went to New York City, where he worked as a studio musician, toured as a soloist with Benny Goodman, and performed and recorded with major jazz bands. Wanting to continue working in education, he returned to the Bay Area, where he performed and recorded with Duke Ellington and many others. Smith's style of playing is fluid and rich, generated from the mainstream of jazz styles and influenced by Louis Armstrong, Harry "Sweets" Edison, and Buck Clayton, among others.

Now in his mid-eighties, Smith has a regular gig with Lavay Smith at Enrico's in North Beach, playing with the elegance and eloquence that has always marked his style. He is an active member of the Bohemian Club, and every January he performs in Vienna, Austria, where he visits his daughter, a United Nations attorney.

Looking back, Smith affirms that he has worked hard. He also credits his good luck in a life that "turned out beautifully for me. You know, so many things happened in the nick of time—I just happened to be there when something opened up."

Caroline Crawford, Music Historian
Regional Oral History Office
The Bancroft Library
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Interview #1: February 3, 2005

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Crawford: This interview is with jazz trumpeter Allen Smith for the Regional Oral History Office jazz series. Let's start with the date and place of your birth.

01-00:01:17

Smith: Well, I was born in Midland, Pennsylvania, which is the western part of Pennsylvania, near Pittsburgh. And that took place August the 11th, 1925. And I went through my earlier school years there, in Midland. Graduated from high school in 1943. And my parents-- my grandparents at the time were living in Stockton, California. They had, for most of my life, lived in Grinnell, Iowa. And we used to visit them for summer vacations.

Crawford: Could you give me names?

01-00:02:27

Smith: Well, Percy and Martha Smith. And my grandparents were Lucases, John and Dora Lucas. Mother's name was Martha. Martha Lucas. And anyway, they had moved to Stockton, California, and were of an age--at the time, I think they were probably in their eighties--and wanted us to move out from Pennsylvania and share their home with them, guaranteeing them a life estate, when they passed. And that was an opportunity for Dad to--and the family--to get out from under the snow [laughs] and the harsh winters of Pennsylvania.

Crawford: How had they happened to settle in Pennsylvania, your folks?

01-00:03:41

Smith: Well, I really don't know how or why, other than job opportunity. Dad used to work in the mills, in the steel mills. The Pittsburgh Crucible Steel had a plant there in Midland. In fact, it was practically the sole source of income for the people that lived in Midland.

And so he became a steel worker. And when World War II broke out, he decided to leave the mills and become a custodian in the school department of Midland. That's the occupation that he had through most of my life in Midland, was that of the school janitor.

Crawford: And your mother?

01-00:05:10

Smith: Mother was a housewife. She had some piano students, and occasionally, I guess, she probably worked as an aide. Well, basically, that's about it.

Crawford: Is that where your music came from?

01-00:05:37

Smith: No, my music came from the family, period. My father was the choir director of the First Baptist Church, and for a period, my mother played the piano there. She also taught piano. And Dad played the trombone for an earlier

period of my life. He used to also have musical groups. Back in those days, he had a minstrel show, in which a bunch of guys used to perform. And he was the director of that.

Crawford: What do you remember of the minstrel show?

01-00:06:43

Smith: Well, I think it was probably your typical minstrel show. A lot of buffoonery, a lot of jokes being told. Some singing. That's about all I can say, because I was pretty small. In fact, occasionally, they would take me with them to shows; and most of the time, I'd curl up on a bank of chairs and [laughs] go to sleep. So I must've been about maybe four or five, somewhere around there, if not earlier. Younger, rather. That's about it.

Crawford: Did you have brothers and sisters?

01-00:07:50

Smith: I have an older brother, who's seven years older than I. And he's still alive, and we play golf almost every Monday. And also, one of my sons. The three of us play golf a lot.

Crawford: What would you say your first memories were?

01-00:08:19

Smith: Of what?

Crawford: Yours. Your first memories. When you were very small. Do you remember your house?

01-00:08:28

Smith: Oh. Well, yes, I remember living in Midland, Pennsylvania. And I remember going to school. We used to walk to school. It was a small town, probably about six thousand people, I believe.

The town was segregated, to an extent. To the extent that blacks and other minorities, including people from Europe--Italians, Portuguese, Spanish, just about all the ethnic groups, Czechs, Slovaks--Dad used to speak a bit of Russian, and certainly, spoke quite a bit of Serbian, that he picked up from the guys that he worked with in the mills, and also the neighbors.

It was sort of like--well, there were two towns. There was our town, which was a mixture of any other race, and the "American town," we used to call it. American town, as kids growing up, was peopled by the bosses of the mills--Scotch, Irish and English, from northern Europe. But we all went to school together. And we all participated in sports. And as I say, those in our town, our half of the town, were a mixture of just about everybody else-- all the menial or workers, the laborers, et cetera.

The bosses of the mills lived out in American town. I enjoyed growing up in Midland. One of the quirks of prejudice, of growing up in a prejudiced situation, I think most of the people in our part of town really did not feel the segregation to that extent, because-- I mean, to a great extent. When I say great extent, I mean to a mind-warping kind of thing.

Next door to our home, our house, an Italian family lived. Across the street, Serbians lived. I used to consider myself, when I was in kindergarten, first grade, going with a little girl by the name of Betty Mary Milkovitch. [they laugh] She was my girl, and I'd walk her to school every day and, you know, hey, people were people, and that was the upbringing that my mother gave me. People are people. There are good and bad. But she didn't raise me with a hatred of whites, or any other race, for that matter.

Crawford: And you weren't divided that way.

01-00:13:04

Smith: And we weren't divided that way.

Crawford: The division was more management/labor, it sounds like.

01-00:13:08

Smith: Yes. Yes. My grandparents on my father's side lived on Fifth Avenue. And that same block was sort of a transitional section of the town, to the extent it was the beginning of American town. The Smiths had a great big house right on the corner of Fifth Avenue and Beaver. Fifth Street and Beaver Avenue.

Now, the church, First Baptist Church, was in the black community. It was considered a black church, as such. And that was the church that most--well, there were two churches. The Mount Olive Baptist Church was also in that community.

So there were two churches, two black churches. And most of the people, most of the people in *our* town lived in company houses, rented from the mills, the Crucible. Everything. That was the source of work for the majority of the people of the town.

Crawford: It was a company town.

01-00:15:07

Smith: It was a company town.

Crawford: Company store--

01-00:15:09

Smith: Definitely. Definitely was a company town.

Crawford: What was the name of the owner of the mill?

01-00:15:15

Smith: Pittsburgh Crucible Steel. Pittsburgh Crucible Steel Company. That was the name of the place that everybody worked. The *majority* of the people worked. They had provided homes, and people lived there all their lives, you know. All their *working* lives, anyway.

I went from kindergarten through high school. In fact, my senior year, the year I graduated, '43, was the year that we moved to Stockton, California. And we were all looking forward to that, because California was considered the land of milk and honey, and—[laughs]

Crawford: It must have been.

01-00:16:26

Smith: As far as we were concerned, it sure was.

Crawford: I'm a native Californian, but I think about people who come from the cold weather—how you must feel when you get here.

01-00:16:38

Smith: Well, it's different, I'll tell you! So much sunshine, and just the warm climate. And the palm trees and--you know?

Crawford: What about music in your home, then? It sounds like your parents were both heavily involved with music.

01-00:16:57

Smith: Yes. I also had an uncle who was a trumpet player, and he was playing at that time, throughout my school years, especially in high school, he was playing trumpet with Fats Waller. And there was a lot of music in the family. I had an aunt, my father's brother's wife. That part of our Smith family lived in the house that I spoke of, Fifth and Beaver. I had an aunt that played the violin. Very excellent violinist.

There was another aunt that lived with the family, my father's younger sister Lillian, and Mary, my aunt there, also played piano. Mary and Loma had a son, my cousin Vernon, who was about three or four years older than I, who was sort of my mentor.

He played trumpet and also trombone, when he was in high school. And he was only a couple of grade levels above me, so I got the chance to hear and to be impressed by his playing. And he became a role model for me, you know, being a couple of grades ahead of me. I can see him in the band, the school band and orchestra. I can see him performing.

So he was a role model who was more closely related to me. And that continued throughout our musical lives together. Well, I say together—he

was the person that I admired in music. He also became involved in music in Pittsburgh.

Pittsburgh was only about thirty-five miles away from Midland. I also had relatives in Pittsburgh. And there were several opportunities. Dad would always go to Pittsburgh to purchase music for the choir. And so we got trips to the big city.

Crawford: How did you travel?

01-00:20:37

Smith: Car. Regular car, you know. Dad was a Ford lover in those days. [chuckles]

He had another brother, who owned a drugstore in the Hill District, which was the black section of Pittsburgh at that time, in those days. And so I got to see my cousin Vernon. After he graduated, he was playing with bands in Pittsburgh. In fact, Fletcher Henderson came to town and was looking for musicians, and he took the whole band. [they laugh]

Crawford: Oh, my goodness! Including Vernon.

01-00:21:41

Smith: Including Vernon [laughs] yes! And during that time, I later learned, Billy Strayhorn was growing up about that same time in Pittsburgh. I didn't know him, and Vernon probably did. But I certainly later learned who Billy Strayhorn was. In fact, I just recently finished reading a book on his life.

But there were a lot of musical opportunities for me to be involved with. In fact—I've told this story [chuckles] many times; my uncle Loma had an old trumpet that he had had, gathering dust underneath the bed, in a case. As I became interested in music, he told me that if I learned to play that instrument, that I could have it. And so I said, "Oh." You know, "Why not?"

So one thing led to another. The high school band then, the orchestra teacher used to go around to the other schools and develop talent that was there among the elementary schools. And so around fifth grade—I think I was around ten years old—that took place, and I started taking lessons from Mr. Hough.

Crawford: Hothe?

01-00:23:51

Smith: H-O-U-G-H, Hough. The high school was seventh through twelfth. And when I got down to high school—obviously, a combination of junior high and high school—he was my music teacher. I guess I became proficient enough that the PTA bought me a trumpet, and I played that all through high school. In fact, I had that school horn, I believe, up until the time I went into the service.

As I say, I left Midland. We moved out here to Stockton, California, and that fall, I went into the service. By that time, my cousin Vernon, who had preceded me in high school, also preceded me into the Navy, and was stationed with a navy band at Great Lakes, Illinois, and mentioned that if I got in the Navy, I should try to get sent to Great Lakes, where he was, and he would try and get me into the band.

Crawford: What year was that?

01-00:25:57

Smith: This was in '43. All of this was in '43. It was a funny thing. You know, I had made up my mind that at least as an avocation, I wanted to be a musician. I had played in little jazz bands in high school, a little five-piece band at school, and we played in the school functions, occasionally around town, and other functions.

I played with two groups, you might say. There was a black group of older men, and the kids that I played with in high school. So that was the second band. And so I was getting two kinds of experiences, which were both very good. I was learning real good jazz from the black musicians.

Vernon had played with that group when he was still in town, and he later left, and joined other groups, including Fletcher Henderson's, as I mentioned, when he came and took a band that he played with out of Pittsburgh.

Anyway, I'm digressing. Vernon, by this time, was in the Navy. I wanted to get in the Navy. And so it just happened that we were making plans to move to California that summer. Mother had to go, but she was having some health problems at the time, and needed someone to go with her to Stockton.

Crawford: She was going to leave first.

01-00:28:32

Smith: She was going to be the first, yes. Dad was going to tie up getting rid of the property in Midland, and then follow us out there. My brother Wayne was already in the service as well, so the only person who could do that would be me, to escort her to California.

Well, to tell it like it is, I became rather selfish, and decided that I wanted to enroll or enlist in the service. That would mean that Mom would have to go to California by herself, and I've always felt— Obviously, I had felt guilty about forsaking my mother, in a sense, and deciding to enlist that summer.

Crawford: They hoped that you would take her to California.

01-00:29:28

Smith: They hoped that I would take her to California. But they did not stand in my way, when I told them that I wanted to enlist. In fact, Dad drove me to the draft board in Pittsburgh.

