

Regional Oral History Office
The Bancroft Library

University of California
Berkeley, California

EARL T. WATKINS: JAZZ DRUMMER AND UNION OFFICIAL

Interviews conducted by
Caroline Crawford
in 2003

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Earl Watkins
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INTERVIEW HISTORY—Earl T. Watkins

Earl Watkins was an obvious choice for the oral history series on jazz. Born and raised in San Francisco in the 1920s and 1930s, he served in the U.S. Navy and after the war returned to the vibrant jazz scene in the city.

Watkins had become a professional drummer at the age of 17, joining the then-segregated musicians union and playing gigs at Minnie's Can-Do Club in the Fillmore District. After the war he recorded with Wilbert Baranco, backed T-Bone Walker at Slim Jenkins' supper club in Oakland, and played in dozens of Fillmore clubs, the only clubs open to African Americans until the late 1940s.

In the oral history, Watkins remembers hearing such jazz greats as Dexter Gordon, Charles Mingus, Jerome Richardson, and Chet Baker, all San Francisco residents who sat in at Jimbo's Bop City and elsewhere. The Fillmore District had taken the place of the Barbary Coast, which had been closed down by the authorities before the war. In the late 1950s, the Fillmore was also shut down by redevelopment, a devastating blow to San Francisco's African American community.

Watkins was never an advocate of the jazz musicians known as "the moldy figs," even though he joined Bob Scobey's band at the Tin Angel and spent seven years in the late 1950s playing Dixieland with Earl Fatha' Hines. He preferred playing bebop in the house band at the famous Blackhawk, which was Dave Brubeck's San Francisco base, and at the Say When Club, the usual venue for Charlie Parker and Billie Holiday when in town. Of his working style he said, "You have to develop technique and have full control of your instrument, so that if you hear or see something you can play it...you know what beats fit and what is coming."

During his long career, Watkins worked to break the color barrier in the Bay Area along with Vernon and Eddie Alley, trumpeter Allen Smith, and labor leader Al Forbes. When the musicians unions merged in 1960 after the state attorney general threatened to sue all-white Local 6 for violating the Fair Employment Practices Act, Watkins was elected to serve on the board of directors. He was still working with the union and performing until his death in 2007 at the age of 87.

Two of the three interviews with Earl Watkins were conducted on the University of California campus in 2003. The third was a telephone interview. Mr. Watkins reviewed the transcript and made a few corrections. The oral history is part of a series featuring Dave Brubeck, John Handy, Allen Smith, Eddie Alley, and Norma Teagarden.

In the oral history Earl Watkins sums up his life as a series of blessings: "I'm blessed because I come from humble beginnings...losing my mother at fourteen and being boarded out and having to raise myself...I was twenty-two when I left home and got married and was on my own. What can I say? I'm still drumming, and even now my phone never stops ringing, because the musicians don't want to contact the bureaucracy—and I can still refer them."

The Regional Oral History Office was established in 1954 to augment through tape-recorded memoirs The Bancroft Library's materials on the history of California and the West. Copies of

all interviews are available for research use in The Bancroft Library and in the UCLA Department of Special Collections, and many are posted on The Bancroft Library's website. The office is under the direction of Richard Candida Smith, Director, and the administrative direction of Charles B. Faulhaber, Director of The Bancroft Library.

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Interview #1: September, 30, 2003

[Begin Audio File 1]

Crawford:

Let's start with your full name and birth date.

Watkins:

My name is Earl Watkins, Earl T. Watkins, Earl T. Watkins, Jr., Earl Thomas Watkins, Jr., full name. I was born in San Francisco, California, January 29, 1920. I was born in a house, a rooming house in the Western Addition. The exact location, it was at Sutter Street between Broderick and Baker Streets in San Francisco. That would be one block west of the Russian Center. If the Russian Center is still there, the house where I was born is still there.

In those days, the black community was very, very small, and our neighborhoods were fully integrated. Very few of the black families or African American families or colored families, very few had their own homes and so we lived in rooming houses. So the family would rent a large, large house, and they would rent out rooms.

Crawford:

Rooming with a private family.

Watkins:

I guess that was the norm say in 1920, you know. In reading different histories about the big cities: Chicago, New York, any of the big cities, rooming houses seemed to be the trend. From what I understand—I was told this by an elderly lady, who was a little girl when I was born. She was in the house when I was born. She said that my mother was in the room, the doctor came, and they heard this baby's cry, the birth cry, and when the doctor came out he was holding me in his arms or his hands. Of course, I couldn't remember that naturally, being newly born.

The first house I remember was a flat. We had a flat—my dad and mother and I—we lived in a flat on 1420 Geary Street in San Francisco. That's between Laguna and Octavia.

Crawford:

Still there?

Watkins:

The building is gone. It's now the site of a high-rise, senior assisted living facility. A very, very large, exclusive, expensive facility called the Sequoias.

Crawford:

Oh, I have played with Bread and Roses there.

Watkins:

Yes, the Sequoias. In front of that building there was a fireplug, and that fireplug, when I was growing up, it was my fire engine, it was my horse and buggy, it was my coach, you know, with the cowboys and Indians. I used to play on that fireplug when I was just a little kid, that I can remember.

Crawford:

How about the traffic on Geary?

Watkins:

Geary Street was a main thoroughfare. At the time it hadn't been widened, and you had the municipal lines. We had two streetcar lines in San Francisco, not counting the cable cars. You had the municipal, which was city-owned, and the Market Street, which was privately-owned. The municipal, they were all lettered cars; A, B, C, et cetera. The privately-owned Market Street, they were all numbers. The Geary Street was A, B, and C Municipal. Fillmore Street was 22 Market Street, their Market Street car barn was located on Turk and Fillmore.

Crawford:

You rode those lines. What did you have to pay?

Watkins:

We paid five cents, and you had excellent transportation. The A, B, and C took you all the way out to the beach, and [Playland] if you wanted to go to Playland, which at that time was the big entertainment center.

Playland at the beach, you had the shots and you had all the shooting galleries and then throwing the baseballs at the dolls, and even had a tank where you threw the balls and if you hit the target you dunked the person, and they had the tunnel of love, that's where you went through this tunnel, lights blinking on and off and little ghost figures popping up and out of the walls.

The tunnel of love they called it because what you did if you were spooning or courting or smooching, you would take the girlfriend and you would go through the tunnel because you had your privacy. Each car was a private car.

The Playland, you had a long slide that you slid down, and you had the barrel, a rotating barrel that you walked through, then there was a round table that spun around the circle and everyone would gather at the top and as they increased the speed, where it was very slippery and you would slide off, it was really fun. And that was the A, B, and C.

Now on the Sutter streetcar, they had the 1, 2, and 3 cars, and the 2 and 3 would take you out to the beach. The 1 might have, too. They went out Sutter Street and then they turned right at Fillmore, and one went up to Sacramento, and you went out Sacramento. Anyhow, you ended up at the Sutro Baths and the Sutro forest.

Crawford:

Oh, yes. When did the Sutro Baths close?

Watkins:

Well, you know they had several fires, and I can't give you the exact date. It was in 1942, early '42, I got married and moved to the East Bay and also I went into service. So although I was stationed at St. Mary's College, why most of my activities were in the East Bay there, so Sutro Baths had several fires and sometime after the war they finally closed it down.

Crawford:

While you were growing up it was in full swing?

Watkins:

While we were growing up, it was in full swing. I think they had seven different pools. Some of them were natural seawater, some were fresh water, some were heated, some were whatever the normal temperature was.

They had a huge Olympic-sized pool there that they would train. When I say Olympic, I wouldn't know about Olympic size, and Fleishhacker Pool was larger than Olympic size, but they had a large pool. At the Sutro Baths, unfortunately, we had discrimination. And at Sutro Baths, you'd go there if you were a minority, Asian, or colored, they would ask you for your health certificate. Well, that was just a ruse. So they were definitely segregated.

Crawford:

So you couldn't swim there?

Watkins:

You couldn't, except on special occasions. Now, our church would rent Sutro. They would rent it maybe on a Saturday night, or even on a weeknight, they would rent it after their regular business hours. They would rent it, and they would have a swimming party, and they would sell tickets and use it as a fundraiser. In a case like that, then it would be open. They would open to minorities, but during their regular course of business, they weren't open to minorities. It was unfortunate, but as I say, we'd go there.

They'd have dances also because they had a dance pavilion, and they would have dances. But our church would rent—and sometimes our social clerks would rent—but they would rent after

the regular business hours. Then you had on the opposite end, down where the Fleishhacker Zoo was located, you'd go south down the great highway until you got to Sloat Boulevard, and then they had the zoo there. Of course, they had streetcars that ran down Sloat Boulevard, so we had excellent streetcar transportation, both east and west and north and south, and so people didn't own cars.

Crawford:

Do you remember the time before the bridge was built?

Watkins:

Of course.

Crawford:

When you had the ferries?

Watkins:

Of course, ferries were the big thing. You had the ferries as passengers only, and then you had the automobile ferries, and then you had the combination automobile and passengers. What they would do: they'd have restaurants.

They had restaurants on this so you could get a snack, because it would take you, oh, maybe, twenty minutes or so to get across the bay. You had the Key System ferry lines, now they ran to Berkeley. You had a pier that started at the foot of University Avenue and went out into the bay and your Key System, which was yellow or gold, they would meet out on the pier.

We had the A train, which ran down in west Oakland and ended up on Twelfth Street and that's the train that we'd take from San Francisco to go to, I should say the ferry plus the train, to go to Sweets Ballroom to listen to the name bands, when we were teenagers. Then you had—

Crawford:

Where was Sweets?

Watkins:

Sweets Ballroom was located on Franklin between Fourteenth Street and Fifteenth Street, just east of Broadway, first block east of Broadway. And that's where you had your big bands, you had Sweets, McFaddens, you had the Persian Gardens which later became the Ali Baba. Then you had a social hall there where they would give dances. The new Sweets that was, I think that was McFaddens, and it was located next to Capwell's downtown.

Crawford:

That was the era of the big bands?

Watkins:

Oh, the big bands—the Depression hit around 1939, so I would say that our big band era— they had big bands prior to that—but really their golden era was, I would say, from about 1929, 1930 up until here even recently, because you had the Count Basie Orchestra before he passed.

We had the Duke Ellington Band before he passed, Buddy Rich's Band before he passed, Stan Kenton's Band before he passed, so I would say up until maybe—well, actually the Count Basie Orchestra is still going. Under other leadership, but they retain the Count Basie name.

So the big band era—plus the fact you have the Lincoln City Band in New York with Wynton Marsalis.

Crawford:

Didn't there come a time after the war when it was just hard financially to run the big bands?

Watkins:

During the war, you had the industries, the war industries, and so there was plenty of money, and you had the three shifts a day and people had to have entertainment.

So you could have a big band, a name band could come through and play our theaters, and the theaters would be packed morning, afternoon, evening, or if they did three shows or two shows, each show would be packed.

Crawford:

Even if it was morning, you would go.

Watkins:

Yes, you were looking for some place to go. So the big bands, they thrived, and this Bay Area, we were considered as the premier entertainment area for big bands. Lionel Hampton, he would come to the Oakland Auditorium and draw 7,500 people with just a few posters being put on the post.

Crawford:

You must have been there.

Watkins:

Oh I was there, oh heck, yeah. Every time a big band appeared, I was there.

Crawford:

Well, let's back up and talk about your parents.

Watkins:

My dad, Earl Watkins, Senior, and my mother, Susie Louise Watkins, her maiden name is Bynun. That was her maiden name. They were born in Alabama, Portland, Alabama. That's just outside, maybe forty miles or so outside of Birmingham.

My grandfather on my mother's side, he was a preacher, and so my mother had the advantage of an education and musical training. She played the piano, classically trained, and also she would play the pop tunes from sheet music, and we would always hear the piano in our house. We had a bench full of sheet music.

Crawford:

So you grew up hearing a lot of music at home. Your father was musical, too?

Watkins:

My father, the grandparents on my father's side, they owned land. They owned acreage, and they would provide seed and fertilizer, and then the neighbors, they would sharecrop. When they would plant whatever products they would produce and sell, why, after all the expenses, they would split the money with the people that had done the labor. Although unfortunately, I never saw the grandparents on my mother's side. But on my father's side, my grandmother came out here, I got to see her, and I got to see two of my aunts.

Crawford:

Were they musical, grandmother and aunts?

Watkins:

No. My dad played the ukulele, and he would sing and at the time when I was growing up, you see, that was your big entertainment. It was in the homes, the community was—well, it was pretty small by comparison.

Crawford:

You said it was fully integrated in your community.

Watkins:

Yes, fully integrated. But with the black community everyone knew one another, if you didn't know the person you'd seen on the street, you were nodding acquaintances. Of course all your people in your church, you knew. And when the churches would get together and have their various joint meetings and joint conferences, why, you'd get to know the people, and you knew everybody.

Crawford:

And you spent a lot of time in church?

Watkins:

I was in the junior choir. We went to Sunday school. Of course I was in the junior choir, and we sang.

Crawford:

What was the church?

Watkins:

I was at the AME Zion, African Methodist Episcopal Zion. Our church was located on Geary and Webster Streets, and the pastor was Reverend McGruder, and her son was Steve McGruder, had a beautiful voice, he sang in the choir. Two daughters, they both sang. They sang duets, and they sang together. As a matter of fact, they were excellent singers. At one time, it was rumored that the Jimmie Lunceford Orchestra wanted to take them on the road with them.

Crawford:

And they sang in the church?

Watkins:

They sang in the church, and they would sing outside of the church for special occasions. Their songs mainly had religious overtones.

Crawford:

Would you say gospel music?

Watkins:

More like gospel songs. "Ain't gonna study war, no more." And then Nellie McGruder was adopted, she was another daughter. And our church organist—what was her name--was it Mrs. Love? I can't remember for sure, but I think it was Mrs. Love. She played the organ, and she rehearsed the choir. We would start—oh, we would do a Christmas program and then right after the Christmas program, we'd start rehearsing for Easter, and what would we do? Oh, sometimes I have a senior moment.

Anyhow we would start rehearsing for Easter and, of course, we would sing in harmony. She would teach us all, we'd learn by rote because we didn't read music, but the lyrics, and we all had good ears.

And good voices, and she would teach us harmony. So we would do an Easter program, and of course, the Christmas program we'd do. Then of course, we would sing—the junior choir—we'd sing in church, and then the senior choir, they would do the evening performance, and we would do the morning sermon, we would sing. Of course at that time, every household practically had a piano. See, a piano was a big thing, and many of the homes had phonographs.

Crawford:

I was going to ask you about that.

Watkins:

We were lucky. We had first a windup, and then we had an electric phonograph. And of course, we had records. We had records of Paul Whiteman and Amos & Andy and Fletcher Henderson. I don't recall any Don Redman, and we would listen to music.

Crawford:

At night you would listen to the radio, listen to music?

Watkins:

In the evening we would listen to music. We had our Blue Monday Jamboree here in San Francisco, that was at the radio station, I think it was KFRC. They were located at the Don Lee Cadillac agency. They were located on the top floor of their building, and Meredith Willson—he was the musical director before he went to Hollywood—and you had many of our local artists playing there because all of our radio stations had live musicians performing. They didn't have dj's or record programs.

You had live people, and then all of our schools had music programs and that was every day you had music classes, every day. You'd have either singing or instrumental. They supplied instruments, and the high schools, especially in high schools, many of our fellows who naturally went on to become maybe big names in the jazz field, they attended our public school system and had private lessons afterwards.

Jerome Richardson was one of our fellows here and was a product of the Berkeley schools, Oakland and Berkeley schools, and later San Francisco State. Then after that we all were in the navy together at St. Mary's College in the Navy Preflight School.

Crawford:

Where did you go to school? To elementary and—

Watkins:

The first school was Henry Durant, and then they moved us to Raphael Weill out in the Western Addition, we were one of the first classes—I was in the first class to attend the school, that was around 1927.

Crawford:

Is that Will—W-I-L-L?

Watkins:

W-E-I-L-L. I think it was Weill. It was located in the Western Addition. It was just off of Geary, I think it was either between O'Farrell and Ellis and coming up a little further would be Buchanan Street.

Crawford:

You walked to school?

Watkins:

Oh yeah, sure of course, because I was right there. The Henry Durant, that was on Turk Street, Turk near Webster, and it was one of the old brick buildings with the potbellied stove [laughs], and of course when they built Raphael Weill, they moved us and they decommissioned that school. The building is long gone but—and then from there I went to John Swett Junior High School, and I was supposed to go to Commerce High, but I took my transcripts and I went over to Galileo High School, and I enrolled in Galileo High. It's still there—on Van Ness and Bay.

Crawford:

What was that like?

Watkins:

It was—we had mainly Italian because of its location, we had Chinese because of the location, and we had a few colored families that were around the Marina on Union Street and then we had Pacific Avenue. We had some colored families.

When I first started there, I lived at Bush and—was it Scott? No, no, I lived at 6092 Geary Street, Geary and Webster, and my mother passed away. Then of course my dad broke up the place, and I was boarded out.

Crawford:

What was your father's occupation?

Watkins:

He was a chauffeur, which as considered to be an excellent occupation at that time. My dad was a chauffeur. When he was in Alabama, the family sent him to a vocational school in Tennessee and that was the beginning of the college system down there.

Crawford:

Yes.

Watkins:

It was a vocational school of the South at the time.

Crawford:

And what did he study?

Watkins:

I think he studied automotive engineering because he was—not only was he a chauffeur, he knew something about maintenance on cars. And so my dad, he came out to California in World War I around 1917, and he was stationed on the border of Mexico. At that time the climate out here was so different, I mean the social climate was so different from Alabama.

Crawford:

Much more free.

Watkins:

Oh, yes. Even though there was a lot of discrimination, it wasn't to that degree as it was in the South. And so my dad was so taken by the environment and everything out here that when he was released from service, he went out to Alabama, married my mother and brought her out here.

Crawford:

Childhood sweethearts?

Watkins:

Yes, brought her out here.

Crawford:

How did she adapt?

Watkins:

Oh, she adapted well. She adapted well. Of course they always kept in touch with family. They would phone and write and on holiday we would receive packages with cakes and cookies and home-cooked goodies on all the holidays.

They would communicate by phone and writing back and forth. I didn't have any other relatives. Well, my uncle, my uncle Bluit, he came out here, and he settled here. But the rest of the family, my aunts, my three aunts, they ended up in Birmingham, Alabama. The oldest aunt, my aunt Louise, she became a teacher, and it seems like from what I gather and from what I was told, in the old days like that, early 1900s.

See, my dad was born in 1890s. So in the early 1900s, the older kids if they were very bright, they would take care of the younger kids and maybe even try to teach them if the older kids had a chance to go to school. And my aunt, I think, she started out teaching younger kids, and then gradually she ended up in the school system down there. And then of course, she always took classes. Every summer she took classes and she was—well, her thing was education.

But in the South that seemed to be the criteria for black families because they were fresh out of slavery, many of them. Slavery ended when 1860s? So 1890s, that's only thirty years and in spite of the climate down there, which was to try to keep the colored population uneducated, keep them down, why, they did set up black colleges where they had that separate-but-equal thing, you know, segregated educational system. [Plessy v. Ferguson, U.S. Supreme Court, 1896]

But the colored teachers were really dedicated and colored families were—their emphasis was around education, educate their kids. And so my aunt, that was her big thing. The few times that she came out here and I got to see her, see, she was married to her husband. He ran on the railroad—I don't know if he was a dining car waiter or a Pullman car porter, but that entitled her to transportation so she came out here. She was out here maybe about three different times. After my father died, she was out here, she came out here. He went into a coma in 1969—he had emphysema because he smoked like a chimney—that was the last time I saw her.

I saw her about three times, and I noticed that her emphasis was always education. She would talk about the schools. She worked right up the ladder, and she retired. She was just short of a hundred when she died, so I guess she retired probably in her late sixties or early seventies, so she had some thirty years of retirement and still took classes.

She would write, and I'd talk to her on the telephone. She would brag about Birmingham. They had their symphony, and she would talk about all the cultural events they had down there because when they finally got through all that stuff in the sixties, and they started to integrate why, she would go to the various cultural events that they had down there. And she would brag on the telephone and also by mail about their symphony and the theater that they had down there.

Crawford:

She was your father's sister.

Watkins:

Yes, yes, my father's sister. Aunt Louise.

Crawford:

And you had a sister?

Watkins:

I am an only child.

Crawford:

When your mother died, your father just felt that he couldn't raise you by himself?

Watkins:

Well, see, my dad unfortunately, like so many Southern men, a lot of black men—I don't know whether they pattern themselves after your Southern intelligentsia—but a lot of these men, they were into drinking, gambling, and womanizing. That's part of the history down there. It didn't start there, you know, you had all the European culture, everywhere.

But my dad, unfortunately, he tried to gamble, work and gamble. So I think that probably, I hate to say it, but I was boarded out. And so, he broke up the house and sold all the furniture and my mother's piano and everything. I wouldn't see him for weeks, I practically raised myself. I knew where he was because we had a couple of gambling houses. And I always knew where he was when he wasn't at work.

Crawford:

He was gambling in San Francisco?

Watkins:

Trying to gamble, because San Francisco at one time was pretty wide open. It was no secret, you had bookie places all over the place, and then you had out-and-out gambling houses.

Crawford:

How old were you at this point? When your mother died.

Watkins:

I was fourteen, when my mother died, 1934. She died in the month of June. So we stayed at the house, I guess, maybe for six months or so and then after that I was boarded out.

The first person was a Mrs. McFarland. Well, first my dad, he moved a fellow, Mr. Atkinson—he had several boys—and my dad moved him and his boys in the house because Mr. Atkinson was going to cook, and since he was taking care of his boys, he was going to take care of me, but

that didn't work out. And then there was a Mrs. McFarland, she was from the West Indies, and she had rooms for rent. And my dad, I was boarded out to her.

Crawford:

Did your dad give you some pocket money?

Watkins:

No.

Crawford:

You were working?

Watkins:

Oh, yes. Selling papers, and we did different things. Well, really, when I was seven years old, I used to sell papers on the corner of Fillmore and Golden Gate, in front of Bick's Drugstore Store.

Crawford:

Do you remember the merchants in the Western Addition then?

Watkins:

Oh, the merchants. The Western Addition, Fillmore Street was the big street, the main street, starting, oh, say, McAllister and going all the way up to, say, California Street. And then there were a few fringe businesses above California, but that was mainly where most of the business was taken care of.

You had, on the corner of Geary and Fillmore, the roller-skating rink,, which is now the Fillmore West, but that was a rink when I was growing up. And Eddie Fitzpatrick and Dick Jurgins and oh, there were some of the big bands that played there.

As I said, it was segregated. But as kids in the daytime when the bands were rehearsing, we would slip in the front door and peek over the top of the stairs and watch the bands as they rehearsed.

Crawford:

You couldn't go to regular performances?

Watkins:

No, no, no, they were segregated, same with most of the restaurants on Fillmore Street. Japanese restaurants were open to you. Even the Chinese restaurants, they wouldn't cater to colored. I

think they were afraid of alienating their white clientele, Chinatown the same thing, same thing with the hotels.

If you were a person of color, you couldn't rent. The Japanese would rent to you, they were our friends, Filipinos too. We would go to their pool halls and shoot pool as teenagers. But the Fillmore, it was thriving. You had grocery stores, greengrocers, butchers, shops, fish markets.

Crawford:

There were some kosher stores there, weren't there?

Watkins:

The Jewish community—McAllister and Fillmore and up and down McAllister, that's where you had most of the Jewish community, where there were kosher grocery stores, kosher green markets, meat markets. And going toward downtown, you had secondhand stores, furniture stores.

McAllister Street, that was it. And then you had a Hebrew Institute on Fulton Street, Fulton, near Webster and Buchanan. Our Jewish kids, when they would go to regular school, from there they would go to Hebrew school. Of course, then the Japanese kids from the regular school, they would go to their Japanese school.

Crawford:

Where was the Japanese community? Was it where it is today?

Watkins:

The Japanese, yes. That was where it is today. It wasn't quite as large, and it wasn't an area, it wasn't quite that large, but mainly, Post Street, from, say, Buchanan Street up, Buchanan, Laguna, even Webster Street. That was your Japanese Community. They had grocery stores, they had doctors, dentists, clothing, they had some restaurants and some bars.

Then during the war, when they sent them to relocation camps—why, the black community had just exploded because the defense industries, particularly Kaiser. They were bringing in people from the Southern states and from the Bible Belt.

The Fillmore district, it exploded because, see, people coming from the southern states who had relatives, why, they came to the Fillmore district where their relatives were. And the white community, many of them were very fearful of a Japanese invasion. You know we were weak on geography and with Pearl Harbor.

Also the fact that some of the Japanese mini-sub, some of them surfaced on the coast down in southern California and up around Oregon. And they would send what they call balloons with the propaganda attached, and maybe they would send balloons, propaganda balloons, from their sub range.

A lot of the whites in the community were very fearful of being invaded, plus the fact recruiting was on. So many of the white families were leaving because of going into service and many of them were just frightened.

So that left a lot of the housing, housing opened up, in the Western Addition in particular. For the war work, so with the people coming from the South, there were businessmen, black businessmen, because in the South they had their own businesses. The white community, white businesses were closed to colored people in the South. People came here; they opened night clubs, restaurants. They had all sorts of different kinds of shops, beauty shops, barber shops, convenience shops, you had all sorts of—just an explosion of black businesses.

Crawford:

How about the black music clubs?

Watkins:

That's right, you had night clubs and the jazz clubs. They opened—it was almost overnight. As I said I was away—but when I would come to San Francisco—stationed at St. Mary's College, and we were on duty many times at night playing, but what happened, we would come over here, and the Fillmore just blossomed.

You had the Blue Mirror down on lower Fillmore Street. I think it was the Ebony Plaza across the street, the hotel. They had music in their basement area, they had a lounge there. You had the Booker T. Washington Hotel, which had been the Edison Hotel prior to the war. And that was taken over by [someone who] opened it up to black clientele and they opened up their lounge and that was on Ellis just off of Fillmore.

Then you're going up the street even further, you had the Long Bar, which was located on Fillmore between Post and Sutter. They had entertainment, and between Sutter and Post, you had the Havana Club, which was opened by a fellow named Delifus . Julius Delifus, he came from Holland.

[End Audio File 1]

[Begin Audio File 2]

Crawford:

Today I wanted to back up a little bit and talk about school, Galileo High and so on, and find out who your mentors were. Was there anybody who influenced you?

Watkins:

Well, yes. As I was telling you, we all had pianos, so all of we kids, we were exposed to music. We had all these musicals, all the movies. During that time, that was the big entertainment. You had radio, and so you had, oh, the Camel Caravan with the Benny Goodman Orchestra, bands

broadcasting from the Grand Terrace, the Meadowbrook Ballroom, and also the Panther Room in Chicago.

I have forgotten the name of the hotel where they had the Panther Room—they would have big bands; you would have the Benny Goodman Band. They had the Count Basie Orchestra there—they integrated it—had the Count Basie Orchestra.