Crawford: Was there any question of your not being in the service, or not being able to be in the service?

01-00:30:23

Smith: No. Just a matter of the responsibilities that the family. I *certainly* wasn't helping my family by deciding to go into the service *at that time*.

Crawford: Yes.

01-00:30:45

Smith: And so anyway, the main part of this story—and we might delete this whole section, because—

Crawford: You can delete whatever you want.

01-00:31:02

Smith: [laughs] Here it is, coming back. But anyway. I've always been a religious person, growing up in the church, singing with the youth choirs and all that, and Dad, you know, every Sunday, he was there at the church; Mom was there, either playing piano or doing something.

Crawford: It was a good part of your life.

01-00:31:26

Smith: Church was a big part of my life. Anyway. Going on, making the story longer. [chuckles] We go to Pittsburgh. I get examined by the doctors up there. And they tell me that I failed the physical. And I said, "What?" "That's the answer. You have albumen," a condition having to do with the urine specimens that were taken. I had never heard of albumen. But evidently, it was something that could prevent you from getting into the armed service. Okay?

So I'm saying, "Oh, my God." Now I *have* to go to California. I can't enlist here in the East Coast. My chances of getting to Great Lakes are down the tubes, because I'll be out so far away.

Anyway, to make a long story short, I have to take Mom to California. I have no excuse not to, so I do. We're out here in California. No longer here than about two, three weeks, I get my notice from the draft board. "Go report for duty." I mean go and have your examination, et cetera.

And so I go to Sacramento, go through all the routine. I pass the physical with flying colors. No albumen, no nothing. [laughs] Now, don't ask me how, why, but I kind of felt that fate had a hand in here somehow. Anyway.

So I'm now in a line, waiting to decide what branch of service I want to be in. When it comes my turn, I say, "Well, I'd like to be in the Navy." And so he checks me off as Navy—that was it. What branch of the service do you wish to be in? So I said, "Well, I'd like to be in the Navy." And so they gave me my choice of Navy.

I said, "I would like to be sent for my boot training to Great Lakes." And they said, "Well, we don't think we can do that, because we usually send either to Seattle, on the West Coast, or"—I think it was either Montana or Utah, some Navy facility up there or wherever. He said, "But I'll put down here that you would like to go to Great Lakes."

Two weeks later, I get notice from the draft board saying that the Navy choice has been approved, and I am also in charge of a ten-man draft going to Chicago, Illinois. Believe that? [laughs] I was put in charge of ten other guys. And we were all going to Great Lakes.

I went to the Great Lakes, did see my cousin, did get assigned to the Navy band, after my audition. And the next thing I know, I'm getting liberty, getting a weekend pass. And so I said, "Well, I might as well go back to Midland." I still had friends and a few relatives in Midland. I was going to be assigned to a Navy band.

And so I get back to Midland. And I see my cousin. I asked him, I said, "What are you doing here?" You know. I was on leave, but there he was. And still in the Navy, of course. And he said, "Well, don't you know?" And I said, "No. Know what?" He says, "You're in the band, and we're both going to Honolulu." [laughs]

The chief of the Navy bands there, the black bands—he was white, himself. You know, all the services were segregated back in those days, and the greatest musicians that came into the Navy and that were shipped to Great Lakes came in and were assigned to this particular Navy chief, who was white.

He, knowing that he was going to have to do some sea duty himself, decided to hold certain guys in abeyance, that he wanted to take with him in *his* band. He had his pick of choice. Rather than to rate them, give them a rating—soon as they got a rating, they would be shipped out elsewhere.

But if they were unrated, then he could take them. And that's what he did, he just hand picked the best musicians that he could find, that came through at that time.

Crawford: Did he actively audition people?

01-00:38:58

Smith:

Oh, yes. Well, not only that, but he ran the bands. He *knew* what bands they played with in civilian life. I can show you a calendar. There was a trumpet player that was in the Navy at the same time, and Chief Hough had chosen him to be in the trumpet section that he was going to take with him. He was very well known in Chicago, this trumpet player, and was able to pull a few strings himself to keep from going *out*, leaving that area.

Great Lakes was just up the road from Chicago, and he didn't want to leave, because he'd take a liberty, or go into Chicago. You know, it was just like going from San Jose to San Francisco, [laughs] you might say. Almost that close. Anyway, to make a long story short, his name was Clark Terry.

Crawford:

Oh! [laughs]

01-00:40:32

Smith:

And he pulled a few strings, and got out of that band. And who—

Crawford:

So they happened to have a place for a trumpeter.

01-00:40:38

Smith:

Guess who. I know you could *never* guess. [laughs]

Crawford:

What a story!

01-00:40:47

Smith:

Yes, I got Clark's place. There were about four or five other players in the band that were equally well known, or became well known.

O.C. Johnson was a drummer, who has passed recently, not too long ago. He became one of the most sought-after drummers in New York City, after he got out of the service. He was our drummer.

This chief had pulled aside at least eight guys who could write music, could write and arrange any song imaginable. So everybody in the band had played with *some* big name band. You know. Count, Duke, [laughs] whoever. Cab Calloway. Oh, yes. Yes.

Crawford:

All draftable.

01-00:42:13

Smith:

But experienced, you know. And so that was my education. We were shipped to Honolulu from Great Lakes. *Beautiful* train ride, wherein we practiced every day aboard the train.

Crawford:

What train?

01-00:42:43

Smith: Just a regular car, Pullman car. Back in those days, I don't really know; they may have had names for the trains, but this was just a train.

Crawford: A troop train?

01-00:42:58

Smith: Yes, going from Great Lakes to Santa Rita. We ended up, our port of debarkation was Santa Rita, what is now Santa Rita prison. It *was*— Oh, God, what was the name of the darn place? Shoemaker, Camp Shoemaker, down in Pleasanton.

We shipped out from there, straight to Honolulu, and we were stationed at Barbers Point Naval Air Station. In fact, that's in that file, also. I think. I was there for two-and-a-half years, from spring of '44 till '46, when I got out.

Crawford: Not bad to spend all the time in Honolulu.

01-00:43:57

Smith: You know? But then that was a college education for me, for two years, with that band, just learning jazz music from people of that caliber.

Crawford: What did you learn that you didn't know?

01-00:44:15

Smith: Well, I really didn't know a lot. The level that I had experienced in Midland certainly would not have equipped me to go into any of these large bands that some of these other fellas had. But after two years of playing in the Hellcats, we became a very famous band ourselves. And that was my, in a sense, college education.

Crawford: You said the service was segregated.

01-00:45:05

Smith: Well, all the branches of the service at that time were. If you were black, you went into a black unit, all-black unit. It wasn't until way after the war that—I forget what president it was, the one decided to desegregate them. [President Harry S Truman, Executive Order 9981, 1948]

Crawford: I think Dave Brubeck was the first one to insist on having an unsegregated military band.

01-00:45:36

Smith: I don't know. That, I don't know. I know Dave. In fact, I've played with Dave when he was out here. But I don't know that story, or part of his history. But the services at that time were segregated. Army, Navy, Marines, whatever. But anyway, it was an education for me. And I was very fortunate, I felt.

Crawford: What was your military service like?

01-00:46:23

Smith:

Well, we would get up in the morning, go have early chow, go to breakfast early; come back, have a rehearsal somewhere around ten o'clock.

At noon, we would go to the theater and play a performance for the servicemen stationed on the base. And speaking of segregation, all the black servicemen on the base had to sit in the back of the theater. We were upset about that. Well, here we are playing for the servicemen, and we were told that when we came to the theater we would have to sit in the back because that's where the blacks sat. We said, "No. Uh-huh." [laughs]

We talked to people that had a little power on the base, so that we could sit down in front, anywhere we wanted to sit, when *we* came into the theater ourselves to enjoy a movie or whatever. If we're going to be sitting up there on the stage playing, et cetera, entertaining the troops, then we should have that right.

Crawford:

I should say so.

01-00:48:19

Smith:

Their story was: "Well, that area was really reserved for the cooks and stewards, who were all black. And we thought it would be better for them to sit in the back—then they wouldn't be disturbing people if they came in late, after serving dinner, blah-blah-blah." We didn't buy that. Anyway, we ended up desegregating the theater, at least.

Crawford:

And that was fine. That worked out okay.

01-00:48:50

Smith:

Yes. Yes. But the services generally, you know, by and large—not by and large, they *were* segregated, period, in terms of units. A black person was assigned to a black unit, regardless of whatever.

Crawford:

Was that a good deployment for you?

01-00:50:40

Smith:

For me, it certainly was. I fulfilled my responsibility, through no fault of my own, of bringing my mother to California. And got rewarded for it, on top of it, by getting what I was hoping I would've received back there.

Crawford:

Makes a believer out of you.

01-00:51:14

Smith:

You better know it. [they laugh] You better know it.

Crawford:

Did you see the islands? Did you travel some?

01-00:51:27

Smith:

Oh, yes. Our duties, when we went there, were to entertain the troops and the officers. We would play. And you asked me what my day was like. We would play the first part of the afternoon. It would be a show at the theater.

Inevitably, after that, we would have dinner—on the base, usually—and then go play a dance some place out in town, the town or some other Army or Navy base on the island, for other troops there.

Ray Anthony—you may have heard that name—was also a bandleader in the Navy. And he was stationed at the Royal Hawaiian for his tour.

Crawford:

His band?

01-00:52:49

Smith:

Yes, yes. Because he had been popular with Glenn Miller, and his band did the same thing that we did out at Barbers Point. In fact, we had a battle of bands [laughs] one year, just before we came back.

Crawford:

A competition?

01-00:53:12

Smith:

Yes. And his band came in first. But we thought from the applause from the servicemen in attendance that we won. [they laugh] But politics being politics, well—

Crawford:

He was stationed at the Royal Hawaiian. What does that mean?

01-00:53:35

Smith:

That was his assignment. You know that hotel. That's one of the finest—well, if not *the* finest hotel—in Honolulu at that time. And in fact, it still is, to this day.

Crawford:

What about leave? Did you get leave to come back?

01-00:54:04

Smith:

No, we were over there for eighteen months. And by the time we were ready to come out, well, the war was over. We came back spring of '46. And I was in two years, from '44, spring of '44 to '46.

Crawford:

Who were the audiences you played for, primarily?

01-00:55:00

Smith:

Servicemen. Oh, we did play— there was a Victory Club, which was a club where civilians and servicemen could mix. That was like a USO over there. And we broadcast from the— I forget the name of the station in Honolulu, but it was their main station.

Well, every Saturday we would have a broadcast for about an hour. And we occasionally would play public dances. In Honolulu, as well as Pearl Harbor, and other naval bases throughout the island.

Crawford: Pearl Harbor was operating at that time.

01-00:56:07

Smith: It was *operating*. It was definitely *operating*. But I wouldn't say fully, because they had suffered quite a bit of damage there.

Crawford: You saw that.

01-00:56:27

Smith: Truthfully, I *must* have seen certain remnants of it. Oh, yes. You could *still* see remnants of that today. What was the ship that—

Crawford: The Arizona?

01-00:56:58

Smith: I think it was, I'm not certain. My history is failing me. But I've been back several times, and I've visited that area, Barbers Point.

Crawford: Barbers Point, is that still a military installation?

01-00:57:24

Smith: I think it is. One of the places I did go back to was the base, because I wanted particularly to see where I had spent my two years over there. I was able to get into the base.

Crawford: What was the band's preparation like, and what did you do between performances?

01-00:57:56

Smith: The musical preparation was that which I had received in high school. The Navy had nothing to do with my Navy experience prior to my being inducted in '44. I graduated from high school in '43. Summer of—well, June of '43.

And so the only music that I knew professionally were the two groups that I played with in Midland, and the education, the musical education that I received in the band and orchestra in high school.

Crawford: Was there one person specifically who helped you?

01-00:59:15

Smith: The band director, Mr. Hough, that I mentioned. He was the one that started me out, when I was approximately ten years old. And I was with him till I graduated in '43. And he was the man.

Crawford: He took time with each of his instrumentalists.

01-00:59:46

Smith: Sure. Plus, you know, remember, I was singing in the church choirs. I was also singing in choral groups in high school, going through.

Crawford: And that meant you could read well.

01-00:60:00

Smith: Oh, yes. Yes. I was a *very* excellent reader. Even, as I say, back then. Probably better than most.

Crawford: This uncle who played with Fats Waller, I'm interested in him.

01-00:60:24

Smith: Clarence, yes. I never heard him perform live with Fats Waller. And I really don't recall recordings that he may or may not have made with Fats Waller. But I do know that he was well known in New York City, because that's where he lived.

Later on, when I went to New York in '58—I lived a year in New York—I met many people that had known him when he was alive. He was well known in New York circles as a trumpet player. So you know, that was something that added to the aura, I guess, of becoming a musician, because I had people within the family who had received a certain amount of fame.

Crawford: That is a lot of music in one family. Let's break here. Our tape is just about finished.

Begin Audio File 2 02-23-2005.mp3

02-00:00:00

Crawford: Let's go on then, and I'll start by asking you a little bit more about the Hellcats. Did you have a lot of privileges because you were such a good band?

02-00:03:55

Smith: Well, not really a lot of privileges. It's just that our duties demanded that we do a lot of playing. We broadcast on the main Honolulu station at that time. I think it was— In fact, I talked to a guy from Honolulu that I played with this last weekend. I think the stations call letters were KDGM or something like that, which broadcast daily out of Honolulu.

We broadcast from that station once a week for a period, which was enjoyable for us, and also gave us added publicity, the fact that we were broadcasting. But our normal duties were to play a daily noon concert in the theater for the service personnel on the base.

We would put on a show for the servicemen, and women. And then they would have a movie. And so those two things were the events, were the highlight of our regular day.

We also would have a rehearsal, usually in the morning. And if we couldn't squeeze it in in the morning for some reason, we'd have a rehearsal in the afternoon, after we got back from the theater.

But normally, I'd say at least three or four times a week, we would also have an officers club dance to play, or some kind of performance in Honolulu. So we were kept quite busy. But that was great for us, because we got a chance to be off the base quite often, and among the general populace of the island. And we made a lot of friends, naturally.

Crawford: Were there nice jazz clubs in Honolulu then?

02-00:06:57

Smith: There were some. We mostly played on service installations. Army, Navy-- well, Navy bases primarily. Occasionally an Army base. And we played Victory Clubs, USO type clubs. We didn't play in nightclubs as such, civilian nightclubs.

But almost every base that we played on, naval base, had an officers club, and we'd play there. All over the island. Kenahoe, in addition to downtown Honolulu.

Crawford: And so you liked being there in the tropics.

02-00:07:57

Smith: Oh, yes! It was fun. Like I say, rough duty, but [chuckles] somebody had to do it, you know. [they laugh]

Crawford: When were you discharged?

02-00:08:10

Smith: Depending upon the amount of seniority you had, some of the guys got out a little earlier than others. We got over there spring of '44, and then we started mustering out in '46 and came home. I was one of about three that had the least seniority, and so we had a little more time to do. We came back to our point of embarkation, down at Camp Shoemaker, which is now Santa Rita, in Pleasanton, just outside of Pleasanton.

We came back there and waited for them to decide what they wanted to do with us. We still had about a month or so of our time to do in the service, before being mustered out.

Well, they sent me back to Washington, D.C., to the school of music there, for a couple of weeks, and then back out to California. I was stationed at Vallejo for a couple more weeks, and shortly after that, then mustered out.

So I got out the summer of '46, and then the government passed the G.I. Bill, which gave servicemen the opportunity to attend college and have free tuition.

I decided to take advantage of that, because in high school, I had taken college prep courses, and so when I applied to San Francisco State College at the time, I had no problems getting in. And so I started to attend State in the fall of '46.

Crawford: A very good music department there, I understand.

02-00:11:08

Smith: Excellent.

Crawford: Did you take education courses, or music?

02-00:11:11

Smith: I took music, up until my senior year. I just happened to run into two other guys that had been in the service, and we just sort of formed a triumvirate. They were musicians and I was very much into jazz, and so I just told them, "Hey, you guys, I want as many music classes or courses as I can get."

And so did they, so I said, "Hey, you guys fill out my program for me. [laughs] As far as I'm concerned, I'll take the same courses." We did, and we were successful to the extent that we were able to convince some of the professors in the music department that we should have a jazz course, as well as the normal classical fare.

Crawford: Harmony and theory and jazz!

02-00:12:20

Smith: That's exactly it, harmony and theory and—only give us an opportunity. And they also got credit for us to form classes of our own, with the emphasis on jazz music, and not classical.

For those particular courses, we would be taking, as you said, theory and harmony classes. We'd take those as well, but in addition, we would have a jazz band on campus, and we would be able to write jazz music for that band.

So that would give us a different kind of an experience. Still it would be highly motivating for us, because, for most of us, that's the field we were going to go into, the jazz field. We also were taking high school-type classes, music to be taught in the schools.

Now, in my senior year, I took a look at the job situation. All the music teachers that were teaching band and orchestra, all those positions were already taken and these teachers had been there for some time. That meant that whenever I graduated, in order for me to get a job teaching a band or orchestra, I was going to have to move to the hinterlands, [laughs] you might say. Because all the positions in San Francisco were taken. The high schools, their positions were all filled, and we were going for a special secondary credential.

All through my college days, I was playing in night clubs in San Francisco, while I was going to college. I didn't want to have to leave San Francisco to get a job, so it just happened at that time—you know, so many things in my life [laughs] have happened in the nick of time, you might say, or I just happened to be there when something else opened up.

Prior to that time, prior to my graduation, [teaching positions in] the elementary schools were not open to men. People in the elementary schools were basically female. To have male teachers on an elementary level was pretty much unusual, prior to my graduating. Well, about the time that I graduated, the elementary schools started opening up. I guess they wanted father figures in the elementary schools.

Crawford: Was that a wartime phenomenon, that there simply hadn't been men around to take the jobs?

02-00:16:27

Smith: No, it wasn't just wartime. Historically, the elementaries were pretty much reserved for women. I guess the mother-role attitude prevailed in the elementaries; kindergarten through sixth grade. But males started moving in, and the boards of education started seeking out qualified males, usually it was in, say, fifth, sixth grade, something like that, maybe fourth grade.

I found that with all the education courses that I had taken, although they were on a secondary level, they highly qualified me to go into elementaries. If I would take maybe a semester or so of method courses, elementary method courses, I could satisfy my elementary credential maybe in six months.

So that's what I did, plus a summer session. When I graduated, I graduated with [an] elementary degree. Now, it's funny that State held me up from getting the credential, an elementary credential, because I lacked a quarter of a unit of folk dancing. [they laugh]

Crawford: Well, there's always that.

02-00:18:47

Smith: Believe me. [laughs] I said, "What?" I wasn't about to take another semester. I had already had some folk dancing classes.

Crawford: That was mandatory?

02-00:19:06

Smith: Yes. That was part of the curriculum, a quarter unit of a folkdance class, that I was lacking. Although I *had* taken *another* course in folk dancing. So rather than to worry about State College, I applied, sent all my records, transcripts, to Sacramento. Two weeks later I had my credential in my pocket. Sacramento said I *more* than satisfied the state requirements.

02-00:19:42

Smith: So I got my elementary credential through the state, rather than State College, and I started teaching in the fall of '50. And so I was in from there on.

Crawford: Weren't Cal Tjader and Howard Brubeck at about that time?

02-00:20:09

Smith: Not Brubeck. He was going to Mills College, Dave.

Crawford: Dave was, but I thought a brother, one of his two brothers was there.

02-00:20:15

Smith: Oh, I didn't know him, if he did.

Crawford: Some of the players in the octet had been studying at State, as I remember.

02-00:20:25

Smith: There were a lot of musicians that studied at State, that played in different bands. I even played with Dave Brubeck and Paul Desmond.

Crawford: When?

02-00:20:42

Smith: In college. Paul Desmond went to State at the same time I did, and we were playing in nightclubs out in the Fillmore together, with various bands.

Crawford: Let's talk about that.

02-00:21:05

Smith: In one those pictures I gave you, I think Paul was in that picture.

Crawford: Yes, you showed me.

02-00:21:17

Smith: So it was at that time that occasionally— Dave had a regular trumpet player, but occasionally, for some reason or other, he would be tied up with something else.

There were several times Dave would give me a call, and I would play with them. I was not a regular member of his group, but I played with him, you know, as a sub for his regular trumpet player.

Crawford: Let's talk about the club scene in the Fillmore. It was certainly an exciting time.

02-00:21:52

Smith: San Francisco was like most other cities in the United States. The war effort demanded more personnel in the various mills, the steel mills, the shipyards, et cetera. And personnel to work in regular business.

Many of these people came up from the South, and many of these people that came to these cities were black. Many of them ended up working in the shipyards out here, in Hunters Point. The government also put up housing for them.

However, they continued the segregationist policies from the South, transplanted them here. In other words, whites lived on one side of the street out there; blacks lived on the other side.

Crawford: Are you talking about Fillmore?

02-00:23:22

Smith: I'm talking about Hunters Point. Hunters Point was a segregated federal housing community, and that was permitted here. I'm sure the city fathers welcomed having more industry come into San Francisco, and went along with the segregational patterns of the South.

Crawford: Were there restrictive clauses in housing and that sort of thing?

02-00:24:00

Smith: I'm sure there were. In fact, I went to housing when I was writing my masters thesis. I went to the housing department here, and was shown evidence of this. That this is how that community was set up, that there was a black section, there was a white section. And never the twain should meet.

After the war, whites started moving out and more blacks moved in. Blacks did not have the mobility that whites did, in terms of securing additional housing other places, you know.

So the area of San Francisco that blacks were assigned to—public housing, et cetera—was the Fillmore District. The Japanese people used to live in the Fillmore, and had bought up property. When they were interned, as you remember, one of the aspects of them being sent off to concentration camps—or camps, period—was many of the black people that had been successful bought or leased the property of these Japanese people that had to leave and were interned.

When the Japanese, after the war, came back, they picked up their leases and properties, et cetera. So that was another blow to the business acumen of the blacks that had been there. That sort of was another aspect of the problems that faced the black population in that area, in the Fillmore area, because that's where the blacks that were not living in Hunters Point, that's where they settled.

Crawford: And so they had to find yet another location.

02-00:26:37

Smith: The city came in and redeveloped that whole area, which meant that was a further blow, in terms of having to find other places. The Fillmore was decimated, in terms of blacks moving out, having to move out. There was nothing there. They did provide *some* housing, but there again, this was a blow to the black populace.

Crawford: When was redevelopment?

02-00:27:25

Smith: They started really in earnest in the sixties, I believe.

Crawford: And that meant tearing down housing.

02-00:27:35

Smith: Tearing down housing and putting up new housing. Apartments, some of them big high-rise, et cetera.

Crawford: And who had access to those buildings?

02-00:27:48

Smith: Whites.

Crawford: In the Western Addition, we're talking about.

02-00:27:52

Smith: Yes.

Crawford: So where did the black population move to?

02-00:27:57

Smith: Wherever they could. And there was *some* housing there, public housing.

Crawford: Was Oakland more open?

02-00:28:10

Smith: I really don't know. Oakland had *its* black section, as well. There was, I can't say unspoken, but the restrictive covenant laws, which said, *the property is for sale, but not to blacks*. If you were a white person owning property, you were counseled not to sell to blacks. And that's something that took place *all over* the United States.

Crawford: Until when?

02-00:28:51

Smith: I really can't give you a date, because I'm sure that there were some white landlords, or the people that wanted to get *rid* of property, that went ahead and sold. But the restrictive covenants that existed during those days, that was one of the premises, that you didn't sell to blacks.

Crawford: Was that something that an owner signed, a white owner signed?