Then you would get from New York—I remember the famous story, listening to the Count Basie Band broadcast from the famous store, and the guest singer for that week was Billie Holiday. Can you imagine listening to something like that as a kid? If only we had had recording instruments, recording—

Crawford:

You really did because you had the radio.

Watkins:

Yes, so we were exposed to music just constantly.

Crawford:

And how about school, was there a school program?

Watkins:

Each school had a music program. Every day there was a music program. You had music every day, that was one of your classes.

Crawford:

You played instruments, or you listened?

Watkins:

We would study; we would have a little history about the classical artists, and then we would do singing, and then we would listen. We would sing the popular tunes, and then during the day and at various times, they would have a rally, and you would go down to the main auditorium and they would play—over the PA system—they would play the current hits of the day, or they would play classical music, or they would play operas. And so we had all this exposure.

Crawford:

In school?

Watkins:

In school, John Swett Junior High, that's what we did, and so we had exposure. Then of course you had, when you went to high school, then you had band. If you took up band, then and also in junior high—I believe in junior high they had instruments—we had band. But I know in high school we did.

So if you went to high school, and if you were taking private lessons, or even if you had some talent, you could go to school and they would teach you.

Also with the movies, you had all these movies. I remember the big broadcast of 1936 or 1937, or '36 or '35, you had the Hollywood Hotel, the big broadcast [from] Hollywood Hotel. You had the Benny Goodman Orchestra with Gene Krupa playing that famous solo "Sing, Sing, Sing" where he did all the tom-tom work.

Crawford:

That impressed you, as a coming-up drummer.

Watkins:

Oh yes, and what happened, where I really got started, when I was very young I went to a teenage dance. During the depression, you had the WPA.

Crawford:

Works Progress Administration.

Watkins:

Works Progress, yes. They had various types of projects. And one of them was the music project, and they hired musicians because there was no work.

So they had musicians, and I think it was either the Curran Theatre or the Geary, they had the music project. They would have musicians, plus the fact they would have people who were singers and dancers and they would send them out into the community. They would send bands to play for youth teenage dances or for youth groups or for entertainment, concerts.

I can recall there was a house on Sacramento Street. It was a large house, a rooming house, and this colored family, they lived there. They had this large living room, and a couple of days of the week the WPA would send out these people, and they would teach us the kids' routines.

We had a school's day routine, and then we had another routine, and they would teach you. You would do songs and dances. You had dance routines, and you had song routines. We had the ensemble, the chorus dance routine, and then you had individuals that would do a tap dance or whatever they did. And we put on the show as a matter of fact. We put on a show this was, oh God, in the thirties, early or mid-thirties.

They put on the show at the veteran's building, the colored veterans of foreign war, they put on a show, and we kids, we did our routine and then the adults, they did their routine, and then they had a dance. At the dance was the orchestra that they featured—it was an out-of-town band—was the Fletcher Henderson Orchestra. Of course I was so young at the time, maybe I was thirteen or so, probably they had Roy Eldridge and Ben Webster.

I remember the drummer's name was Pete Suggs and subsequently I've seen his name on records with the Fletcher Henderson Orchestra, but that was your program. So that was the exposure that we had. We were just exposed to that.

And then of course, our barber, one of our barbers, Mr. Thompson, had been a veteran in WWI and he had served in the cavalry band in Kansas. In his basement, he had all this music and all these musical instruments, so he started a teenage band.

Well anyhow, let me backtrack from that, when I was talking about the WPA. I guess I was maybe about fifteen years old, and there was a teenage dance that they were having at our community center. So one of these bands came out to play, and I noticed the drummer. He had the foot going with one rhythm, the left foot going with another rhythm and each hand doing a different rhythm, and I was fascinated with his coordination, how he could keep the time and each foot was doing something different, each hand was doing something different. I asked him, "How could you do all these things—?"

Crawford:

You hadn't played the drums at all by then?

Watkins:

Oh, no, I hadn't played. I was interested because I was fascinated by Gene Krupa. I was beating on pots and pans in the house.

Crawford:

Were you playing piano?

Watkins:

My mother played the piano, and she wanted to teach me, but I rebelled because I wanted to go out and play. But all the kids, we would try to play chopsticks, and she did get me in for a few lessons. So we would try to fake it on the piano. We would all play little things that kids play, teenagers play. I had all this exposure, but I was fascinated by the listening to drums especially Gene Krupa and Chick Webb on KRE. We had a station KRE that use to play jazz, and one section where they would play the colored bands, Andy Kirk, Lunceford, Chick Webb, Count Basie—that's where I first heard Count Basie—Duke Ellington.

Then they had another segment where they would play Dixieland. They would play the Frisco Jazz Band and Turk Murphy and Bob Scobey and Lu Watters.

Crawford:

You played with Bob Scobey, didn't you?

Watkins:

I did, yes, in later years. They would have maybe Lu Watters Band. See, Lu Watters, he was a big Dixieland name around here going back to the thirties.

Anyhow, I went to this teenage dance where I asked the drummer, I said, "How can you do that?" He said, "Well, would you like to learn?" It turned out he was a doorman down on Pacific Avenue with a split shift.

Crawford:

What was his name?

Watkins:

His name was John Randolph, and he had a band called Randy's Rhythm Ramblers. He lived very close to my house; he lived on Webster between Geary and O'Farrell, and so he said, "You come to my house."

He gave me a time during his two-hour split, between his split shift, and he says,

"Let's see if you're really serious." So I went down, he had this electric phonograph, and he had the Benny Goodman Trio and Quartet Record with Gene Krupa and Teddy Wilson and Lionel Hampton, and he put a record on and he said, "Listen to this, you listen to what the drummer is doing and see if you can copy what he's doing."

Well, I listened, and I figured out what he was doing. It was Gene Krupa, and at that time it was "Tea for Two," which was a very simple song. You know, the melody was very simple, and he was just keeping time with the wire brushes so I listened to him, and I figured out how he must be doing it.

Well, he figured out that I must have some kind of talent because I could keep the time, every beat. So that's how I started. I bought a practice pad from him, some Drew sticks, and then he told me about a book to buy.

Mr. Thompson, the barber, the one that had been in the cavalry band, he formed this teenage band so they needed a drummer, and I went up there and then Mr. Thompson tried to help me and show me a little bit. Then there was a fellow named James Brown, played the bass, Jimmy Brown. He was taking lessons from Vernon Alley at the time, and he formed a band and they needed a drummer so they recruited me. He belonged to the union, and the fellows with him they all belonged to the union.

Crawford:

This was in the mid-thirties?

Watkins:

Yes, around 1936, '37. They told me I had to join the union, so we phoned up the home of the business agent, Alex Forbes. He was secretary/treasurer of the business section of the then segregated local, the subsidiary of local 6. And so he came by my house, and I gave him five dollars, and then every time I would see him on the street, he would say something, and then I gave him a dollar or two.

Crawford:

Dues?

Watkins:

Yes, that was towards my initiation fee. I was making payments on the joining fee, and also they were towards my quarterly dues. Finally, eventually, I got the card paid up. [laughs]

But, so anyhow, with the Jimmy Brown band, James Brown, his mother-in-law, she lived in Stockton. She was a hair stylist, Madam—we all called her Madam--and she had a beauty parlor.

She used to promote dances, and she would hire our band. So we would go to Stockton, and we would play at the Growers Hall. In the band we had Al Levy on the guitar.

There's a book out on the Barbary Coast--it's mainly the background and history by Sid LeProtti, who was a pianist who played on the Barbary Coast. He was a black pianist, and he later ended up in Walnut Creek.

So Al Levy played with his band, and Levy came from that late 1920s era. He was playing guitar with the Jimmy Brown Band, the two Godfrey brothers each played trumpet. They were from Oakland and they were like the two guys that played in church and also they played any time someone formed a band because they read music, and they were good, especially Gene, he was a good improviser. And we had Jimmy Brown, then we had various piano players—what was his name? We had various piano players, Jimmy Brown on the bass, and George Neely was one of our saxophone players, Melvin Parks was another one of our saxophone players.

Crawford:

Was Saunders King involved with that?

Watkins:

Not with our band. Saunders, now that's another story. See Saunders, he was considered to be part of our entertainment elite. Saunders was one of the first black artists to appear on radio in the Bay Area. They had a gospel singing group, and they had a program, a radio program. And so Saunders, oh man, he played guitar and piano, and he was raised in the church. He had a

gorgeous voice. See Wesley Peoples and Eddie Alley, Vernon's brother, they had formed a band, a big band—

Crawford:

So you knew the Alleys then?

00:15:34

Watkins:

Oh, yeah. As I said, before—

Crawford:

How is Vernon Alley?

Watkins:

Vernon Alley is an amputee, he lost part of his left leg and his left foot, and he is living in an assisted living facility, Coventry Park. 1550 Sutter Street.

Crawford:

He wrote me that he wanted to do an oral history, but I know he has been ill.

Watkins:

You can look him up in the phonebook. Vernon Alley, he still retains the same phone number he's had all these years.

Watkins:

Anyhow, they found this band, Vernon Alley, and Eddie Alley, and Wesley Peoples, and they recruited Vernon on the bass. They had a band, Wesley played the piano, sax and piano. It was a good band, black band. I guess it was around eight or ten pieces, and Wesley, unfortunately, came down with tuberculosis.

And when he passed, why then, they got Ernie Lewis to play piano. So they needed a name, so they recruited Saunders King, and so the band—there was a booking agent. They had a booking agent, and they booked the band. They would play up in Napa. I think they may have even gone as far as—I'm not sure if they went as far as Seattle or not.

But anyhow, then Saunders from working with the singing group, he became a band leader. Then Jack's Tavern—that was one of our clubs, pretty famous in the history of the black clubs—they hired Saunders to play there, and I think he had a quartet, maybe even a quintet. Herb Caen by then had come to San Francisco from Sacramento, and he had this column, and Herb started

going around to the different jazz clubs. Herb came down into the Fillmore district, into the black community, and went to Jack's, and gave Jack's and Saunders a plug.

Then suddenly it became a black and white, or black and tan and there were more white people than colored people attending it. So the business boomed, you know, because Saunders, their band, they were playing in the back room and the bar was in the front.

Then around the corner, you had the Club Alabam and Wilbert Baranco, and by then Vernon was playing with Wilbert, they were playing at the Club Alabam. So they had a little strip, and then a little later the Town Club opened in the same block as Jack's, and you had Pat Patterson and Ed Hammon, and the two of them playing bass and piano. Then they added a couple horns and guitar, so you had the beginnings of a strip. Of course, that's 1939, 1940, before the war. Then of course when the war came, the energy of the clubs blossomed; they exploded.

Anyhow, that's the story with Saunders. Then of course Saunders went on to record. He had a beautiful voice. The blues community, they adopted him. They tried to identify him as a blues singer, but Saunders had a gorgeous voice. He could make you cry with a ballad. He would take [sings], "Why was I born? Why am I living?" and, oh, you would just get goose pimples. And then he had—

Crawford:

Recorded?

Watkins:

That's one of his recordings. Then Saunders ended up with a quintet, so he traveled all up north, up in Seattle, Portland, down in Los Angeles. He played Billy Berg's, he played the Radio Room, then he went through the South, he was in Chicago. See, he recruited, Johnny Cooper. Johnny Cooper joined his band, Bernard Peters on drums, Joe Holder was the first bass player, then later they had Doug Carnard, Lawrence Kado, they had different bass players. And Cedric Hayward played piano after Johnny Cooper left. But Johnny Cooper was with him and Saunders, of course, playing the guitar and singing. They played all over. They had an agent, and Saunders was very big.

Well, what happened? He had some kind of problems, but then, Saunders, he was—I can remember in as late as 1948 and even later, Saunders was still big. Then after the war, when the club scene started to fade away, Saunders later, he did a lot of work down in Mountain View. Tommy Kahn was working with him down in Mountain View. He worked there a lot then. He sort of just started working mainly in the church.

As a matter of fact, Saunders when they did that photo, that photo that that they took on the steps of the City Hall—

Crawford:

Yes, I have that.

Watkins:

Saunders is in that. He was in his nineties by then and in a wheel chair. He was on the far right.

Crawford:

Yes, I have that in my file. You mentioned that he went back to the church. Did you stay in the church after your mother passed?

Watkins:

Yeah, I would go to church, we would go to church. Yeah, I would go to church every Sunday. Sunday morning I would go to church and go to Sunday school and sing in the choir. Although I was boarded out, Mrs. McFarland—she was actually, she was from the West Indies, she considered herself to be a “British subject”. [laughs] She had the picture of the queen in her living room.

Crawford:

Oh, of course she did.

Watkins:

Oh, over the piano, and all that stuff. But—

Crawford:

She was the choir director?

Watkins:

No, no. The choir director, I think, was Mrs. Love. I think that was her name. No, Mrs. McFarland, she didn't go to our church. She didn't go to any of the American churches. When we were kids we would go, we'd go on our own.

Crawford:

You liked it, it was still part of your—

Watkins:

Well, it was part of the culture, and you just went. You just went just like you went to school, you went to church.

Crawford:

Who most influenced you up to that point in your life?

Watkins:

Well, of course my mother, you know, before she passed, up until the time she passed. She was the major influence. My dad was always working, and when he wasn't working, I didn't know it at the time, he would be trying to gamble. He would be in the gambling houses. He was just—they say it's a disease, and I think so.

Crawford:

Kind of an addiction.

Watkins:

Yes.

Crawford:

Well, I know that you must have gotten over to the blues scene over in Oakland.