02-00:29:25

Smith: Don't ask me; I wasn't a property owner. I think it was more an understood thing between whites. It was *very* well known, it was just a fact, that if there were no blacks in a neighborhood, and there were all kinds of foreigners, people that had come from other countries, as long as they were white, they were acceptable.

But blacks were not. It wasn't until Truman integrated the services. Because you have to remember, as I said, prior to the integration that this president brought upon the services—prior to that time, they were also segregated, much in the same manner as in the South.

Crawford: But the attitudes started changing after the war, didn't they? About segregation.

02-00:30:51

Smith: Well, of course. Of course. Black men were enduring suffering and pain, and death, in the service. The Japanese and the Europeans that were fighting the war—the Germans—didn't care about killing blacks as well as whites. You know.

Also blacks felt indebted, as such, to our country—the only country we've ever known. We felt a desire to be a part of the war effort—the work, the mills--as well as being in service. So even though it was segregated, we felt it our responsibility as American citizens to contribute in every other aspect that the white person did.

Crawford: You found absolute housing segregation, and musical segregation. I think the Fillmore was the only district where blacks could play.

02-00:32:25

Smith: Yes. I was one of those, among many others in San Francisco. Vernon Alley, I mentioned his name. His brother Eddie Alley helped introduce me to the San Francisco jazz scene. Vernon was living here in San Francisco. Well, he grew up here. But he remembers vividly when blacks could not perform east of Van Ness Avenue.

Crawford: You were playing in the late forties. What clubs were you playing?

02-00:33:22

Smith: In the Fillmore.

Crawford: Can you remember the ones that you played?

02-00:33:27

Smith: Oh, there was Jack's Tavern on Sutter Street; there was the Club Alabam on Post Street; there was the California Theater Club, up between Laguna and

Buchanan, on Post Street; there was Jackson's Nook on Buchanan, just off of Post Street; and of course, there was Jimbo's Bop City, which was on the corner of Buchanan and Post. There were clubs up and down Fillmore itself.

And so there were a lot of clubs in the Fillmore area that you could play in. And also out along Third Street, up Bayview. But I think I mentioned that there were some white owners that wanted to open up a club where the— [pause] I forget the name of the club now, but it was on O'Farrell.

Crawford: Was that Blanco's?

02-00:35:05

Smith: Yes, Blanco's Cotton Club. They wanted to have black entertainment. They wanted to run it like the old Cotton Club in New York City, with black entertainment, black bartenders and waitresses, et cetera. And the bartenders, cooks and stewards union said, "Uh-huh. Not in San Francisco."

Crawford: Who was putting pressure on them to say that?

02-00:35:41

Smith: Well, the union itself. Their union.

Crawford: The music union, or the bartenders union?

02-00:35:48

Smith: The bartenders union. They said, "First of all, there are no blacks *in* the cooks and waitresses union." Blacks were not *permitted* in those unions, just like the musicians didn't have any blacks. Blacks had to form their own union. And that's why we had two separate unions here, 669, the black union, and Local 6.

Crawford: Before the merger.

02-00:36:28

Smith: Yes, the merger. Now 6 embraces all the musicians, period.

Crawford: This is 1960, I think. What made Blanco's possible? The owner was Barney Deasy, as I remember.

02-00:36:47

Smith: Yes. Yes. He wanted it.

Crawford: He got to open his club. How did that come about?

02-00:36:52

Smith: He got to open his club because although the other unions threatened to put a boycott, to boycott and picket the front of the club, our union authority, officers, said, "Go ahead and walk across." We didn't have any problems going to work. And I think at the last minute, they decided to pull it. Pull the

pickets. But we did open. I was in the band that played there. In fact, I served as leader of that band.

Crawford: Was it tense to be there?

02-00:37:50

Smith: Oh, to some extent, but not really.

Crawford: Who was the audience?

02-00:37:55

Smith: Basically black. To my understanding, it was a mixed audience. However, a lot of whites attended that club, because they wanted to hear black entertainers—musicians, dancers, whatever. And that was a *very* important club, from that point of view. They could mix with blacks, and hear firsthand that kind of music.

Crawford: Al Forbes had something to do with that.

02-00:38:49

Smith: Al Forbes was president of the union out here. Sure. Our union leadership was as militant as it could be, in terms of fighting for black rights among the musicians, et cetera. But you know, there was only so much they could do.

Crawford: How did you come to lead that band?

02-00:39:22

Smith: Well, the guys that [pause] were in the band, elected me, [laughs] pretty much, you know.

Crawford: Who was in the band, do you remember?

02-00:39:41

Smith: Piano player, who's no longer with us, John Cooper, was very well known, as well known as Vernon Alley at the time. A kid named Gordon on bass. Curtis Lowe, who was a member of the union, or who became a member of the union, on sax. And I believe Earl Watkins was the drummer. We had a five-piece group.

The club unfortunately was not a success, because mainly, I think, of management. I think the people that owned the club, Barney Deasy and his partner got caught up with some of the agents that overbooked the club. The club, when we were there, the five-piece group provided music for dancing.

But then he started bringing in big bands. And I think that was basically due to booking agents that said, "You can get this big name, if you book this other big band," eighteen pieces or something like that, which was a lot of money. And he just ran out of funds. I know we were trying to get him to bring Art Tatum in, as a solo. And he packed the place.

Crawford: Oh, I should say.

02-00:42:22

Smith: They did well the weeks—I think it was about two or three weeks—that Tatum was there. But then right after that, the booking agent sold him somebody like Lionel Hampton or Cab Calloway big band, and they went broke, practically. So it was just, I think, basically, poor management that the club finally folded.

Crawford: That was a huge breakthrough, wasn't it?

02-00:43:05

Smith: Yes and no. I mean, the blacks did. But I think everybody wondered, how long is this going to last? You know. But it was a move in the right direction. I think the black people that were involved appreciated the fact that Deasy and his friend, manager, were trying to move society ahead and really have a mixture.

Crawford: Deasy was white—did he open any more clubs?

02-00:43:59

Smith: Not that I know of. Not that I know of.

Crawford: But there were other clubs then, the Say When and—

02-00:44:06

Smith: You mean where blacks could go—

Crawford: East of Van Ness.

02-00:44:08

Smith: Oh, yes. There were becoming more clubs where you could go in, but up until I guess the fifties, that edict or unspoken word existed. Blacks were not to play east of—or were not welcome. I came to town about that time. I think I may have mentioned I couldn't even get a loan from Bank of America. To this day, I don't do business with Bank of America.

Crawford: They turned you down?

02-00:45:01

Smith: Yes. I wanted to get uniforms for the band at Blanco's Cotton Club. And I couldn't get an account at Macy's. I finally bought the jackets that we wanted from Macy's, but I wanted to get a loan from Bank of America, and I didn't have a credit rating established. They wouldn't go for it.

So I said, "Well, hey, how can I get a credit rating, unless I get some credit from *somebody*, you know, to get established here?" The fact that I was a serviceman made no difference. The fact that I was college—I think at that time, I—God, when was that?

Crawford: That was mid-fifties, wasn't it?

02-00:46:09

Smith: I think so.

Crawford: So you had graduated.

02-00:46:11

Smith: I had just started teaching in '50, and I think those were my early teaching days. So you would think that—

Crawford: Disgraceful.

02-00:46:23

Smith: You would think that that would be proof that I was substantial, or that I was trustworthy. Anyway, like I said, I haven't been back to Bank of America since.

Crawford: You did manage to buy your uniforms?

02-00:46:39

Smith: I did, yes. Yes, at Macy's.

Crawford: Could you have been a musician alone, and sustained your family, or sustained yourself?

02-00:46:50

Smith: Probably, at that time. There were a lot of black clubs that were making money, and musicians were playing in those clubs. In the Fillmore. I was doing as well as anybody else was doing, playing. And having just come to town.

California Supper Club was one of the more high-class black clubs in the Fillmore. Jack's Tavern, over on Sutter Street, was another high business club. There was also the—oh, the one I had a picture of, that I showed you. The New Orleans Swing Club.

Crawford: Also on Sutter?

02-00:48:15

Smith: No, that was on Post. Post, just off Fillmore.

Crawford: So those were well run and well attended?

02-00:48:25

Smith: Oh, yes. Up until the early fifties, they were doing *very* well. But when the war effort was over, people stopped attending, or going out as much as they used to, because they just didn't have the money. Television took its share. People started staying home and watching the tube. And one thing led to another.

Crawford: So that the whole scene kind of dried up.

02-00:49:13

Smith: Yes. Whites *and* blacks suffered.

Crawford: What were Eddie and Vernon Alley doing that period? Was Vernon touring already?

02-00:49:24

Smith: He *had* toured. Eddie had his own band here in San Francisco. I don't believe Eddie did any touring. But he was known as a regular bandleader. He had a lot of business. I played with him, as well as Vernon. Vernon was mostly in town during those days. All through the fifties.

Late in the forties, after he got back, got out of the service, and he was making good money. He was one of the more popular bandleaders—certainly, black bandleaders—and played all the black clubs, and all the social outings, social clubs, as well. Big dances, with however many pieces the patron needed. He was always very, very well liked, and very successful as a musician.

He also knew a lot of whites, having gone to Commerce, downtown, where the old board of education building is, the headquarters of U.S. Unified, that was Commerce High School. He was a superstar here in San Francisco, in high school. A track star and also a football star.

So he was very well known, both blacks and whites. And he was a very personable guy. Once he met you, he never forgot your name or your face. He just knew everybody. And everybody knew Vernon, you know. So that popularity gave him *carte blanche* to the whole city. [laughs]

He and John Cooper were probably the two most recognized—among white people—the two most recognized black musicians in San Francisco, I would say. Musician friends of mine were in the Bohemian Club and wanted to get me in when I was doing my administrative work. I had too much going on, musically as well as school and I hesitated about going in. I think this was in the early eighties, maybe mid-seventies.

Crawford: But you did eventually go in.

02-00:53:50

Smith: I did. But the Bohemian club was beginning to change from their all-white stature to having some blacks integrating the club. And with my background and the people that I knew, they wanted me to come in. I told them that I couldn't come in at that time because of my workload, but I would recommend Vernon and Johnny.

They were chosen, and the two of them went in before me. They were the first two to integrate the club. I'm almost a-hundred percent certain of that, because I don't know of any others that went in before those two.

Crawford: And that was the eighties. When did you go in?

02-00:55:02

Smith: After I retired. I retired in '85. And I think I went in in '87.

Crawford: How have you participated in the club?

02-00:55:18

Smith: As a regular member. As a regular member. I'm a member. There are various different categories in the club. And one of those categories is for musicians.

Crawford: They have many musicians as members, don't they?

02-00:55:42

Smith: Oh, yes. They have a band, a symphonic band; they have a symphonic orchestra. They also have a jazz band. The jazz band of which I'm a member of is called the Jinx Band. We put on shows regularly throughout the year, as well as performances up at the Bohemian Grove.

Crawford: You go to the Grove, as well. What is that like?

Smith: It's fun.

Crawford: You can't tell me much about it.

02-00:56:13

Smith: Well, it's not necessarily secret, it's just a place where, in the summer, we go and spend a couple weeks just partying, really, putting on shows for each other, and there are at least a hundred camps up there, and various people go to various camps. The Jinx Band has a Jinx Band camp. And it's just a summer vacation for a couple of weeks—

Crawford: With the President?

02-00:56:53

Smith: To chill out. With who? Oh, yes! There are a *lot* of notables that come up there, you know. In fact, I met Colin Powell up there one of the afternoons, in one of the camps. I had just read his book that he had written. I forget [laughs] the name of it now. *My American Dream* [*My American Journey*] or something like it. I think that's something near to the title. But I was very impressed with the book and with him, and was happy that I did meet him. But people like that—

Crawford: Do they go for the duration, or do they just visit?

02-00:57:46

Smith: They visit. It all depends on the time that they have in their own schedules. They may be up there for a week, they may be up there for a couple of days.

Crawford: Are people pretty conservative, politically?

02-00:58:07

Smith: Basically. Yes, I would say the majority of the people are Republicans. And to that extent, they are conservative.

Crawford: What about these skits I've heard about? You can be candid.

2-00:58:34

Smith: Oh, they're *very* good. They're very good. And they're classy. There's nothing untoward, really. The men play parts of girls, because there *are* no women in the club. So they dress up like girls. Everything is double entendre. The risqué skits are. But they also put on Broadway-type shows. And a lot of money goes into the production of these things.

Crawford: They have designers and wardrobe and that sort of thing?

02-00:59:17

Smith: Oh, yes. Writers. That's another part of it, the literary side of it. And people are introduced into the club who can provide some kind of service to the membership.

There is an associate membership, which is much less expensive because you're providing a needful service to the membership. Like the musicians. Or actors. It's basically a good club to belong to. The majority of the people are professional people, bankers, lawyers, what have you.

In addition to the wealthy people that belong, there are associate members. And now I'm in the professional category, which enables me to put in less time at the club, because being a professional, I have outside duties as well, that are recognized. My time at the Jinx Band can be limited to conform with my outside duties, my own professional duties. That's another category that many of the members that are professional musicians are in.

Crawford: Do you spend a fair amount of time there?

02-00:61:51

Smith: Oh, yes.

Crawford: They have sports facilities?

02-00:61:56

Smith: We don't have, for example, a swimming pool. [chuckles] We're right next door to the Olympic Club.

Interview #2: February 23, 2005

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Crawford: We left you in New York. You were talking about ending up the tour with Benny Goodman, and that he invited you to do something called Swing into Spring.

03-00:00:11

Smith: Yes. That was the spring of '59, when we got back off the tour. He had several alumni players that had been with him and were already famous, I guess. But it was enjoyable. And the term Swing into Spring was used quite a bit during that time, or that period. So it was a catchy title, so that's why people used it. It happened in the spring of the year, and Benny is known for the King of Swing, so it all coincided. He invited me to be one of the participants. And it was enjoyable.

Crawford: You took a leave of absence in 1959 and lived with Jerome Richardson in New York. What did you do there?

03-00:01:41

Smith: Well, as I say, I did a lot of studio work. And some of the people that had written for Benny, written music and arrangements and so forth—Sy Oliver was one of those people—I played with him. He conducted a show on Broadway, and I played in that orchestra for a period. A couple of weeks, something like that.

And then, as I mentioned earlier, I did a lot of studio work in commercials. Played a lot of jingles, they called them back there at that time, whereas some particular company would be advertising a product, and they would have music in the background, of course, and they'd hire musicians.

That, in a sense, was like a circuit. Some guys were fortunate enough to know the contractors. After I had been there for a period of time, they found that I was dependable, that I was capable, and they started hiring me, as well, as one of the trumpet players in the section, if not *the* trumpet player in the section. So I did quite a bit of that. In a sense, I proved to myself that I could make in New York as a musician, if I chose to stay there.

However, as I told you, I decided to come back and go back into teaching. And also, to work toward getting an administrative credential, which would enable me to become a principal in one of the elementary schools. And that's what I did. Many of the guys would say, "Hey, why are you going back to San Francisco? You've got it made here."

Crawford: What didn't you like about the New York scene?

03-00:04:24

Smith:

There wasn't anything about the New York scene that I did not like. It was just that I had proven to myself, if I wanted to make it in New York, I could, as a player. But truthfully— Well, I had taken a year's leave of absence. I knew that if I came back at that time, after that year, I could continue the life that I had built up in the education field.

In addition to that, having become known by the people in New York, they were going to come to San Francisco at one time or another, and I would probably get calls to work with them, since they knew I was in town—

Crawford:

And you did.

03-00:05:30

Smith:

And that's exactly what happened. I started getting calls that I wouldn't have gotten, had I not gone to New York and had been, in a sense, discovered, because it came up I would be the first trumpet they would call because they knew me.

Crawford:

When did you play with Duke Ellington and Gil Evans and—

03-00:05:58

Smith:

Well, Gil Evans, that was when I was in New York. Duke was out here. Mercer, his son, was his contractor and road manager. And over a period of time, when they came to town—Duke always liked to record, and re-record things that he had already recorded many times. But he might want to change something a little bit, or write another arrangement and see how that sounded, and so forth.

Well, sometimes when he would go into a studio, the guys—Duke did an *awful* lot of work—and the guys would be fatigued, or tired. And some of them occasionally would get sick. Or would pass up on a recording session and, "Hey, get Allen, [laughs] you know, to cover for me." That kind of thing.

Crawford:

Want to say something about him? His special magic?

03-00:07:25

Smith:

Well, Duke was Duke Ellington. I mean, as far as his special magic, he had one of the most well-known bands in jazz history. The man was phenomenal.

I first saw him—my dad took me to see him. He played in a theater, I'll never forget, just across the border in Ohio, just across the border, the Pennsylvania border. Dad would take me to see several bands, or occasional bands, like Cab Calloway. And Ellington would come there.

I had always known *of* him as a child growing up, you might say, and had very, very great respect for him, as all the musicians did, that *I* came in contact with. And you know, it was an honor to be playing with him in San

Francisco, to be sitting in, taking the place of one of his trumpet players. I did that several times with him, when he would come to town and decide to go into a recording studio. So that was an enjoyable experience for me.

Crawford: Did he let you know that you were okay, that you were part of the band?

03-00:09:35

Smith: Oh, yes. Yes. As long as I was performing and doing my job, fine, you know. And so he'd tell Mercer, "Get Allen in."

Crawford: Mercer traveled with him.

03-00:09:53

Smith: Oh, yes. He was his road manager.

Crawford: It probably says here in your discography, when it was.

03-00:09:59

Smith: Well, I hope so, because I forget. [chuckles] It was probably in the seventies.

Crawford: It says the Private Collection, Volume 8, from '57 to '67. But perhaps that just refers to the music.

03-00:10:16

Smith: May I see that? Those were recorded in the years that are stated, '57, '65, '66, and '67. That was when they were released. The ones that I am on are *Count Down* and *When I'm Feeling Kind of Blue*. These are recordings that Duke had made, but didn't release immediately. And the ones that I would have been on would have been the later ones, probably in '66 and '67.

The same thing with Gil Evans. This was copyrighted in '59. Well, I was in New York at that time, and that's when that would have been. The same thing with Goodman. His was recorded in '58. And again, I was there, and I appeared on one, two, three, and four, *Happy Session Blues*, *Autumn Nocturne*, *Oh Baby!*, and *Benny Rides Again*. All of those were done in November of '58.

Crawford: Were there clubs that were special for you?

03-00:12:08

Smith: Well, as a jazz musician, a club is a club. There are a lot of people that come to the club, usually. Certainly, if you're playing with somebody as notable as some of the people I was playing with. Now, Ellington would have been one of these people. I did not appear publicly with Ellington. I did appear publicly with Benny Goodman.

Crawford: And you played with Ella Fitzgerald and Peggy Lee.

03-00:12:52

Smith: That was at the Fairmont Hotel here—

Crawford: Right, in the Venetian Room.

03-00:12:56

Smith: Yes. That's one of the finest rooms in the country. At least it was at that time. In terms of being a swank situation, in the finest hotel in San Francisco. And this was a supper club. People came there to see a show, to have dinner, and dance.

Crawford: As a player, was there one singer among all of these—I didn't mention Lena Horne and Tony Bennett—was there somebody that you really felt like playing to and playing with? That voice thrilled you?

03-00:14:50

Smith: I would say all of them, to a great extent. On that level, you are going to be playing with performers, headliners, that are well known worldwide, and performers that you have a tremendous amount of respect for.

That would include just about everybody that would come through that Fairmont Hotel when I was there. Nat King Cole. I mean, these are superstars. Not just stars---but superstars. Lena Horne, Ella Fitzgerald, and on and on. Tony Bennett and so forth. Sammy Davis, Jr. These were all people that are known worldwide, and highly respected.

How would I feel playing with them? I'd feel *very*, very honored to be able to. How would I perform? I would try to give them my best performance every time I was on stage backing them up. And when I say backing them up, playing in an orchestra whose music they depended upon for their performance. If the orchestra wasn't good, or the band, then they would soon replace that band, or replace that person who was not performing properly.

Crawford: Right.

03-00:16:49

Smith: You know. And rightly so. So I would be very honored. But I would be asked to perform as a background musician to these wonderful people, and that was when I came back from New York, in '59, I started working.

I got a call from Heckscher, the bandleader, Ernie Heckscher, to come and join his band. He would usually call me as an addition to his band, when he had some superstar like that, that had requested me. Or knew I was in town, et cetera, et cetera.

It became a regular kind of a thing. Whenever these people would come to town, I would usually get a call from him to come up and play the show. I had played the show before, and my style of playing was commensurate with what

they wanted to hear. I mean the performers. And so many times, *they* would also request me to be in the band.

But over a period of time, Ernie would call me automatically, you might say. And so for about a period of, oh, at least ten years or more, I was working; anytime any big star would come I'd be there.

Crawford: It's been written that the Bay Area, San Francisco particularly, was the only real challenge to East Coast jazz. Was there a West Coast sound?

03-00:19:09

Smith: I was never impressed with that term. Because the West Coast sound was usually referred to as the Los Angeles sound. When they used that term, they were usually referring to Los Angeles. Los Angeles, back in those days—in the Swing era, I'd say from the forties on—had much more jazz going on, in terms of volume of clubs. There was much more in L.A. than there was in San Francisco.

Crawford: Around Central Avenue?

03-00:20:11

Smith: Yes. Yes. But it was just jazz—jazz, period. There were some fire-burners, as far as musicians are concerned, in Los Angeles. Some great trumpet players that were down there. Great saxophone players that were there.

Just as I had gone to New York, there were a lot of other musicians in L.A. that had done the same thing, and were playing there. I mentioned Benny Carter. He lived in Los Angeles. I got a lot of work from him whenever he came to New York. In fact, I mentioned the first time I worked with him in New York, it was on a soundtrack for a foreign film that he was recording.

So it's pretty hard to say that one town, one city was responsible for this or that. Because everybody is moving all *over* the place.

Crawford: San Francisco had been a Dixieland town. Did you play a lot of Dixieland or traditional jazz?

03-00:22:08

Smith: No. Put it this way. I liked jazz. And all through college, I was in the process of trying to learn how to play bebop. I was a devotee of Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker.

In fact, when I was going to college, I may have mentioned that I was so taken with Gillespie and Parker's music, and being a trumpet player, I just adapted as many of his affectations as I could. I wore a beret, I grew a goatee. I had horn-rimmed glasses. I thought I was just about the hippest thing [laughter] that existed, you know. All through college, you know?

And so I was not interested in Dixieland. To me, that was what everybody called corny music, back then. But later on, I adjusted—I encompassed, we’ll put it this way. I attempted to encompass playing Dixieland, because I had always prided myself on the fact that regardless of what music, what style the music was, I wanted to learn how to play it.

I wanted to master that particular style, because I felt that if I could, then my worth to a contractor would go up. I could not only play jazz, but I could play this type jazz, that type jazz, or whatever. It was one of the reasons that I stayed with a Latin band for ten years. I *enjoyed* playing Latin music, but I also perfected it to an extent that I was sought after by Latin bandleaders, as well.

Crawford: What about Cal Tjader’s group?

03-00:24:48

Smith:

Cal liked Latin music. I played many jobs with him. But I’m talking about the more authentic Mexican or Latin-American bandleaders that were living in San Francisco. There was one in particular: Merced Gallegos had a big band. Had three or four trumpets—four trumpets—three trombones, five saxes, a regular big band.

We played every Saturday night in San Francisco, every Sunday afternoon over in Oakland, at Sweet’s Ballroom. And then most of the time, or *much* of the time, we would go to San Jose and play Sunday night, at a club called the Rainbow Club, for Latinos down there, in San Jose. I did this for a period of—well, from ’48 to ’58, when I went to New York. And it was a lot of fun, I really enjoyed it.