Watkins:

Well, yes and no. Let's see, I am ahead of myself. I mentioned Mr. Thompson, the barber that I mentioned, Jimmy Brown, and then what happened? When I was in his band, yes, then we would have our union meetings, and then when the war started—by then I was playing with Saunders King, his drummer—see, his drummer was working at this little place called the Drum Club just around the corner from that musician's union on Turk Street, Turk and Jones. When Saunders would get a gig, his drummer would take off, I would substitute for his drummer and play with the piano player, named Murphy at the Drum Club. Also, I would play with Pat Patterson, another pianist, very excellent pianist, and whenever he would get a gig, he would use me on drums. Then of course, I played with Jimmy Brown's band. Then New Year's Eve, I think it was '37 or '38 we played up in Vallejo at the Casa de Vallejo—I think that was the name of it—we played New Years Eve. We had about eight or nine pieces. And so I was just starting to play around.

Of course then during the war when Pearl Harbor happened—see before the war, the services were segregated. If you were in the army, you were quartermaster corps. You drove a truck and did menial stuff. If you were in the navy, you were in the stewardcy department, and that meant you were in the kitchen and serving officers and all that. So when the Pearl Harbor came, while this fellow named Dorie Miller, he was not a cook, but he was somehow a kitchen helper or something. He grabbed a machine gun and started to shoot, so there was a poster showing him shooting at the Japanese planes and so that poster was shown nationally and was a recruiting tool. So the navy sent out a chief petty officer to our union meeting. And what he did, he said that they were recruiting black musicians to serve shore duty at the various naval bases, naval air bases.

Crawford:

What year was this?

Watkins:

Nineteen forty-two, mid-'42. Naturally I was 1A in service, and I was married with one child. What happened with me, I enlisted along with most of the fellows out of our union. Those that were engaged in defense work, they could get deferments depending on what they did, but I was working at the naval supply depot. I started to work in 1939 at Mare Island, then transferred down to Pier 56 over in San Francisco, and then from there I transferred over to a navy supply depot in Oakland, living in Berkeley, that was an easier commute.

Crawford:

So that was your first work of that sort?

Watkins:

Well, no. Growing up I had done all sorts of stuff.

Crawford:

But I meant full-time.

Watkins:

Oh yeah, full-time. Full-time, it was civil service. I worked civil service. I was a kitchen helper at Letterman General Hospital.

Crawford:

In the Presidio?

Watkins:

Yes, I was nineteen years old, nineteen or twenty. And I guess we were preparing for the war then. Because what they did, they reactivated—they were bringing back fellows who had been in service in the medical corps, doctors and dentists, and they were going there for refresher courses. And so they had reopened the Presidio. The Letterman General Hospital, it was open, and they had barracks. They had set up barracks, and the fellows would stay there while they were getting this refresher. So each barracks had a kitchen. And so they had a main kitchen, they would bring the food over, and we had a chef over there, and we would serve the officers. Of course as a kitchen helper I served, and we had waitresses, too. And then I washed the dishes, peeled vegetables, all that stuff, kitchen helper, third cook. That was civil service. That, I guess, was my first full-time, steady job.

Crawford:

And you could make a good living doing that?

Watkins:

Yeah, I had part-time. Well sure, what the heck. Gasoline was ten cents a gallon, five cents to ride the street cars.

What was your rent, do you remember?

Watkins:

Oh, I was living at home, they were paying eighteen or twenty dollars a month [laughs] because my father by then—he hadn't remarried, but he had a live-in lady friend, and I was living at home. Oh, that was in 1941. In 1942, I was living—

Crawford:

So you could move back with your dad?

Watkins:

Well, yes, because he set up housekeeping. He had a lady friend who set up housekeeping. He never remarried, but he had two different lady friends, one of them passed with cancer. Another lady came into the picture and that's—we were all living together. I got married and moved out. But anyhow that was my job, kitchen helper, and then from there, I signed up with the civil service as a laborer at Mare Island, and we would unload freight cars and just do general grounds work. Then I transferred down to the naval provisions pier. They would bring in all the boats, they would bring in all sorts of provisions: meat, canned goods, sugar, coffee, salt, and we would unload them and stack them in the warehouse. And then when they got ready to ship the stuff overseas, they would come down, and then we would break the stacks down and load the pallets that they would take out to the ships when they would load the ships to take the stuff overseas. So then I transferred over to Oakland to the navy supply depot because it was closer. Of course, I was 1A in the army at that time. That was before the recruiter came. And so then I was at work, and then I got a job working with John Anderson at the North Pole.

See, I was working at the navy supply at the day time, then at nights I was playing four nights a week at—playing drums at the North Pole with Don Anderson and Cookie, the singer. So then of course when the recruiter came for our union meeting, why naturally I signed up and so they put us on leave, inactive duty for a couple months. Then when they got everything together, all the logistics together, then they called us in for active duty. And they sent us back to Great Lakes, and we were there for eight weeks getting our training. Our bandleader, our chief petty officer, oh, he was worried because you see, they had, the Great Lakes, had a wonderful big band, and that's where they were sent for training. It was six separate—Camp Robert Smalls, it was segregated. On the other side, there was all white. Where we were, it was Camp Robert Smalls, they were two camps and they were colored, and they had the ships company band there.

The guy that was all over the bands was Eddy Peabody, the banjo player, vaudeville pianist. He had been in the navy in World War I so he was ranked as a commander, and you had to pass him. You had to do your drill and all your right turns and your left turns and about face and follow the drum major. We'd have happy hours while we were there, and the big band would play and then they would bring in guests. We saw the Jimmie Lunceford Orchestra there, and we saw—who else did we see? Anyhow, they would bring in different bands and Peabody, of course, would do his vaudeville act. And so the chief petty officer of the ships company band there, if a band came in, he'd try to pick all their top men out. So we had guys that had been with Lionel Hampton, and they played with Count Basie, and they played with the Duke and Jimmie. Our chief had really true professional guys so he was worried to death so he got us out of there as soon as he could. On December 1, we finally came back here, and we checked in to St. Mary's College. We were the ships company band, and it was a preflight school. That's where all of the cadets would come for all of their preflight training before they actually went in and started to fly the airplanes.

Crawford:

And what troops were they? Was there a troop number?

Watkins:

Oh, no, that was navy. It was navy.

Crawford:

It was navy. Navy pre-flight.

Watkins:

Navy pre-flight school.

Crawford:

And wasn't there a big blues, jazz scene there at St. Mary's?

00:33:21

Watkins:

No. At the time, the big blues scene was West Oakland. That's where the blues was up and down Seventh Street and the Continental Club down in West Oakland.

Crawford:

Do you want to talk a little about that?

Watkins:

Well what happened, you see, Oakland and the East Bay and Richmond, also Vallejo, like San Francisco, see, we had all of these defense industries and defense plants. We were honeycombed with defense plants, the shipyards, and everything else. There was one company I worked for part-time when I left the navy supply depot—as soon as I got service, I took military leave and so I had a two month period so I worked at this valve company and that was the defense industry making valves. So it was honeycombed so that meant they brought in workers from all over the country. They brought from the Midwest and from the South so you had a big country western scene, you had a down-home blues scene and then of course you had the big band scene and the fledging bebop scene. All of that—

Crawford:

Already?

Watkins:

Oh sure. Well, Dizzy was on the scene. And as a matter a fact, he and Bird and Milt Jackson, and Alley on drums—anyhow, they came out here mid-'45, late '45, and played Billy Berg's. They brought bebop out here in that early. So Diz and Bird, they were recording along with a lot of the other artists in New York going back to 1942. So we were exposed through records and through broadcasts and, then of course when Diz was at Billy Berg's, they used to broadcast every night, and we were just fascinated with what they did. But in the meantime, they had this big blues scene. So as I mentioned earlier, T-Bone Walker, who was one of the big draws, T-Bone would come up here and play at the local clubs. He would play Slim Jenkins, the place would be packed, and he would do his act, splits while he was—and then the other one where he would put the guitar behind his head and play. He would point to his left pocket, and the women would come out of the audience in droves and stuff dollar bills in his pocket.

Then about late '46, T-Bone came to the Swing Club and by then I was out of service, and my band, we had played for a year down in at the Band Box down in Menlo Park. And so I was up on the job, it petered out, and they changed the format because singing groups were coming in. So we came up here, and we played the Swing Club. We got recruited to play the Swing Club and what happened, we backed T-Bone Walker, he was one of the acts. The Club Continental—it's still there—Jimmy McCracklin, he was big there. Pee Wee Crayton was big there, Lowell Fulson was big there.

Crawford:

Where was that located?

Watkins:

It's in Oakland, and it's around Twelfth or Fourteenth Street. It's west of Cypress, somewhere near Peralta in West Oakland around Twelfth Street, somewhere down in there.

Crawford:

What do you remember of McCracklin?

Watkins:

McCracklin, he was a good blues singer. You know I've just seen him recently, just here lately. He was a blues singer. He had records out, and he traveled all through the South and all up and down the coast here, Los Angeles, Oakland, Richmond. They all played Tapper's Inn out in Richmond. They had a scene going in Richmond they had a strip in Richmond.

Crawford:

I think McCracklin owned a club out there.

Watkins:

I'm not sure but Tapper's Inn was owned by an Indian fellow, a Hindu. But all the blues artists: Lowell Fulson, Pee Wee Crayton, McCracklin, Ivory Joe Hunter, all those guys. Oakland, they had their own blues scene. They had record producers; we had record companies here, they had producers of record. They had a sound, they called it Oakland Blues.

Crawford:

And how would you describe that?

Watkins:

Well, I was see—you get loyal. The Dixieland people were loyal to their—you know they follow their tradition. They follow their music. The mainstream people, they follow their music. Traditionalists, we call them "moldy figs." The other guys, we called them mainstream artists, okay. We were beboppers. So actually we kind of looked down on—we thought of it as being pretty primitive because basically you're playing three chords and the lyrics, they are about life. "My man done left me, or my woman's left me"—you know, it's mainly about life, and it's blues and it's suffering and—you know with bebop, bebop was about exploring and going beyond the normal lines of harmony and the execution and the technique and the facility. It was a challenge, it was a real challenge to musicians, and of course the mainstream guys, they were down on the beboppers. [laughs] The mainstreamers down on the moldy figs. So you know, it's competition, it's healthy and friendly competition. Even Louis, you know he kind of put down the beboppers, and Louis, he was the bebopper of his day. I guess he was the link between Dixieland and mainstream.

You could even go beyond that, he was Louis. He was Louis, everybody respected him because of what he did. There was no one else like him when he came along, and he could take any song, any song and just give it meaning, give it heart, give it soul. He could take a ballad—I heard him on a record, he's got a record out, "Bess, You is My Woman Now" and it is, oh it is fantastic. He and Ella, they have a record where they do Porgy and Bess. "Bess, You is My Woman Now," oh geez. And of course Roy Eldridge, they consider him to be the bridge between Louis and Dizzy. Of course with Diz, of course he's Dizzy, you got other people out there—

Crawford:

He's unique.

Watkins:

Other people, but you know, he's Dizzy, he's the man. I don't think they progress beyond that. But the blues scene, I wasn't much into it, but it was big. The blues artists here, they did well. And even today, Lowell Fulson, I think he's still alive.

Crawford:

No, I think he's passed on.

Watkins:

Did he pass?

Crawford:

Yes, because I interviewed him.

Watkins:

Yeah, not too long ago. When did you interview him?

Crawford:

Oh, probably five years ago.

Watkins:

But he was doing—what's that joint down on Rose Street? Oh, it's still going.

Crawford:

Grove in San Francisco?

Watkins:

No, here. It's Martin Luther King Way now.

Crawford:

Eli's.

Watkins:

Eli's, yeah. He was at Eli's. I saw him there within the last eight years. It was at least eight years ago.

Crawford:

Eli's is still holding on, and also Esther's Orbit Room. Did you know Esther Mabry when she worked for Slim Jenkins?

Watkins:

Oh yes, I did.

Crawford:

What was Slim's like?

Watkins:

Slim's, now Slim Jenkins, although he had blues artists in there, he wanted a first class establishment where you could have a mixed clientele. He had linen tablecloths, linen napkins, his waitresses all had uniforms. As a matter of fact, they would go downtown and find a dressmaker and had their uniforms made. He served the food, excellent food, the drinks, the best liquors. At one time he had a liquor store and he had a calendar and a lot of the working class, fellows that worked for the railroad and worked in the various positions as either diner car waiters or Pullman porters or cleaning the cars or that did the engineering work, they would go to Jenkins and eat at the counter, and they would buy their little half pint at his liquor store. It was a thriving business.

And then in the other room, that's where he had his nightclub. He was constantly remodeling the place, and so then what he did was he sold his liquor license and did away with the counter and went full-time cabaret. Then he had Diana Washington in there before she got to be big. Ivory Joe Hunter was in there, T-Bone, and then he started a cross section. Although blues was big and up and down Seventh Street, where there were a lot of blues artists and those other places I was telling you about, they had blues, the Continental. Some of the other places, they had blues. I would always go where the beboppers were. But Oakland, you know when Eli opened up, and I went in there. It was like going back to Oakland during the war. It was Oakland all over again.

Crawford:

That was in the fifties.

Watkins:

Yeah, they had their own blues sound. More like the early sixties, I started going there. It was like Oakland all over again.

Crawford:

Bob Geddins always said that the Oakland sound was just the saddest sound. How would you describe it?

Watkins:

I don't think it was a sad sound. Geddins did well. You're talking about a prolific guy. Of course, a lot of his material was pirated and stolen.

00:44:49

Crawford:

That's what Jimmy McCracklin says.

Watkins:

Yeah, it was Geddins. It was just unfortunate. I know of him more by reputation. I think I met him. I'm not sure whether he belonged to our black local or not. At one time we had four hundred members, and we use to meet once a quarter and at that time we had 100 percent participation.