But at the same time, I learned how to play that particular style, and if I had *not* adapted myself to learning how to play that particular kind of music, I would have not been worth anything to the Latino orchestra leaders.

But I learned how to play that style, in terms of taking trumpet solos, as well as phrasing, when I was playing lead. In fact, I even started writing in that vernacular, as well, writing songs of my own.

Crawford: Were those performed and recorded?

03-00:27:16

Smith:

Oh, yes. They were *performed*. I don’t know about recording. We didn’t do that much recording. But they were played at dances, some of the things that I’d written. And they were acceptable.

Crawford: What made San Francisco the scene that it was?

03-00:27:48

Smith: Well, San Francisco was, and hopefully, always *will* be San Francisco. San Francisco is one of the greatest cities in the world. Well known, well loved, highly respected, as cities go.

Crawford: But as a jazz place. Fantasy Records, for instance. Was that a big force? Was Dave Brubeck a big force?

03-00:28:21

Smith: Yes. But he was no greater a force than some of the others that were here. For example, Turk Murphy, speaking of Dixieland. He was very well known and highly respected. In fact, the *Chronicle* just wrote, this last year, a big article about two trumpeters, myself and Turk Murphy. And you might want to hang on to that one, too.

He, of course, was much better well known than I, because I was accepted and performed in the Bebop jazz scene. But Dixieland and Turk Murphy were more highly respected here in San Francisco. Had much more publicity than I did at that particular time. I was just new to town, you might say, was limited to being heard, basically, in the Fillmore.

There again—I'm not trying to make excuses, but discrimination had its part to play, too. The only place that jazz music would be performed was out in the Fillmore District.

Crawford: Did you play at the Blackhawk?

03-00:30:34

Smith: The Blackhawk was on Turk and Hyde. And that was on the other side of Van Ness Avenue. When the Blackhawk opened to jazz, this was around '51. They wanted as much jazz as they could get. And they did—so *many*, many performers, black and white, performed there.

The first time I heard Miles Davis was there. Clifford Brown was there. And, well, it's kind of hard to separate what was responsible for what, in terms of making the jazz scene in San Francisco important. But it *was* important here. And there were many kinds of jazz at that time. Dixieland was one of those types of music that many people—in fact, many people that love Dixieland don't know anything else *but* Dixieland.

Crawford: That's very true.

03-00:32:15

Smith: And prefer it. San Francisco was probably more well known for Dixieland than it certainly was for jazz, because jazz was limited to the black people that played it, for the most part.

Let me put it this way. When I came to town in the late forties, the people that I knew that played jazz, one, played it in the Fillmore, which was peopled by black people; and/or were black musicians themselves, that played jazz as such. Jazz meaning swing, bebop, whatever.

That kind of music was prevalent among blacks. Whereas, to a greater extent, Dixieland, you might say, was more prevalent here among the whites. For the most part, it would be surprising to go into a club, say, and see a bunch of blacks playing Dixieland. It would be almost unheard of. You'd hear Swing, you'd hear blues, but you probably would not hear any Dixieland coming from the blacks.

Crawford: You played with Brubeck.

03-00:34:31

Smith: Yes.

Crawford: Where was that, and what was your impression?

03-00:34:34

Smith: We played in, oh, I forget. I played in an awful lot of clubs.

Crawford: What was it about his style that was sometimes controversial? Was it complex music? Was it difficult?

03-00:35:10

Smith: Yes and no. Dave was an intellectual, to begin with. When I say intellectual, he attempted to take the music that he wrote, the jazz music that he wrote, up to another level. It was swing, or it was jazz. But it was a type of jazz that interested him. He borrowed—not saying that he was the *only* one that borrowed from the classical masters—twelve-tone scales, et cetera.

Many of the black musicians also did that. Diz copied Stravinsky. A very good friend of mine, Gerald Wilson, Khachaturian was one of his favorite composers. And his style of writing chords, Gerald's style of writing chords, was based on some of the things that Khachaturian did and wrote. So there were a lot of parallels in jazz and Bebop, you might say, that could be compared to some of the early classical composers.

However, Dave— [pause] Being a college educated person, and thinking in terms of classical composers, I think had a tendency--and not only that, he studied with Darius Milhaud for a few years, and even went to Paris and studied with him over there. He and several members of his band. I think that it gave them a different perspective than the run-of-the-mill jazz musicians. So he came firsthand, rubbed shoulders with people, as I say, like Darius Milhaud, which gave him a different perspective on jazz, different viewpoint.

Crawford: Was it easy for you when you played in with his band, for instance?

03-00:38:22

Smith:

Well, to me, I was never—I could never say that I was a member of his band. I performed with his group several times. And I knew him personally, quite well. But you know, he had the Collins brothers—they used to play with him. And Dick Collins was—at one time, anyway—he was his primary trumpet player. I hesitate to say that I was a member of his band, because I was not a member of his band, as such. I did perform with him on occasion.

Crawford:

Paul Desmond liked to say that Brubeck liked to play what he didn't do best. Because he constantly wanted to take what he was unsure of, and make it better.

03-00:39:49

Smith:

And work on it. Paul and I went to school together, also. We were very good friends.

Crawford:

What was he like?

03-00:40:08

Smith:

The kind of person that would never come on strong to anybody, as such. Just a kind of person that—if you didn't like Paul Desmond, there was something [laughs] wrong with you, I kind of felt. I thought he was just a real self-effacing kind of person. He would never go around bragging about how good he was. We played together—in fact, one of the pictures that you have, when we were at the New Orleans Swing Club, in that big band, with those other saxes—we played games with each other. If we liked the solo that one of us had stood up and played, we'd toss a penny over on the stand, as payment for that—

Crawford:

Great story.

03-00:41:29

Smith:

He started that. It was funny. I sat back down after a solo, and he had tossed a penny over there. So we started going back and forth with that penny. But he was that kind of a person.

Crawford:

Somebody said he was the loneliest man in the world.

03-00:41:56

Smith:

I don't know if he was the loneliest man in the world. I know that he pretty much was self-contained, to that extent. He was definitely a loner type. Well, I could tell you some stories [laughs]—I won't—that took place at that time. One of my attempts to draw him out of himself, as such. I would say he was pretty much a loner kind of person. But he loved playing with Brubeck. In fact, I asked him once what was his aspiration, his most important aspiration in life. And he said, "To play with Brubeck." That was it—to play the rest of his life with Brubeck, was the thing that he would most desire.

Crawford: I was just going to ask you what was so unique about that collaboration, because it apparently was.

03-00:43:42

Smith: Between the two of them? I really don't know, other than the fact that Paul respected [Brubeck], and thought that Dave's music was exciting to him. You probably couldn't find two people that blended as well as those two did, in terms of what they wanted to get out of the music that they played. And some of Brubeck's greatest tunes—for instance, *Take Five*, was written by Paul. You know. And so they not only admired each other, but I would say [chuckles] they practically idolized each other, you know. Two musicians can't enjoy each other's music any more than those two.

Crawford: Is it unusual for a bandleader to be democratic? I understand that was true of Brubeck, but in your experience?

03-00:45:23

Smith: Well, a leader, you know. The mere word leader connotes that this person that's standing up in front of the band, conducting the band, is the director. All these words are reinforcements of the fact that this person, his main job is to lead. His *name* is leader, you know. There is nobody else that's going to set the pace of this band, except the leader. He's the one. He's the boss. And so the mere word, the designation of his position in that band is different, say, from sideman. Sideman is what the name says. He's a man that is used as one of the men that play inside the band. But he's not the leader.

Crawford: I asked Brubeck that question when I was interviewing him. And he said, "I never told anybody what to do. I played in such a way that I tried to bring people around to my point of view."

03-00:46:57

Smith: Mm-hm. That's his attitude. And I'm sure there are other leaders that also feel the same way, and attempted to do the same way, the same thing. But I would venture to say that the majority of leaders, the majority of bandleaders, covet their position very much. And I don't believe that they would relinquish that position to any sideman in the band. "This is *my* band. You *will* do as I say, or you will cease to be a member of my band." It's that simple.

Crawford: Did you ever see that happen?

03-00:47:52

Smith: Did I ever see somebody get fired? I've seen sidemen quit bands. Although I may not have known why the person left the band, I am certain that I must have been on bands where the leader of the band decided to drop this person, or whatever.

That's like someone goes to a big corporation and is working today, and the next day they're no longer there, you know. Even after they've been there for

a certain amount of time. If the leader of any organization decides that this person is no longer functioning in the role that he expects them to, then he's going to get rid of him.

Crawford: Let's go back to San Francisco State. I just can't get over the treasury of musical talent.

03-00:49:20

Smith: That's come out that school?

Crawford: You, and Ron Protty, and so many. Cal Tjader, Paul Desmond, John Handy. Who of those stayed here? Who went back to New York or other places? Vince Guaraldi's another one.

03-00:49:35

Smith: I couldn't answer that question. I mean, I don't know all the people that have and have not. The better musicians that decided to leave here and go to New York, I would say, Vernon Alley is one of the early people, early musicians, that went and went on the road with Basie, and went on the road also with Lionel Hampton. And Lionel Hampton, at one time, was a *very* big name, as big as Basie's name. And when Vernon went on the road with him, that was a big feather in his cap.

But he came back. He didn't stay in New Jersey. Jerome Richardson, who was responsible for my going to New York, he went to New York before I did, and—I think Jerome went to New York; I don't know why, but I remember the time, but I think it was '53 that he moved to New York. We had worked an awful lot together out here. And also, I first met him in the service, when I was in the service and coming out of the Navy, at Shoemaker, Camp Shoemaker, down in Pleasanton.

But those two people, I knew quite personally, because we did an awful lot of work, Vernon and Jerome. Curtis Lowe I think also played with Hamp for a while. There are the later people, such as you mentioned John Handy, some of the younger people, did leave here and went. But I can't remember them all.

Crawford: Guaraldi, you must've known very well.

03-00:52:23

Smith: Oh, yes. I knew Vince Guaraldi. All I can say is, there are a lot of musicians that did move back. There's a trombone player, I can't think of his name now, that lives in Vienna, that used to play a lot around here.

Crawford: You were very important in union doings. Let's talk about how the subsidiary unions were set up. Why was that the case?

03-00:53:29

Smith: Well, let me first say that I was just a member of the union, of the black union. I came to San Francisco at a time when unions were separate. There was Local 6, which was the white union, and still has the name of Local 6, the number; and Local 669, which was the black union.

Crawford: The American Federation of Musicians.

03-00:54:03

Smith: Yes. Throughout the country, almost every city that had unions, had a musicians union, probably had two unions, a black and a white. That's the way the country functioned, on a segregated basis.

Crawford: When was 669 created? Was Petrillo involved in that?

03-00:54:38

Smith: I do not know. But I'm sure he *was*.

Crawford: What do you remember of James Petrillo?

03-00:54:48

Smith: You know, contrary to your earlier statement that I was knowledgeable or that I was involved with 669, I was just a member. I was never in any kind of leadership capacity.

Crawford: I have an article from the *Chronicle*, in which you and Earl Watkins are spoken of as being breakthrough people, in terms of union involvement. I'll show you that.

03-00:55:28

Smith: Meaning, I *hope*, that we were members of the black union that helped integrate the unions, and were knowledgeable about both unions, to an extent. Now, Earl was not only a member of both unions, but he has been a board member of Local 6 for quite some time. And I believe he was also a board member of Local 669, going back to the days of the merger, and prior. And may have been instrumental in helping to bring about the merger.

Crawford: Talk about the merger and what were the pros and cons.

03-00:56:37

Smith: Earl's the person you should talk to about that.

Crawford: We have talked about that at some length, that there was a discrimination suit, I think in 1959. And the merger took place in 1960. And what were the pros and cons of that, from your point of view?

03-00:56:54

Smith: Well— [pause] I don't like segregation of *any* kind, based upon race. People being chosen for their intelligence, or being chosen for their various abilities,

that's a different thing, as far as I am concerned. If a person has worth, that in itself would normally demand that he have a particular position, then I would say that's acceptable. But if the choices are made based on the color of one's skin, then I'm *very* much against that. I know that when the waters began to change, warm up to all races, that there were people in the white union that were very much in favor of integrating the unions here in San Francisco.