Crawford:

Did the blues musicians join?

Watkins:

Some of them did, McCracklin did. T-Bone, he belonged in Los Angeles because he did studio work down there. Some of them did. Many of them traveled so they may have belonged to the union in their home local, wherever their home local was. But our guys here, many of them joined. Then after we merged a lot of them dropped out because they didn't see where they were getting any benefits.

Crawford:

Did the union help them track songs that had been pirated?

Watkins:

Unfortunately no, because see a lot of the pirating took place out of the country. See, they would sing your material out of the country. Italy was one time the home. It was the big place where most of your pirating took place. And for you to file a suit against them, you would have to go out of the country. Go to Italy and get your Italian lawyers and actually move over there and go through the lawsuit. But that happened with the Fatha' Hines [Earl Fatha' Hines] group I was with that played at the Club Hangover. We would do a broadcast every Saturday night and somebody—I don't know whether it was somebody at the station or whether our clarinet player down on Howard, he use to record in his room. He had a timer and a little home set, and he

would record, I don't know. Somebody though sent some of the tapes somewhere and we had records coming back into this country of our Club Hangover broadcast. And so my friend Ernie Lewis, by then he was an official with the federation, and I contacted him to ask him what can we do to see if we can get some kind of consideration, and that's when he explained to me: It was out of the country, we were helpless, see, because it was a non-union pirating operation.

Crawford:

Well I think Bob Geddins took a lot of dubs and that they were taken from him, and McCracklin claims that he's still working on the "Thrill is Gone."

Watkins:

Yeah.

Crawford:

That he wrote that song, and it was recorded by Roy Hawkins, I think, and then he never got any credit for it.

Watkins:

B.B. King. [B.B. King has since acknowledged McCracklin's authorship]

Crawford:

B. B. King, that's his song. That's right.

Watkins:

Now it's unfortunate. B.B. King, he started doing his own recordings, promoting himself. See, a lot of those recording companies, they pay you fifty dollars for the session and you didn't realize it, maybe a hundred dollars, and you were signing away your rights to the tune. That happened to many of the artists in the South.

Crawford:

Ever recover?

Watkins:

I don't know. Some of them are still trying, some of them are still trying to recover. A lot of them were recorded by non-signatory companies, companies that were not signatory to the American Federation of Musicians Recording Agreement so then you had to go to the courts.

Crawford:

Would that be the Bihari Brothers and outfits like that?

Watkins:

I just know of them by what I've read and a little bit about some of the documentaries they've shown on TV about some of the people who think their material was stolen. Little Richard, the other guy who did the dance—oh, for crying out loud.

Crawford:

Sage Haskell?

Watkins:

No, no, no. Oh, for crying out loud. Chuck Berry, now he was an original. Oh yeah, boy, he could play too. The other fellow, the one that shot himself, fantastic pianist, I mean guitarist. He shot himself playing Russian Roulette, oh, his name comes up frequently. As a matter a fact, I think he was in London even. They did a thing with him over in London. Tremendous guitarist. Oh, darndest thing, memory.

Crawford:

It will come back. Well, you'll see the transcript and you could fill it in. I wanted to ask you, Slim Jenkins moved to Jack London Square, he wanted to go?

Watkins:

What happened to Jenkins, see, Jenkins was trying to attract a clientele. He wanted to mix clientele. He sold his liquor license and did away with the counter that catered to the walk-in trade, for that kind of trade. He enlarged the establishment he had down on lower Seventh Street. There are pictures of it; there are pictures of the entrance when it was on Seventh Street. Then he changed the entrance and moved the entrance to the back parking lot. He had a parking lot. That's so that people wouldn't be subject to the people that were the ordinary street traffic.

Jack London Square was starting to come to life, and so Jenkins, through his connections, fought his way into Jack London Square. He opened a club at 310 Broadway. It was a beautiful place, and he took the 310 Broadway Club, then he took this other business that had been an olive oil business on the side street. I guess that was Third Street. And that building, since we had one building going directly in, a storefront building that he enlarged, then another factory that he took over, and he ran that into the building so he ended up with an L-shaped establishment. And the bandstand was back here and the dance floor was out here, and then you had for this building coming in, seats where the people could sit and view. And then here you could see the floor show and then there was a partition. Then on the Broadway Street entrance that's where you had your restaurant, that's where the people came into eat.

And in 1963, I went in there with Fatha' Hines. By then Fatha' Hines, he had disbanded our Club Hangover band, and we had done thirteen weeks at the Claremont Hotel with an eight-piece band. It wasn't success, we didn't draw. So then we went into Slim Jenkins with a quartet and that's where I was exposed to the organ. There was a girl named Bobby Brooks, an excellent

organist, and I was on drums, Fatha' Hines was playing piano, John Green was on bass and Arthur Walker was on trumpet. And so the organist would play with us, Bobby Brooks. What happens, Jenkins recruited me because by then the music business, it was really going down hill for jazz groups. The government had placed a 20 percent entertainment tax on clubs, nightclubs, dance halls, anywhere where there was entertainment. If you had dancing or singing there was a 20 percent entertainment tax. After the war, the business started to go down hill. The musicians union lobbied and fought tooth and nail; they couldn't get rid of that.

They did them a favor—oh, this was when the business was, we were really in the doldrums. And the singing groups were becoming really popular, doo-wop groups, and singing groups and blues groups and within the blues and rock 'n roll so the government did us a favor, they reduced the entertainment tax to 10 percent. That helped for a little bit. But for jazz, it didn't help us, but it helped the doo-wop groups, the singing groups. It helped the blues groups, it helped the rhythm and blues groups. It helped some of the groups where some of the fellows that would walk through the audience and lay down on the floor and play, you know groups that did theatrics. It kind of helped them because some of the clubs—but the entertainment tax, it was still placed—

Crawford:

When did that come in?

Watkins:

Oh, during the war. See, they didn't reduce it until, I guess maybe the late fifties, maybe even the early sixties, they reduced it to 10 percent. Finally they reduced it down to 5 percent, and I don't know if they ever really, totally ever abolished it. It was a detriment to the business, a real deterrent to the business. It helped kill off the business. That plus the phasing out of the war industries and the war industry money. And then the veterans coming home and getting married and buying homes and raising families, going to school, then the audiences dwindled and the money started to—then the rhythm and blues and rock 'n roll, and then concerts started to come in. See, many of our artists they could do a concert, they could make as much on a two-night concert or even on a one-night concert as they could playing five nights a week or six nights a week in a club. So the concert concept started to come in, and then of course with the cost of traveling that led to the demise of the big bands, the cost of transportation of men and instruments and then the cost of the tickets. Tickets started—

Crawford:

When did that begin to hit the big bands?

Watkins:

Oh, uh, I would say probably in the sixties.

Crawford:

Well, let me leave music for the next session.

[End Audio File 2]

Interview #2: October 7, 2003

[Begin Audio File 3]

Crawford:

Well, let's start, and go back to 1942. Let's go to Berkeley. When did you move there and when did you get married?

Watkins:

Yes, as stated earlier, I was born and raised in San Francisco. I got my education there, got my start in music there. In 1938, I was walking down the street, and I bumped into this friend of mine and there were two girls from Berkeley. They were visiting, and so we met and we started talking.

One of the girls was a very attractive girl from Texas, San Antonio. So I rode the streetcar with her down to the Bay Bridge Terminal, rode all the way to Berkeley with them and rode back. I acquired her phone number and we started talking back and forth.

I had a part time job delivering *The Pittsburgh Courier* and *The Chicago Defender*, black periodicals. *The Defender* was very large, and it originated in Chicago. Lionel Hampton at one time had played with the band that was associated with what they call the Bud Billiken--they had a, like a school, it was a school for kids, and within this school they had a group for young people, and they called it the Bud Billiken. It was a young group.

They also had a music program. Lionel Hampton—when he was a kid, part of his life was spent in Chicago—and he was part of this Bud Billiken, playing drums, and I think also he played piano and saxophone. He got his musical training there plus additional training when the family sent him—I think they sent him, I don't know whether it was to Milwaukee—but they sent him to a convent or religious school.

One of the nuns taught him, taught him rudimentary drums. Then when he came back to Chicago, he was with Bud Billiken. But anyhow, that's another story.

I had a part-time job delivering *The Pittsburgh Courier* and *The Chicago Defender*, and *The Pittsburgh Courier* was another one of our national black periodicals.

So the distributor, he was headquartered in Berkeley. I would come after finishing my route—I would do Friday nights and then all day Saturday. I had a route that included deliveries in Berkeley to private homes and different businesses then North Oakland, Downtown Oakland, West Oakland. Then I'd hop the ferry and go across the Bay, and out in the Western Addition, we had private customers and the nightclubs, black nightclubs, Jack's Tavern and the Club Alabam and then the various beauty parlors and the other barber shops.

Crawford:

Where was your route exactly?

Watkins:

Western Addition.

Crawford:

In Berkeley.

Watkins:

Berkeley? Oh, Mr. Gibbson, D.G. Gibbson, he lived on Carrison Street just off of San Pablo. That's just south of Ashby about a block or two, so my route had Ashby and Sacramento. Then I would go down to North Oakland, 36th Street , 34th Street, 35th Street that would include the barber shops and private homes. Then downtown Oakland, there was the Rose Pharmacy. It was a multi-name, and I would deliver papers there and pick up the old papers and pick up the money. Then I would go down into West Oakland, also to this branch of the pharmacy that was at Seventh and Peralta. And then I would catch the train, the train that ran on Seventh Street, down to the pier, the Oakland Mole and then catch the ferry over to San Francisco. Then I would catch the street car and I would go out to the Western Addition.

Then there was the private party, Webster near O'Farrell, then a beauty parlor on Webster Street, between Post and Geary, then the Club Alabam on Post Street between Webster and Fillmore, Jack's Tavern around the corner on Sutter.

Then I had private parties. There was Mr. Jeffery's on Post and Lyon, then Mr. Thomas and his family on Pine and Lyon Street and then Professor Williamson, he played the organ at the Third Baptist Church on Hyde, Hyde and Clay, I believe, but they lived on California Street between Baker and Broderick. Professor Williamson, I delivered to him, and of course talked to his two daughters, Jane Williamson and Joyce Williamson, two very beautiful girls.

I had other customers, and then my route would be finished. Then in the evening I would go back to Berkeley and take the old papers. Of course I would go visit the young lady that I was courting.

Crawford:

When did you get married?

Watkins:

I proposed to her, I guess maybe it was 1940 or 1941. And so in February in 1942, we got married. So then I moved to Berkeley, and I moved here with my in-laws. At the time I was working for the federal government in the defense industry.

Crawford:

What were you doing?

Watkins:

Well, I started out at Mare Island as a laborer, working at Mare Island, and I would commute from San Francisco. We'd get in the carpool, and we'd commute. Then I transferred to Pier 56 on Third Street opposite the Southern Pacific Depot at the time, and that was the naval provisions period. Then I transferred to over to Oakland to—

Crawford:

Naval supply?

Watkins:

Naval supply depot. At that time I was a laborer, and we would run the warehouses and stock the warehouses and put the—when they bring in the various articles, all sorts of stuff, we'd stack them, and then I was in the group that loaded the ships.

We would be in the hold of the ship, and when the materials would drop down on the pallets, we would unload them and stack them in the hold of the ship. There was an occasion where these pallets had holes on each corner and you had hooks and then the crane would drop the line down into the hole and then you would unhook the pallets and unload them. In the meantime the crane would go up.

So one time I was holding the line, and they signaled the crane to go up and the hook caught my glove and took me up in the air. It was a very frightening experience. I climbed out of the hold, and it was so frightening.

They used to have these little jitnies, you called them, almost like golf carts, but they were gasoline powered. You would have a whole line of carts, and the pallets they would load on the carts and you would go to the various warehouses, and the workers would load the pallet and then you would drive the cart to the ship, beside the ship and then the line would drop down. They would hook the lines to the pallets and up they would go over the side of the ship and down into the hold.

Well, I found an empty jitney and I started driving the jitney so I got classified as a jitney driver so that was much safer work and less physical. I learned how to drive the platform lifts, forklifts, portable cranes. They were electric operated and indoors—when you worked indoors, then you had the electric-powered forklifts and cranes and various types of industrial equipment.

Crawford:

What was the racial makeup of that work crew?

Watkins:

It was largely black because, see, during the war, the defense industries mustered here in the Bay Area. You had everything. You had not only shipbuilding, but you had everything. You had machine shops that manufactured everything: shell-casings, valves for the ships for the various engines. They had all sorts of industries, small and large, and they needed workers, so many of the recruiters, they went South. They recruited workers from the South.

Crawford:

There was a huge migration wasn't there?

Watkins:

A tremendous migration, yes. President Roosevelt, Franklin D., his mandate was "no discrimination in the defense industry in the war effort." He wanted no discrimination.

See, as I think I stated earlier, the armed forces—minorities were limited in the army to quartermaster corps so you did truck driving and a lot of menial stuff. The Navy was the steward department where you worked with food and maybe even with the officers. You might be the officer's aide, who took care of his quarters and took care of his clothing and stuff.

But during the war, when Pearl Harbor came, this one fellow—he was either a cook or a kitchen helper or something—he grabbed a machine gun and started shooting at the Japanese planes, and they captured that on film and made a poster. That was one of the posters that you saw that was distributed throughout the nation.

As a result, they opened up the ranks in the Navy, and that's how I came to go in as a musician. But anyhow, getting back to the defense industry and the makeup, you had a large minority makeup, not so much Asians as African Americans, colored. So the makeup at the navy supply depot—

Crawford:

Must have been a lot of Filipinos then?

Watkins:

We had, yeah, Filipinos. They were given preference. Japanese, they were sent to relocation camp, and the Chinese—so many people had problems differentiating between the two. I never had any problem because I grew up in the city, grew up among them.

Crawford:

The Japanese were the most open about taking in minorities, weren't they?

Watkins:

They were. Over in San Francisco, you had discrimination in housing, discrimination in employment, you had discrimination in restaurants, the hotels, some of the shops, the various shops. They wouldn't serve you if you were a minority or colored especially.

Crawford:

Was that neighborhood oriented?

Watkins:

Throughout the city.

Crawford:

When did that change?

Watkins:

It was a long time changing, it was a long time coming. It was well after the war, especially housing, and even today, you have corporate discrimination in housing.

Crawford:

Really? There are no longer restrictive covenants, are there?

Watkins:

Well, if you see a "For Rent" sign, they may tell you it's already taken or they have so many applicants, and they aren't taking any new applicants or they'll take your application and it never—

Crawford:

Terrible shame.

Watkins:

That's one thing, housing oh yeah, and loans. There's statistics and studies to show that minorities, especially black minorities, you turn down, disqualify.

Crawford:

How about in hiring, since you're in a position to hire musicians?

Watkins:

I don't. I just hire whoever can do the job. Of course, I'm working at the union where I come in contact with everybody.

Crawford:

But employers don't ask and don't specify that they don't want minorities?

Watkins:

They don't ask but certain areas you go in are conspicuous by our absence. You can go out into Contra Costa County, you don't see too many black players.

Crawford:

The suburbs.

Watkins:

The suburbs.

Crawford:

Don't you hire for Black Hawk?

Watkins:

I do, yeah. I do.

Crawford:

You play at Black Hawk.

Watkins:

I play at Black Hawk. I've been playing out there since the mid-eighties, and I am pretty well known out there. And the events manager out there, he calls me frequently.

As a matter of fact I just worked for the chamber of commerce, Danville Chamber of Commerce. We just did a shop set at the Black Hawk. This was a couple of Wednesdays ago. The same day that they had the fundraiser for Schwarzenegger at the Auto Museum. We were in the plaza, and he was in the museum.

Crawford:

Don't get you started, right?

Well, let's talk about living with your in-laws in Berkeley.

Watkins:

My in-laws, the family was from Texas, and they were truly family-oriented. They made me welcome. I was working in the defense industry in the daytime and then playing at night because I was 1A in service, and my wife was expecting.

We were expecting our first child, and so I was trying to accumulate as much money as I could. So if I had to leave, why, I could leave her with a nest-egg or something until I could find some way wherever they sent us maybe to work or something.

But the family, it was a large family. Their family name was Buttler, and they treated me very well. They accepted me into the family. As a matter of fact, the wedding was held in their living room. It was a home wedding.

Crawford:

Where was the home?

Watkins:

On 1625 Derby Street in Berkeley. My ex-wife's aunt's name was Amanda Cash, and it was her house. And my ex-mother-in-law her name was Buttler, and then my brother-in-law's sister-in-law's last name—well yeah, their maiden names were all Buttler, but then most of the girls were married or had been married.

Crawford:

Was there a large group living there?

Watkins:

Let's see. There was my ex-aunt-in-law, she was widowed. Then my ex-mother-in-law, and she was widowed. Then there was next door, there was cousins, and I had an ex-sister-in-law. She lived there. And then there was another lady—oh, I had her name. She was a roomer, she rented a room. She lived there. Then I was there with my wife, and then my daughter was born and she was there. So, how many people was that?

Crawford:

[Laughs] That's a big gathering.

Watkins:

Then next door, and around the corner, there was the McIlvane family. Now the McIlvane family, my mother-in-law was married into the McIlvane family so their family lived around the corner and there were quite a few cousins. The house, there was quite an inflow back and forth, in and out of the house of relatives, cousins, and everything.

Crawford:

And your daughter was born there, in the house?

Watkins:

She was born there, yeah, uh huh. Oh, not in the house. She was born in Providence Hospital. Her name is Erlaine. It was a combination of my ex-wife's name, Elaine, and Earl.

Crawford:

Oh, beautiful.

Watkins:

And then my son, he was born later. By the time he was born, I had an apartment in Berkeley on Haskell and Atkins Street, and his name is Robert. He was named after my grandfather on my father's side.

Crawford:

And where are the children?

Watkins:

Well, my daughter, she's retired. She lives in Oakland. My son, he stays with his mother at their family home on Derby Street. And my daughter, she's just recently retired from the telephone company, and my son, he works with a program where they try to help people, first-time offenders, people coming out of the system and trying to find work.

Crawford:

Either one of them musical?

Watkins:

Unfortunately, no. My daughter took piano lessons, and she was extremely talented, she had a talent, but she wasn't for it. It served her well because she took piano lessons and that enabled her not only to pick-up typing like that—she didn't even take classes in school—and also in the telephone company, she became very adapted to computers. Her whole house is computerized. Oh she and her husband, oh, they were up to date. They were really a dot-com family.

Crawford:

I should say. Was Berkeley a nice community then to live in?

Watkins:

The first time I came to Berkeley, I was a teenager. I was on my own. I was about maybe fourteen or fifteen years old, and I was very much impressed. We used to catch the ferry.

Sometimes we would catch the nickel ferry, and we'd get off in Oakland and walk down into West Oakland, and we'd go to DeFremery Park, it's got another name now.

There was the DeFremery playground on Sixteenth Street and Adeline, and we'd hang out there and then also my friend [Saul Gopo] had a cousin in Shelton Hand's family, and we go visit with the Shelton Hands.

As teenagers, you always visited with other teenagers. We'd visit with Shelton Hands. They lived in deep West Oakland. And then I had a cousin—she was actually a cousin to my uncle's wife.

My uncle was married and when his wife passed away, her cousin [Idelle Stuart] lived right across the street from the Elks, they called it Elks, on Eighth Street, near Cypress, in Oakland.

We'd come over, and we'd go by and visit with her and just hang out and meet other teenagers. And then my friend, we'd go to the Park and we'd hang out there for a while. Then we would catch the streetcar or walk to Berkeley to the San Pablo part. I was very impressed by Berkeley because people owned their own homes or were buying their own homes.

And, see, in the city all the houses were side by side, and flats. We had mainly flats. For the larger houses that were larger houses with multiple bedrooms, they were like rooming houses. So the main people, they would rent a large house like that and rent out rooms.

Over here, that's what we had, we had rooming houses and then we had flats. And the buildings were, you know, one against the other and the doors opened right off onto the sidewalk. You had a small front porch maybe on the right down onto the sidewalk.

With Berkeley, people had lawns and you had spaces between the houses and people had backyards and it was just different, it was a different kind of a thing—

Crawford:

Were there discrimination issues, as you said there were in the city?

Watkins:

Oh yeah. Oh sure, heck yeah. You had restricted covenants, and you had real estate people, they wouldn't show you. The banks would disqualify you for loans. The colored population in Berkeley, you were limited from that area from Sacramento Street down to San Pablo and from Alcatraz say to Dwight Way, and that was about it.

Crawford:

Was there red-lining?

Watkins:

Oh, yeah. Heck yeah. Oh heck yeah. Even below San Pablo, you didn't even live down there until the war. When the war came in, then the area sort of opened up. North Oakland, you had a scattering of families that lived in North Oakland between San Pablo Avenue and Market Street, Grove Street, but on the other side of Grove Street, say east of Grove Street in Berkeley, they wouldn't sell to you or rent to you. Telegraph Avenue, well, east of Grove Street, Telegraph Avenue, they wouldn't rent to you or sell to you until after the war. Then they started block-busting and opening up. The suburbs started opening up so the white people that lived in, say, North Oakland and Berkeley, parts of Berkeley, they would sell them a house in the suburbs. They would sell their house, even in Berkeley, even then some of the property owners. You get out in El Cerrito and Albany, they tell you, "Well, we'll sell to Chinese but we won't sell to colored, and we want all cash." See I experienced that because I dabbled slightly in real estate.

Crawford:

I knew you had.

Watkins:

And I had people tell me that to my face.

Crawford:

Well, you bought a house not too long after that.

Watkins:

I bought a place in 1955 in the Richmond Annex.

Crawford:

Where was the Richmond Annex?

Watkins:

Well, you go out San Pablo Avenue beyond Solano in Albany, and say, when you get to what is now the El Cerrito Plaza, that's Carlson Street. So Carlson Street, it takes off and angles west and going north to—it goes up north and then so say between the bay and San Pablo Avenue, say, from the El Cerrito Plaza all the way out even as far as Potrero. They called that the Richmond Annex. So below San Pablo and between the bay and that's the east and west parameter. And then north and south would be from El Cerrito Plaza, say, to Potrero. They called it the Richmond Annex. Now, on the west side of San Pablo is the annex. On the east side it's El Cerrito, and it's a nice area.

In that area, when I moved into that house, the way we purchased the house, I saw the house and it was vacant. It was an absentee home and it had been vacant. It had been rented out for maybe four years, and it had been vacant for two or three years. I saw the place so I had a Caucasian friend of mine, a white friend of mine, I had him buy the house, and then he transferred it over to

me by a grant deed. And the neighbors had a fit. [laughs] Oh, they had a fit. They called up the broker. Oh man, they called up my friend, and they ranted and they raved. But I was quiet. At that time I was between engagements, so I proceeded to—and the house, you know, it was run down. It was an older house so I proceeded to have a small routine where I planted a lawn in the front, and then I had a brother-in-law who painted, and I got he and his friends to come out. We painted the house, and I painted inside and then I developed the backyard, putting in a brick patio with seats. My kids were going to school—my son then he transferred to the grammar school that was in the annex. My daughter went to the junior high.

Crawford:

Which junior high?

Watkins:

It was in El Cerrito.

Crawford:

El Cerrito.

Watkins:

Yeah, across the street. She went to Portola Junior High.

Crawford:

In El Cerrito?

Watkins:

Yes, of course, when my son graduated from grammar school, he went to Portola. Then my daughter went to El Cerrito High.

Crawford:

Were they good schools? You were pleased with their education?

Watkins:

Oh yes, they were very good schools. So then when I went back to work, then I would leave the house. I was stressed, and I would drive. I didn't bother anybody, didn't say anything to anybody. And the next door neighbor facing the house to the left, the lady there, she was really upset. Her husband, he was a Scotsman and he was a machinist. He made me welcomed and invited me over to the house, had me for a drink, and he said, "Well, don't pay attention to her," because he could see where I was fixing up the place. And I really wasn't bothering anybody.

Then they found out that I was a musician, and at the time I was playing with Bob Scobey's band, so that wasn't too shabby. And I had been playing—

Crawford:

Where was the Scobey band?

Watkins:

Bob Scobey's band, when I joined him, he was playing at the Tin Angel on the Embarcadero in San Francisco and, of course, he was doing a TV show also, Clancy's Corner. Prior to that, prior to joining him, I worked with Vernon Alley at the Blackhawk and Facks, the original Facks, and we did "Down Vernon's Alley."

Crawford:

What station?

Watkins:

I think it was channel 5. It was the same channel where Del Courtney had his variety show.

Crawford:

And how many members were in that band, in the Alley Band?

Watkins:

We had a quartet, piano, drums, bass and sax. It was "Down Vernon's Alley," it was a very prestigious show. We used to do that once a week.

Crawford:

Who were the members? Who was the piano player?

Watkins:

Richard Wyands. He migrated to New York, and he's still active and he's in the forefront. He's one of the leading jazz pianists in the New York scene. Jerome Richardson was playing saxophone. Jerome's deceased. Jerome went on to become a studio musician and one of the leading flute players, yes, flute players in the country. And of course Vernon, he's Mr. Music of San Francisco. Vernon played with everybody.

Crawford:

And Ed, his brother?

Watkins:

Ed, his brother, his brother started him out. I just talked to Eddie this morning; his health is not too good.

Crawford:

Neither one of them are performing now, I think.

Watkins:

Uh, no. Vernon is an amputee unfortunately and living in an assisted living facility. He's working like the dickens trying to get himself back up to a healthier position. And Eddie, he just had really serious surgery, and Eddie is making a comeback.

Crawford:

Where did he play?

Watkins:

Eddie's not playing. Eddie was just doing casual work.

Crawford:

But during that period he played in Pacific Heights, didn't he?

Watkins:

Oh, Eddie played. He did casual work. He had a band going, The Gentlemen of Jazz, and he played all sorts of casual work. Eddie also played with the Saunders King Orchestra when they backed Billie Holiday down in downtown San Francisco with Count Basie society down there. Eddie played at the old Club Alabam. He played at Topsy's Roost, that's how far back he went, at the beach. Eddy played at the California Theater Club during the war. He played at Jack's Tavern, Club Alabam, I mentioned that before. Eddie, he played all the jazz clubs. But see, he married, and he had a family, so Eddie had a day job. So he didn't go on the road, and a lot of the steady night club jobs, he had to limit it to weekends or he couldn't do full-time music. But he was very active. And with his big band he used to play all the social dances. We had a couple of black—oh, how can I put it—they were social clubs, and they were very prestigious social clubs, like the Cosmos Club.

Crawford:

Where were these clubs located?

Watkins:

They were located in San Francisco, in the Bay Area.

Crawford:

In the Fillmore District?

Watkins:

Western Addition.

Crawford:

Were there places that you couldn't play?

Watkins:

Oh yeah. You couldn't play east of Van Ness Avenue [laughs] before the war, no, with a few exceptions. There was one place down there. There were the Italian brothers—oh, what were their names? I just saw their names. They booked Eddie at a club on Pacific Avenue, and when the other people objected, why they just told them, "Hands off," because I think they were not really underworld characters but they had juice. [laughs]

Crawford:

Because they liked the band?