At that particular time, to my understanding—and Earl would be the person for you to get more information on this—but the black union did not wish to join the white union. They had as much money in the coffers that they needed. So they didn't need any financial subsistence from the other union.

In fact, from what I understand, they, if anything, not only didn't want to join, but felt that they had as much money as they needed for their operations, and therefore, why do we need to join them? You know. We can be self-sufficient. And we are.

But the powers that be, from my understanding, in Chicago, Petrillo's office—the federation, in other words—was demanding that all the unions be integrated. So that pressure came from *that* office, or from *that* level, put it that way. To my understanding, and I may be wrong. But that's what *my* understanding of the situation was. And they went on and became one [unit].

Crawford: Did benefits increase for you, noticeably?

03-00:60:50

Smith: Not that *I* know of.

Crawford: So it was about the same thing. Did you know Jerry Spain?

03-00:60:55

Smith: Yes, I played *many* jobs with him, and I consider him a friend.

Crawford: So in your view, that was obviously a good thing to have happen.

03-00:61:09

Smith: Well, yes. I think that segregation based on race, or color of one's skin, or nationality, it's bad, as far as I'm concerned. I think there are many colors under the rainbow. And you look outside, or look at the trees, look at the plants, look at the world. And it's not segregated on color.

Crawford: Let's talk about critics and your experiences.

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04-00:00:00

Smith: Ralph Gleason used to be a friend of mine. He was one of the first.

Crawford: Did you have a favorite critic?

04-00:00:29

Smith: I would say all of the news people—you could go back that far, Ralph Gleason. What's the other one?

Crawford: Elwood?

04-00:00:52

Smith: Elwood, Phil Elwood. All the people that have written at one time, something about me, have just, for some reason or other— And it's, from my point of view, it's all been favorable.

Crawford: Well, that's good.

04-00:01:14

Smith: Many other musicians feel that the writers have not done enough to state the case for jazz, period, being in their position, the writers being in their position. I know that Leonard Vucovich is one of those that feels [that way] and you could quote me. [laughs]

Crawford: *West Coast Jazz*, by Ted Gioia, you know the book?

04-00:01:58

Smith: I think I read some of it.

Crawford: You're in it quite prominently. He feels that the jazz scene here was not favorably reviewed here, that it was really overly criticized.

Well, let's go to San Francisco State, because you have a whole other life to talk about. When you came home and you got your teaching credentials.

04-00:02:24

Smith: Oh. After New York? Well, my principal at Burnett School when I was teaching there was an ex-Navy commander. And being in the Navy myself, having been in at the same time, you know, we hit it off well. I don't know whether or not our respective periods of time in the service had anything to do with it. But I know that he had a lot of respect for me, and I had a lot of respect for him. For the manner in which he approached his job as principal, and the manner in which he treated the staff, and the parents, and the teachers, as well as the children of staff and teachers, and the children, as I said.

Not only that, he seemed to be in my corner. He was somebody that really I could turn to. I had the strong feeling as long as I was with him—and I was out there for about a period of twelve years, I think, out at Hunters Point. And he was a motivator for me, in many ways.

Crawford: What was his name?

04-00:04:52

Smith:

Don Anderson. And he, I think, was the first to suggest that I think about going into administration. He knew that I was a very highly respected musician in San Francisco. So he knew how important music was to me. And I think that's one of the reasons why he told me that if I did go to New York, that I should take a year's leave, and should I make a choice to come back to San Francisco, I could come back to that school.

That, you know, was very satisfying to me, because I didn't feel like I was cutting off my nose or my legs to go to New York. There was always the possibility that I'd return. If I didn't make it there, I could come on back here. I was very happy at Burnett School, and could remain there.

And suggesting that I go into administration, when I did come back, so that I said, "Hey. You know, why not?" And so I went back, and I think I had a few years to do, more to add to the work that I had already done, and picked up my administrative credential, and started working toward administration, as such a thing. He was instrumental in seeing that I got started on the road. And I— [pause] Well, just leave that there. So I started, after I got my credential, my first appointment was to Lafayette School, as an assistant principal out there.

Crawford:

Where?

04-00:08:00

Smith:

That was in San Francisco. All my work was in San Francisco.

Crawford:

Lafayette School was where?

04-00:08:12

Smith:

36th and Anza. 36th or 46th. Anyway. It's on Anza, a couple blocks down the street. It's about three blocks, three or four blocks down the street from George Washington High School. I was there for a year or two. I'll have to check that out. And then I was given my own school, at Junipero Serra. And I'll check the dates. I get fuzzy in terms of dates. But I was there, I think, for about fourteen years. I'll have to check all that, get back to you on that.

Crawford:

And what was that school like? What were the problems that you had to deal with?

04-00:09:58

Smith:

Well— [pause] I don't know if I could really look at them as problems. It was a lower economic class neighborhood. There were projects across the street. There was a mixture—it was out in the Mission—of Europeans, Italians, heavily Hispanic, and blacks. And pretty much, you know, like a regular Mission District populace that attended the school. Blacks, I think, were certainly in the minority. And certainly in the minority as compared with Hunters Point, where I was just leaving.

But I felt very comfortable, in terms of dealing with the people. Because the projects across the street were integrated. They were integrated, to the extent that they were peopled by blacks, by Hispanics, by just about all the races. And the parents were very involved with the school, as well as the people that worked at the school. They lived in the neighborhood or were from the neighborhood. I'm talking about the cooks.

Crawford: That's important, isn't it?

04-00:12:37

Smith: The cooks, the people that took care of the lunchroom.

Crawford: The schools had music, they had drama.

04-00:12:53

Smith: Oh, yes, federal funds, yes. Well, they had *music*. This was an elementary school so—K-6.

Crawford: K-6. Oh, so no orchestra.

04-00:13:13

Smith: No. In fact, I think it was K-5. We had a bandleader, an instrumental teacher that came out and gave lessons to the kids that wanted to take music. And so to that extent, that was fine. But that also was cut out, as you know, when California went broke, you might say.

Crawford: When did those programs go out?

Smith: I forget. What was it, Prop 13? One of those propositions. And anyway, all the schools suffered from that. But I can't say that I had problems, any more than any administrator would have. I did have a problem with a teacher, who happened to be Filipino. And she called a kid a nigger, one of her kids. And that didn't go over quite well with his parents. And so that was one of the problems, in that particular case, with that particular teacher. But that wasn't [usual].

Crawford: How did you deal with that?

04-00:15:06

Smith: I documented everything that happened. I still have the records in my file at home, but I'd have to check on it.

Crawford: I'm sure you were a person of authority.

04-00:15:36

Smith: You know, I handled the situation to the extent that I certainly was not going to stand for a teacher, you know, speaking in that manner to a child. And I could certainly understand and be very sympathetic, in terms of the feelings of the parents—

Crawford: Did you see huge changes in fourteen years? In terms of your student body and funding and that sort of thing.

04-00:16:16

Smith: Not really. Not really. Kids, you know, have to be in school. You have strong teachers, you have weak teachers. The main thing is trying to keep the playing field as level as possible. You've got to have some connection with the community, in terms of going to the community, letting the community come to the school, letting the community know what kind of person you are, what your program is, what you're attempting to do in terms of education for their children.

I think you have to communicate fairness with the teachers, and leadership with the teachers. I firmly believe, and have stated many times, that in terms of the educational responsibilities, as it relates to the schools: if the school is having problems, the first place you would look at would be the administration of the school. If you've got strong administration, then you will have few problems. You're going to have problems regardless, but if you have a strong administration, that's where it all begins. You're either going to have a good school or a bad school, depending upon the leadership.

Crawford: I'm delighted to hear that the parents were involved, because we always found that difficult, raising our children here. There wasn't as much parental involvement as in my generation, we felt.

04-00:18:48

Smith: Yes. I think that that feeling, the need of parents to be involved with the school, that's the *most* important, I've *always* felt. And when I was a kid coming up, I feel that the schools that I attended had that kind of cooperation with the parents.

If you got in trouble at school, you would get in double trouble when you got home. Because Mom and Dad weren't going to stand for that. If we faulted a teacher or the principal or whatever, whoever was in charge of you at that time, whatever they said, that's it. That was the law, you know. So. But then somewhere along the line, parents started suing schools and [chuckles] the whole attitude changed. Not in *my* home town. I had gone by then, but—

Crawford: Did you have that in your school, when you were principal?

04-00:20:18

Smith: I think I had pretty good parent motivation, parent involvement at Burnett School. Not at Burnett School, at Junipero Serra School. I knew just about all my parents.

Crawford: How did you do that?

04-00:20:45

Smith: Go to homes—over a period of time you get to know the families, the kids, the sisters and brothers and so forth. And if need be, you go home, visit the home, and also picnics or outings and so forth. But main thing is that you've got to make the school a place where parents feel comfortable, visiting, coming in, and relating concerns that they have. Because everybody wants the same thing. The parent wants their child to be well educated, and that's what your job is as a teacher or an administrator, to see that that happens.

Crawford: Are you involved in the school at all now?

04-00:22:09

Smith: No. When I retired, I definitely retired. For a period, I— not acting as counselor, but I did some work at the school, downtown. But very minimal, counseling or advising, that kind of thing. But basically, when I turned my back, that was it.

Crawford: How about your own children? Did they go to schools where you were?

04-00:23:17

Smith: My daughter did. When the department first started integrating the schools, she was one of the kids that was sent out to Burnett School. I had just left or was in the last year or so. She went to fifth grade there, at Burnett. I knew the kids. In fact, I told one of the girls, I said, "Look out for my daughter." [they laugh] But, you know, as far as doing any significant work, not really.

Crawford: Talk about the rest of her education.

04-00:24:34

Smith: Who, my daughter? She went to--this is her down on Ocean Avenue. She went to public schools through elementary school. She went to junior high down at— What's the private school down at—across the street from City College?

Crawford: Lick-Wilmerding.

04-00:25:18

Smith: Yes. It was a very good educational experience for her. Took French.

Crawford: Very good school.

04-00:25:27

Smith: Took French as one of her subjects, with a *real* good French teacher, who took the kids to France. Arranged a tour over there, so that they could meet kids from France, as well, their age. And so she made friends with kids over there. And she still visits here friend that she made back in high school, I'm sure she does. But then she graduated from Lick-Wilmerding, and went to Washington, D.C., to Georgetown University.

Crawford: Oh, my. That's one of the toughest universities to get into, isn't it?

04-00:26:27

Smith: Yes. And fortunately, a judge who lived up the street from us, about four or five houses up, gave her a recommendation. And she went in [chuckles] with flying colors. It's funny, but she was on the board that recommended other students that wanted to come there. To Georgetown. So she was instrumental in returning the favor to a few other kids.

Crawford: Good! And she went to law school there, as well?

04-00:27:22

Smith: Yes.

Crawford: And now she's a U.N. attorney. That's pretty outstanding.

04-00:27:29

Smith: That's where she met her husband-to-be. He was from Vienna, and responsible for giving her her first work over there, in Vienna, at some law office. And one thing led to another. She got a job placement at the U.N.

Crawford: That's wonderful. And then you have a son.

04-00:28:03

Smith: Yes, he went to Catholic school, his high school here, Sacred Heart, down on—what is it? Downtown near Franklin.

Crawford: Yes.

04-00:28:20

Smith: And then he decided to follow his sister, and go back east. But he went to Baltimore, University of Baltimore, in Baltimore, and did his collegiate work there. So they both had eastern experiences, which his mother and I both wanted—I particularly—wanted them to have. You know, the eastern competition is a little different from out here. And I wanted them to experience it.

Crawford: Is your wife a Californian?

04-00:29:02

Smith: Yes, she was born here—

Crawford: She's a native.