Watkins:

Oh yeah. Of course, Eddie always has good people in his band. Eddie's reputation is impeccable.

Crawford:

And did you play with Eddie as well as Vernon?

Watkins:

Eddie was a drummer so I played on his drums. His drum set was one of the first that I ever played on at our community center. Wesley Peoples and Eddie use to play at our community center many times for teenage parties and dances. And one time Eddie wasn't there, but his drums were, and I jumped on the drums, and I was able to keep time. And so [laughs] I guess you could call that my introduction.

Crawford:

Well, the Scobey Band, was it a big band?

Watkins:

Scobey had the traditional Dixieland setup, piano, bass, drums, banjo, trumpet, trombone and clarinet.

Crawford:

You didn't like Dixieland?

Watkins:

Dixieland music to me, it was—I had been exposed to it because, as I have said previous, all of our families growing up we were all exposed to music, all kinds of music, in the schools, in the homes, on the radio, the radio station KRE—no, I was a teenager—that was KRE in Berkeley, that was the K-Jazz and the KCSM of the thirties, and they would play all kinds of music. They had a certain segments. They would play the moldy figs segment where they do all the Dixieland tunes. They would play Bob Crosby, Muggsy Spanier, Lu Watters, and Turk—

Crawford:

Turk was here and so was Lu Watters.

Watkins:

Yeah, both Turk and Lu played with the Scobey—I mean with the Lu Watters band. They were all off-shoots, and I guess they got their start, and they played that and they played with Clancy Hayes, of course. They would play all the different Dixieland groups, backed the eastern bands, they would do Wingy Manone, just all the Dixieland groups, and we'd listen to them, and then they would play Jimmie Lunceford and Andy Kirk and John Kirby, Duke Ellington, all the black bands that were recording.

Crawford:

They came here?

Watkins:

No, the radio stations. They would play the recordings. Now the bands would come here, the Duke's band when they would do a picture in Hollywood, that's when they would bring the big named bands out if they had a part in the picture. Then they would, from Hollywood, then they would come up the coast and do the Sweets Ballroom chain, and they would do the Sweets in Oakland. Then during the war, with the USO, a lot of the bands would come out with them. See, the hold back was the transportation costs of men and instruments so if they were going to do a picture, then the studios would pickup all of that. Then during the war, the USO would bring—the military would provide transportation, and then the bands, all this Pacific Coast was fertile ground for any kind of band because of the nightclub scene and the different dance halls. They just bloomed, they just blossomed.

Crawford:

Talking about the fifties now.

Watkins:

Before then.

Crawford:

Before then, forties and fifties.

Watkins:

See, during the war, people were starved for entertainment because you had three shifts working, and if you were working the graveyard shift and you got off, you wanted something to do from twelve until—

Crawford:

And if it was eight in the morning, right?

Watkins:

From twelve until morning, time to go to—you'd go to bed in the morning and then get up in time to do their graveyard, that is swing shift from—let's see, what was it?

Crawford:

Midnight to eight?

Watkins:

Swing shift, you got off at midnight. Then there was a graveyard shift, midnight until eight, and people when they got off at eight, they wanted something to do, so the restaurants, all the restaurants, they would do an enormous amount of business because people would get off of work, they would come in and they'd—you had all these little restaurants, mom and pop restaurants that sprung up plus your larger, more upscale restaurants.

Crawford:

What were the top restaurants and clubs?

Watkins:

Oh, that was a good question. Out in Oakland, Slim Jenkins, of course, that was your top black club, restaurant and nightclub.

Crawford:

Did Mama Thornton ever play there?

Watkins:

Big Mama? She probably did.

Crawford:

Did you know her or did you hear her?

Watkins:

She became famous during the war and after the war. I knew her. I used to see her at the drum shop in San Francisco, and she would come to our union meeting, our black union meetings, but I never saw her perform. But I saw her, and of course, she was big on records. She performed for some reason or another when I was in Santa Cruz—I guess it was with Fatha' Hines, we were doing Brookdale Lodge—she was in Santa Cruz. They had clubs down there where Big Mama Thornton would perform and a lot of the blues artists and the rock 'n roll artists. But Big Mama, yeah, she performed out in Richmond out at Tapper's Inn, that was one of the top spots.

Crawford:

You mentioned Tappers' Inn.

Watkins:

Tappers' Inn, yes. That was Pee Wee Crayton and all the blues artists all appeared out there.

Crawford:

That's not running now?

Watkins:

Oh, no. It's long gone. Ivory Joe Hunter, he appeared. That was a big thing.

Crawford:

T-Bone?

Watkins:

T-Bone, yep.

Crawford:

You said you worked with T-Bone?

Watkins:

T-Bone appeared at the Swing Club in Oakland. That was one of our bigger clubs. They had big names there. In later years in the mid- to late forties, they had Billy Eckstine's Big Band after he left Fatha' Hines. They had Art Tatum during the war and after the war. They had the John Kirby band which was one of the top small bands. Jack McVey when he had the record out, "Open the Door, Richard." That's Swing Club.

Crawford:

That was the Swing Club?

Watkins:

Yeah, that was the Swing Club. That was on lower Seventh Street, that's now the site of the new post office, your big post office down there.

Crawford:

You ever go to Esther's Orbit Room?

Watkins:

Esther's Orbit Room, she had a club down there. Then next to Slim Jenkins, coming east, you had The Villa, that was run by Harry Villa. He was an ex-tap dancer. Then there was John Singer's club, that's where Gladys Palmer when she first came to the Bay Area, that's one of the clubs she worked. Then there was the 49er Club. Then you had the North Pole, where I worked during the war. I worked nights there, weekends. It later became the Colony Club and then later was renamed the Wolf Club. Then there was a Clef Club, that was owned by Wesley Smith. He was the brother of Stuff Smith. Wesley also played violins. Stuff Smith was one of your leading nationally known, internationally known black jazz violinists. Wesley Smith was his brother, and Wesley opened up the Clef Club, and they featured—oh, they featured different bands. I played down there after the war. I played down there for Sunday jam sessions under Ernie Lewis's leadership. The guy that had the really long term engagement there was a fellow they called Peter Rabbit. He played organ, vibraphone, accordion, and piano, and he sang. He had a trio, keyboard, guitar, and bass. He sang also, and he was an excellent performer. He ended up in Sacramento. He passed away in Sacramento maybe five or six years ago. During the war and after the war, that Clef Club was one of the spots. I was playing a jam session down there one Sunday, and I looked up there and Lionel Hampton was in our audience.

Crawford:

Did you ever play with him?

Watkins:

I got a call to play with him. This was right after the war, but I turned it down. And then after the war, I think it was in the mid- to late fifties, I was working with Vernon Alley in the mid-fifties—that was before I joined Scobey—and Lionel Hampton came through with his big band,

and he was playing, I think, at the Warfield Theater. He brought in the band and a show. Well, the classification was thirty men, and so Hampton had to make up the difference by hiring local people. So naturally Vernon was the sub-contractor, or the contractor for the classification to fill up—

Crawford:

Is that a union classification?

Watkins:

Yeah. The theaters, they had a contract with the union. All the theaters, they had a minimum number of men, each theater. So usually they would call us a stand-by band. Usually, you didn't play, but Hampton had everybody on stage playing. That enlarged his band so he had two drummers. So my drum set was the exact make and the exact finish of his drummer's drum set so I sat right next to his drummer with my drum set, and so I just played whatever his drummer played and followed the arrangements. Vernon didn't play bass, but they had two bass players. We had two guitar players. We had multiple saxes, trumpets. Quincy Jones was playing trumpet in the Hampton Band at that time and arranging. We had multiple saxophones. Curtis Lowe was playing with them. Curtis Lowe in later years joined Hampton and traveled all over the world with him. Jerome also in later years joined Hamp. That was my experience playing with Lionel Hampton. So we did a week at the theater.

Crawford:

Did you like the big bands?

Watkins:

Well, I had been in the big band in the navy. We had eighteen musicians, and then we had a concert band. We had a forty-five piece concert and marching band, big band. So at that time, I was really into it. I knew exactly how to play with it, but after the war, most of the work was small band, except for that time and sitting with Basie's band. Then I didn't have any experience with big bands.

Crawford:

You sat in with Basie. How was that?

Watkins:

We were in Chicago. I was there with Fatha' Hines in 1960. We had Sundays and Thursdays off so one of the off nights, Basie's band came through, and they were playing up on the north side at one of the ballrooms. So the band was staying at the Sutherland Hotel, and I contacted Marshall Royal, and they said, "Come on down. You can ride out with us on the bus." So I rode out on the bus, and the drummer was late and so Basie recruited me to sit in on drums until his drummer got there.

Crawford:

Did you ever get an invitation to go to New York?

Watkins:

I went to New York with Bob Scobey, and I went to New York with Fatha' Hines. But playing, no. No, I never got a call.

Crawford:

You weren't tempted to go?

Watkins:

No, I was married and had family. I was established here, and I was with the union. I was on the board of directors of our segregated union, and then when we merged, I was appointed to committees with the merged local. That was from 1960 'til 1965, plus playing. And then in 1965—well, in '61, I got divorced, and I was taking care of my father at that time. So I had an apartment so I had these family obligations, plus I was with the union, and then I was working. Where was I working? I was still working with Fatha' Hines until 1963. In 1963, I was working at Jenkins. I never even considered—because I had been to New York. I had been there with Scobey, and we had made some of the clubs there. We had gone to the clubs, and we had seen the New York scene. We had gone to the Village Gate and the Vanguard and the Blue Bohemia Club and visited—Jerome was in New York by the time I got there. We visited with him and visited with Richard Wyands and visited with all the different musicians there. It was kind of like—getting established was kind of difficult, and I was established here.

Crawford:

And you're a Californian.

Watkins:

Oh, yes. Of course. Heck, yeah. So the New York scene—quite a few of our musicians migrated to New York. Some of them came back. Others, they ended up in Europe. Pony Poindexter and Leo Wright, they both ended up in Europe. Pony came back here when he became ill. Bernard Peters was another musician from Berkeley, a drummer, he ended up in the Scandinavian countries, in Denmark. When he became ill, he came back to this country. He passed away here.

Crawford:

Did you play in Europe?

Watkins:

Yeah, I played in Denmark.

Crawford:

You played in Denmark.

Watkins:

I didn't.

Crawford:

Did you? Oh, you never did.

Watkins:

But Bernard, Leo Wright, he went to work with the broadcasting system in Germany. He became staff, and Pony, he traveled all over Europe and then he stayed over there. These were people from here that I had worked with. So a lot of the New York musicians, too, moved over there and stayed there. Kenny Clarke, the drummer, he migrated to France. He never came back. Don Byas never came back.. Ben Webster, he never came back. Any number of our musicians. Memphis Slim, he moved there, and at one time, I read a write-up on him, an interview, in the New Yorker. The interviewer visited Slim in his villa, and Slim drove up in his Rolls Royce, the fifth one that he had owned since living in Europe, so—

Crawford:

Well, he did all right, didn't he?

Watkins:

Yes. How are we doing?

Crawford:

Fine. I'm just looking at the time here, too, to change when we need to change. Well, let's see. Let's go to when you met Fatha' Hines.

Watkins:

Now that's, oh, Fatha' Hines. I think I had mentioned as a youngster, as a teenager, that I used to tune his orchestra in on my little radio that I had, my little tiny, almost a crystal set. I had a long ground laid, and I could pick up Chicago directly and New York directly. In the mid- to early thirties, radio was the big thing. Many a band made its reputation if it got a radio broadcast, Benny Goodman, the Camel Caravan was a good example, the Meadowbrook Ballroom, there. They used to broadcast. I think that was in New Jersey. Fatha' Hines, he was one of the youngest bandleaders at that time, and the Grand Terrace in Chicago. He went in there at nineteen years old around 1939 and stayed—'29—and stayed there until, I think, early 1942. They used to broadcast, and I could pick up the broadcast. I would pick up the Fatha' Hines band, and then

also the Basie band in the late thirties, they became known. I think John Hammond brought them to New York. I could pick them up from the Famous Door. They used to broadcast, that was one of their spots. The particular time when I could pick them up, this particular time frame, their guest vocalist was Billie Holiday.

Crawford:

Oh, my.

Watkins:

So I'm a teenager, thirteen, fourteen years old, and I'm exposed to all of this. Plus, the fact, we were all trying to play a little piano and play—you know, just fool around. And we called ourselves struggling, wanna-be musicians. Then in the late thirties and very, very early forties, the bands started coming out there. Fatha' Hines would come to Sweets Ballroom, and I think it only cost a dollar to get in so we would hop the A train from the Key System, the train turn-around there, the Key System turn down there in San Francisco. We'd hop the A train, we'd get off in downtown Oakland and walk the two blocks to Sweets Ballroom. We'd see Fatha' Hines, Count Basie came here in 1939. His first West Coast appearance was at Sweets Ballroom. We saw the Basie band.

Crawford:

What was the price of a ticket?

Watkins:

A dollar.

Crawford:

A dollar. [laughter] Fats Waller?

Watkins:

We saw Fats. He used to do movie shorts in Hollywood, and then he would be the voice on a lot of the cartoons, Flip the Frog cartoons, where they'd have the animated characters playing the piano and singing. Fats Waller would be one of them. So Fats came up. He did one of the theaters here. I'm not sure whether it was the Golden Gate or the Warfield. As a matter of fact at that time, he had Big Sid Catlett playing drums. Dexter Gordon, who was a teenager, was playing saxophone, and Fats, he played Sweets Ballroom also. You had Erskine Hawkins. What'd they call him? Anyhow, the trumpet—an excellent trumpet player. His band and his recordings, they were all excellent. They were an excellent dance band. His band, I saw him at Sweets Ballroom, and then of course in 1939, two friends of mine, we all drove down to Los Angeles on Labor Day. We got down there for the Labor Day weekend, 1939. We went out to the Santa Monica, to the pier out there, Santa Monica city out to the pier, and the Erskine

Hawkins Orchestra was playing out there. We went to hear the orchestra, and I've forgotten who they were playing opposite.