04-00:29:03

Smith: Yes. We both went to [laughs] State. After I finished my tour of duty. I enjoyed being an administrator. I felt that I did a fairly good job of it. In fact, truthfully, I feel I did a *very* good job of it.

Crawford: Well, if you didn't have any more problems that what you've told me, you did do a good [Smith laughs] job!

04-00:29:59

Smith: Well, I think the teachers, you know, genuinely liked me, and we had a good relationship. The secretaries, as well. If you satisfy your needs, I think that you're comfortable enough to satisfy others' needs. If you're not comfortable in a job, people around you are going to know that you're not comfortable. You let them know, one way or another, that you're not happy. And if you're not happy with yourself, you're probably not happy with anybody around you.

Crawford: True. Well, let's go back to jazz for a little, and talk about the jazz scene today. What is it like? They keep trying to revive the Fillmore.

04-00:31:25

Smith: There is a move afoot next year to bring that about. One of my sons is working in that area. [Peter Fitzsimmons directs the, Jazz Heritage Center].[asides deleted]

04-00:33:41

Smith: Well, there's a move afoot to try to reestablish the Fillmore, the jazz side of the Fillmore, or to return some nice night spots to the Fillmore. I forget the name of the big club, I think the Chicago Club that wants to come out here.

Crawford: I read that the Blue Note was trying to—

04-00:34:36

Smith: The Blue Note—that's the one. The Blue Note is supposed to be involved in that. But that remains to be seen.

Crawford: What do you think? What are the chances?

04-00:34:54

Smith: Well, since we're off-camera—

Crawford: Oh, no, we are on camera.

04-00:35:00

Smith: Oh, now we're on camera. I think there's a very good chance that this may happen. Shortly, within the next year or two. And I hope it does, you know. The Fillmore used to be a very vital part of black existence in San Francisco. There used to be a *lot* of clubs out there, a lot of *black* clubs out there that brought a lot of recreation to the black populace of that area.

Crawford: What are the clubs now that are healthy? You're performing at Enrico's and Jazz at Pearls, others.

04-00:36:00

Smith:

Yes, but none out in the Fillmore. Well, there's, what is it? Rasselas is one. There are a couple of bars. But basically, nothing in the manner in which it did exist back in the forties and fifties. But there are, as I say, a few taverns, a few bars. Rasselas is one that has entertainment. And of course, the Fillmore Auditorium brings in some large group entertainment, on the corner of Geary and Fillmore. Suffice it to say, there are attempts being made to try to reestablish jazz, as such, in the Fillmore on a larger scale than it has been.

Crawford:

Talk about Jazz at Pearl's. I like that venue so much.

04-00:37:47

Smith:

Well, Pearl's was recently purchased from— The name comes from the lady, whose name was Pearl, who used to own the club. A Chinese lady. She used to own another club—I guess probably, she still does—in Chinatown, that used to be quite popular. An after-hours place—I remember going there myself in the early days. But anyway, she was the owner.

The club was not successful from a monetary point of view, I guess, and she decided to sell it. I don't know all the reasons, but she decided to sell it to the present owners. And they recently bought it. Kim Nalley and her husband Steve [Sheraton]. And they seem to be making a success of it.

A lot of different people appear nightly, myself included. I appear there on Tuesday nights, with her, Kim Nalley, who's a very excellent singer. And the crowds seem to be coming back. At least when I go down there, when I'm there, we usually have a very nice crowd. They have dinner and a show. Two shows. We perform at eight-thirty, the first show, and then another at ten-thirty. And people are enjoying themselves, and so far, they seem to be surviving.

Crawford:

That's been reopened about a year, hasn't it?

04-00:40:37

Smith:

I think approximately, yes. Approximately. I don't know if it's quite a year, but I'm sure it's no *more* than a year. They're very nice people, Steve and Kim. And they have a lot of friends, who come and bring others, that's the main thing.

Crawford:

That's great. And it's a young crowd, it strikes me.

04-00:41:15

Smith:

Relatively, yes. I would say yes. Twenties to fifties. A few over fifty. But it's a club that the group of people that come there are jazz lovers. And that's the main thing. She hires a variety of people. Just about anybody in San Francisco that *is* anybody, sooner or later, will be hired to work there on one of the nights of the week.

Crawford: What about a place like Moose's?

04-00:42:11

Smith: They have jazz.

Crawford: A trio or a duo.

04-00:42:13

Smith: Yes. But they don't have—I think, basically, their main attraction is the food that they sell. At least from my point of view. That's what it appears to me. They have a good bar, and they have a good restaurant, a good menu. And music is pretty much a background kind of thing.

Crawford: Yes. Unlike Jazz at Pearl's, where you have your own stage area.

04-00:42:54

Smith: Right. And you have performers, different performers almost every night. The performers that come in are producing a show, where the audience sits and listens and watches, while they are eating at Pearl's. But at Moose's, since the food is the main thing, the performers—usually a piano and bass, maybe occasionally a singer or something like that—that's not the main item.

People come down there to socialize. They come there to have dinner together, to have a drink together, et cetera. Moose is very well known, has been in that area; used to have a club across the street, for years. And now he's got this one, you know, for years.

Crawford: And that one, I think—I don't know what it's called now. Washington Square Bar & Grill—

04-00:44:29

Smith: Oh, the old one.

Crawford: I think they still have jazz, too.

04-00:44:33

Smith: They do. I think probably—Well, I shouldn't say, 'cause I don't visit either place that often. But I have performed at Moose's, maybe once or twice a year. I'm usually with somebody down there. But very seldom, if ever, at Washington Square Bar & Grill anymore. I used to drop in. A friend of mine, John Cooper, used to play piano over there, and I used to drop in. But he's no longer with us.

Crawford: Norma Teagarden played there for years, as well.

04-00:45:39

Smith: Yes, I think so, sure.

Crawford: Well, you toured a great deal. You have toured a great deal for the last, what, fifteen years or more?

04-00:45:49

Smith: I would say since I've been back in town, from New York. So that would be from the sixties.

Crawford: Now you're with Lavay Smith quite a bit.

04-00:46:09

Smith: Yes. Yes. And also, since my daughter has been living in Vienna, I go see her every summer, my wife and I, usually in the month of June. So over a period of time, I've become friends with some musicians over there. And so when I'm there during that month, I play over in Vienna. Usually a club by the name of Jazzland, which *is* a jazz club. And so I perform there, as well as some of the outlying cities around or just outside of Vienna, with other groups that I have met and that I've come to know, particularly--

Crawford: That's grand.

04-00:47:20

Smith: Yes. There's a lady by the name of Ellie Wright, who used to be married to Jay Wright. Not Jay Wright. Alto saxophone player that used to play with Dizzy Gillespie. [Leo Wright] Anyway, she used to be married to him, till he died, of course. But she's a singer, and I've been playing with her for, well, since I've been going over to see my daughter, vacationing over there. So that's a nice, you know, venue. I enjoy Pat Monk, playing with her, as well.

Crawford: I didn't ask you about influences, but maybe this is a good point to ask you who have been major influences on your playing.

04-00:48:29

Smith: Well, I've had a lot of influences on my playing over the years. The strongest influence was, I'd say, my family. I came up, grew up in a musical family. I think I mentioned my father was choir director. My mother was a pianist. My older cousin, who was about three or four years older than I, was a trumpet player, as well as a trombone player, in high school, and orchestra, just prior to my going to high school.

And so I used to watch him. He also played with a small jazz group in the town of Midland. And when he left town, I pretty much became the trumpet player for that particular small group. Or *with* that small group. So those guys, you know, impressed me, as well. As far as trumpet players, professional trumpet players, although I never saw him perform, but one of my uncles used to play with Fats Waller.

Crawford: Yes, you said so.

04-00:50:17

Smith: And then, of course, there would certainly be Louis Armstrong, who was one of the first big names that I heard. Also, Roy Eldridge, another trumpet player. Howard McGee, another player that I was impressed with as a kid. Certainly, Clark Terry. Buck Clayton. Harry “Sweets” Edison, who became a friend, as well as Clark.

Crawford: Really?

04-00:51:16

Smith: Clark and I were in the Navy together. In fact, I told you a big story about Clark.

Crawford: He really helped you out there.

04-00:51:24

Smith: Yes [they laugh] with the Honolulu thing. But Gerald Wilson, who used to play with Jimmie Lunceford’s band, he and I became very friends. And he was also in the Navy. I met him there. And—[pause] Well, that’s about—

Crawford: That’s a good list, right there.

04-00:51:52

Smith: I was going to say. [laughs] Oh, I could also add Clifford Brown. And Miles. But if I were to say—and of course, Dizzy Gillespie. But if I were to say, as far as patterning my style, the strongest influences on my playing, the people that I really tried to adapt to and incorporate some of their things, some of their style into my own playing, I would say probably first would be Harry “Sweets” Edison, Dizzy Gillespie, Clark Terry. [pause] Who else? Clifford Brown because I really liked him. And the later Miles, because I didn’t like Miles when he first started playing, with Charlie Parker. But the latter part of his career, I really liked him.

Crawford: What was it about that music that you didn’t like? When he was first playing.

Smith: Well, I think he lacked the experience. From what I understand, Charlie sort of took him under his wing, and taught him an awful lot. You could tell, when he first started, that his ideas—at least *I* felt that many of his ideas, when he first started playing with Bird, were quite immature. I think that the times that he spent with Parker were invaluable; that Parker really brought Miles out. *I* think, in *my* opinion. And his whole style, the more he played, the stronger and more professional—I don’t know if professional is the word, but the more together his solos were; the more his ideas—the more he was able to express and put his ideas into a solo. Became such that I was *very* impressed. And especially the things that he did with Gil Evans and the big band. So that’s—

Crawford: That’s your list.

04-00:55:36

Smith: Yes. He just, when he first started, he didn't impress me that much. Later on, he did impress me a lot.

Crawford: Can you say something about the differences in jazz instruments?

04-00:56:36

Smith: Well, a vibraphone is a percussion instrument, just as a piano is a percussion instrument. Saxophone has a reed employed to make the sound. A trumpet has a mouthpiece—or a trombone—which produces the sound. Changes the air column going through the horn.

The nature of the instrument itself naturally is going to determine the sound that is produced on it. And that in itself is going to produce wide variances of sound, and abilities to play it. As trumpet as opposed to a sax, opposed to a piano, each one is individually different. And so they're going to make demands on the player for different kinds of things.

A trumpet player is going to have to be concerned with his lips when he plays the trumpet. Piano player has a different set of needs, namely fingers, hands. A bass player, fingers. But if he doesn't play often enough, he's going to lose his calluses on his fingers, and it's going to be difficult for him to play, unless he plays continually.

Or not continually, but often. Same thing with a trumpet player. If he doesn't play often, his lips become soft, and he can't produce the sound that he would normally produce. So what I'm saying is that each instrument requires a different set of needs for the player to respond to.

Crawford: Physical needs, you mean.

04-00:59:42

Smith: Physical needs, I'm talking about, yes. To make a sound, to produce a sound, you need fingers and/or lip. You need control, breath control, in terms of wind instruments—the trumpet, the saxes, the baritone, the bass horns, et cetera. All of those, each instrument has its own set of problems, [chuckles] you might say, in terms of producing a sound consistently.

The bass player may be focused on melody, in terms of his ability to *play* a melody. If he takes a solo, he's thinking of playing a melody on each of those strings. So his demands, the instrument demands that he be able to play a melody on that, that's meaningful to the listener. But he makes that melody by plucking and by fingering the strings.

The saxophone doesn't pluck his instrument, but he has to know the fingering, and also control of the breath that he's playing through the horn. The same thing with a brass instrument. The brass instrument, playing through a

mouthpiece and also fingering the horn, pressing the valves down or moving the slide. That is another set of demands.

And I think that the psyche, the psychology of the instrument and/or the player has a lot to do with it, as well. Some people are more adapted to playing certain instruments. In other words, the ear may respond to certain sounds of a trumpet, as opposed to a sax.

Crawford: Our time is nearly finished. Thank you very much for the interview.

Smith: My pleasure.

[End of Interview]