So then, that day—I think that was the night before—so that day we went to the hotel, and we had breakfast. And then we heard that there was going to be a parade. Central Avenue at that time, that was your Harlem of Los Angeles. So we heard that there was going to be a battle of bands. What they would do, they rented flatbed trucks, and at that time, that particular day, they had three bands on the flatbed trucks. One of them was the Count Basie Orchestra, the second one was the Jimmie Lunceford Orchestra, and the third one was the orchestra composed of members of the black musicians union there. Mainly, fellows from out of the Les Hite band. Marshall Royal had organized the band. He had Lee Young, Lester Young's brother, in there and, oh, any number of people. The bands would be a block apart, and they were driving up Central Avenue so the Basie band would play, and then when they finished their number, then the Lunceford orchestra would play, and then when they finished their number, the union band play. So we were running back and forth between the three trucks. That was a highlight of our visit.

Crawford:

Was there more jazz going on Central Avenue than, say, the Fillmore?

Watkins:

At that time, oh yeah. Well, not more—well, maybe so because of the population. There was a population, and that was an entertainment center. There was all kind of entertainment, and at that time the movies, the movie industry, they were doing a lot of musicals and a lot of movies featuring name bands. The Goodman band would come out here in the thirties. This was prior to the war and then, of course, during the war. Now Central Avenue, there's a book out called *Central Avenue Sounds*.

Crawford:

Yes, I've seen it.

Watkins:

And that book really gives you the history of the musical activity down there going way back to the Watts area when so many of the musicians came out of Watts.

[End Audio File 3]

Interview #3: November 10, 2003

[Begin Audio File 4]

Crawford:

Today I wanted to ask some fill-in questions, beginning with influences in your music. Which of the drummers influenced you most?

Watkins:

Krupa made “The Big Broadcast” in 1937 with the Goodman Orchestra and Krupa played “Sing, Sing, Sing” in that. He was a big influence. Then the drumming styles changed. I was impressed with Papa Joe Jones, the drummer with Count Basie, and then Philly Joe Jones with Miles Davis, and another big influence was Max Roach. He played with Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker and I heard them in the early 1940s. He accented the bass drum with the left hand differently than most—they just kept time but he had improvisational patterns and you couldn’t figure out how they did it!

Then Art Blakey came along at the Swing Club with the Billy Eckstine Orchestra—there on lower Seventh Street. You would hear the Blakey records and wonder how he did it. The bebop drummers really exerted the major influence. And don’t forget Buddy Rich with Artie Shaw, and then down through the years he advanced and he would just take on the current style and play it. A major influence on all drummers.

Crawford:

You said you heard Louis Armstrong and Billie Holiday in performance.

Watkins:

Louis Armstrong played the Golden Gate Theater and I saw him there, the only time I saw him in person. Dexter Gordon and Sid Catlett on drums. Louis was like the bridge between New Orleans traditional music and the beginnings of the Swing Era—completely changed the style when he came on the scene. The next bridge was Roy Eldridge—he is between Louis and Diz.

We accompanied Billie Holiday. I heard her at the Lincoln Theater in West Oakland on Lower Seventh Street, and they booked her in early 1940s as a single. I was working at the North Pole, a hangout for all the politicians from downtown. The pianist was Don Anderson and our intermissions coincided with her show and I was practically onstage with her. We nodded but she was a star and who was I—then she came to San Francisco and I missed her at the Say When and Café Society—I was working.

In 1953 she was booked into the Downbeat on 90 Market Street in San Francisco, and I was in the house band, the Jerome Richardson Quartet and we accompanied her for two weeks. Her pianist had a problem and couldn’t play. Cedric Haywood was Jerome’s pianist and George Morrow was the bassist, I was the drummer and we backed Billie Holiday. I had been listening

to her from the time I was a teenager. There was only one Billie Holiday and even if she wasn't in the best of health the spark was there.

Crawford:

Would you talk about Earl Fatha' Hines and your work with him in more detail?

Watkins:

I used to listen to him on the radio and then he would come to the Bay Area with his big band, and then later the big band era faded out and Hines went with Louis Armstrong. Hines came to San Francisco with Louis and they played the Hangover Club in the late 40s, early 50s, and then in '49 or maybe even '50 he and Cozy Cole both played with Louis at the Hangover Club, and our champagne supper club in the Western Addition. I was working at the Say When Club on Bush Street, 700 block of Bush.

We were playing away one time, and these two very attractive girls, colored girls came in. They were highly sophisticated in their dress and hair style and I could tell they weren't local girls. So we took intermission and we cozied up to the bar and said hello to them and they said, "I'm Mrs. Hines and this is Mrs. Cole and our husbands are playing with Louis Armstrong." That took on a new dimension. So out of respect for their husbands the place was theirs. We showed them the utmost respect and courtesy. That had to be '49 or '50.

But little did I realize that having all these contacts—having Earl Fatha' Hines records, listening to him as a kid and watching him at Sweets Ballroom and dancing to his music—that I would work for him. And then I was fascinated with Billy Eckstine and his beautiful baritone voice.

Crawford:

How was the first connection with Hines made?

Watkins:

In 1954 when I joined Bob Scobey. The owner of the Hangover Club on Sunday nights would be a regular at the Tin Angel. Little did I realize that when I saw in 1955 that Fatha' Hines was opening at the Hangover that the owner would ask me: "Earl, what are you doing here? Why aren't you with Bob Scobey?"

I related to him the information that the regular drummer and part of the Lu Watters gang, that Scobey's drummer had come back to the band and that I wasn't doing anything at the moment and Doc Dougherty asked: "How would you like to play in this band?" Well, I was aghast, said "Why, of course!" and he said "come back in two weeks and we'll see."

So in two weeks I went back and he said "well, bring your drums—rehearsal is on Wednesday"--and sure enough, I brought my drums and sat in with the band. I had had a year with Scobey and knew all the Dixieland routines—and I had heard Hines, followed him and even practiced to recordings of his big band, and so he was a snap to play with. Being with Vernon Alley and in

the house band at the Blackhawk we had played with and opposite practically everybody who had come through. We would accompany whoever came through. If a singer came through the Blackhawk or a saxophone player or whatever, Vernon Alley's band would play for them; if it was a pianist there we would play intermissions.

So playing with him was a snap. Hines wasn't really a Dixieland player, but the times being what they were the big bands having faded or having reduced their activities, Hines had a Dixieland group. Doc Dougherty hired individual musicians and put the band together. Hines was supposed to play intermission but he wanted to play with the band, so Joe Sullivan played intermissions and he played with the bands.

Hines wasn't happy with his drummer or his bass player, because he was very inventive and prolific—he was jazz royalty. He was classically trained, from Pittsburgh, he'd played organ in the church, and had been discovered by a fellow, a singer named Louis Depp and he was the one who took Fatha' Hines on the road and then to Chicago. Hines was a monster as a pianist. He'd heard Fats Waller and James P. Johnson--had been exposed to everyone and was like a sponge and he could absorb everything everybody was doing. He could read—he was a reading musician—and also they played shows. Played for chorus girls and for singers so he had all this exposure on top of his classical background. His parents he told us wanted him to be a concert master.

He would go to clubs as a kid—one piano player had a tremendous right hand and one had a tremendous left, and Hines said going back and forth on the daytime shift he would get close to the piano and watch the left hand and then the right hand, and he took them cigars, and that way he developed his own style. Lucky Roberts was supposed to be a great pianist and they would arrange a cutting session between two of them—him and heavyweight stride pianists like Willie the Lion Smith, James P. Johnson.

When they set up the Grand Terrace—Al Capone and the syndicate—in 1929—they recruited Hines as the bandleader. There was a cabaret, night club, restaurant, and they had tap dancing, a girls' line, and that meant the band had to play shows so he was exposed to all this. And this was a time when you had to play everything. Whatever the situation called for.

As I said I joined him in October 1955 and was with him until 1963 and from time to time he would give us snippets of his background. That plus what I've read. He used to tell us about these two piano players, and of course his book—he has a book out—written by Stanley Dance, the English jazz critic who brought Hines out of California and put him back on the road after I left.

As a matter of fact, at the Hangover in '58, '59 Hines was getting antsy and he left. He went to New York and they built a band around him—with Kaminsky, Peanuts Hucko, Jack Teagarden, Cozy Cole. Dance arranged for them to go to Europe on a tour. Hines had been known internationally, and Count Basie and the Duke were out there as part of jazz royalty and he was getting antsy.

Crawford:

Why did he stay so long?

Watkins:

He was torn between staying here and putting his wife in business and he could see that the big bands were just about dead. And while here he got lucky. The job at the Hangover was a five-year job, 1955-1960, but the owner got upset because Hines pulled out three times. But he had a steady job and then got a radio show every Saturday morning up there at the Palace Hotel. He played and talked, and then he had an exclusive recording contract with Fantasy Records.

When he first came here he had financial problems. At Grand Terrace his name was in front, he had backers, but it turned out to be a failure. He said the help stole them blind and he got stuck with taxes and everything, because his name was in front, so what happened is that Joe Glazer put him with Louis Armstrong. He got him off the financial hook and put him with Louis Armstrong. So then he traveled with Armstrong and he paid the agency.

So then he got antsy again and left Louis with Glazer booking him but Glazer wouldn't give him enough work to sustain himself and keep the band going. It was small, about seven musicians. Louis wanted him to go back with Louis, but Hines had had a falling out with Louis and he didn't want to go back with Louis. So he traveled with the seven, then a trio, and sometimes as a single, picking up whatever work he could find.

Then in Las Vegas he played at this casino—a mixed casino—for the first time in the history of the state. This was 1955, and Hines was working there and he was signing for everything, for his room and everything, and for some reason he got involved at the dice table, and his luck wasn't so good, and he got several thousand dollars in the hole, and the gangsters weren't going to let him out of Las Vegas. You'd see somebody in Vegas sign at a huge salary, and, sure, they'd sign him, but they didn't pay them the salary because he was in debt up to his ears. Louis Prima was in debt. So when Hines got to San Francisco he was in debt to the music union, to the IRS, to Glazer—up to his ears. So that was one reason he stayed in San Francisco, to try to get on his feet.

Crawford:

What kind of person was Hines?

Watkins:

Very charming. He knew the music business. He could put a band together, and if he put a band together the aesthetics—the costumes were...when we went on the road with him we had uniforms made up and he had a black mohair suit and we had beautiful green suits you could wear for business or anything. He was conservative, but there was elegance. If you ever saw Nat King Cole and you saw Hines, you would see Nat King Cole as his shadow. Processed his hair like Hines, dressed like him.

Nat King Cole had a band growing up in Chicago called the Bandits and they would go to the Grand Terrace and copy the Hines' arrangements—Hines could write and compose and arrange,

he was wonderful. He was impeccable, a great storyteller, oozing with charm. And then there was the side as business manager. The salaries, like most bandleaders, the salaries. [laughs]

Crawford:

How did you do with Hines?

Watkins:

I have to say I did well. We were paid by the club owners. But we did well. Fatha' Hines bought a house in the Trestle Glen area of Oakland off Lakeshore and at the time, the late '50s, he probably paid \$30,000. That same home sold recently for \$750,000. And of course he bought two new Oldsmobiles while I was with him. Before that he rented cars until he decided to buy. He furnished that house tastefully. He had flair, theatrical flair, and if you read his book it's a marvelous story the way they have it set up. And then too he had a lot of pride and a lot of vanity. He started wearing a toupee [laughs]

Crawford:

Was he a ladies man?

Watkins:

In his youth I think he was. In Chicago—eastern cultures are different. I think we viewed women differently out here. We were more family oriented. Economics were big back east. You had abject poverty in certain areas in the east—you had lot of immigrants and the areas were divided and I think the European men treat women differently. I think we have a little more respect in the west—especially California. Hines was very respectful. He was a married man, and far as I know he treated women with respect.

Crawford:

Were there more or less drug problems out here?

Watkins:

We had more alcohol. Alcohol was a big thing here. AA goes way back and then church groups, departments in the church, tried to deal with the problems of alcohol. We had bootleggers. When my parents would entertain you'd call the bootlegger and order a half gallon of red and a half gallon of white and he would deliver for two or three dollars. So alcohol was a problem but hard drugs—marijuana you could buy with a doctor's prescription and they could go to the drugstore or apothecary and they'd have cannabis in jars and drugs would be prescribed for appetite, stomach aches—I read that because we didn't get that exposure.

Another thing was morphine—the doctors would prescribe that but I don't think there was the abuse, the violence, out here anyhow. Back east in Chicago you had turf problems, New York

too, but out here, we didn't have the violence. As a kid growing up I'd hear about these things but they were prescribed. So alcohol was the big thing and the abuse, the addiction.

Crawford:

Are musicians more susceptible?

Watkins:

We got that reputation. But you had musicians who were stable raising families and educating their kids. Vernon Alley's brother never drank or smoked and he's 93. I never drank or smoked much.

Crawford:

You seem pretty healthy.

Watkins:

I think so! [laughs]

Crawford:

What happened when Fatha' Hines left San Francisco?

Watkins:

When Hines left we put Ralph Sutton in. Joe Sullivan see drank a lot. He would bring in a pint and the owner would take it and pour off half of it and fill it with water and Joe would kill that during the evening and go across the street and buy another half pint and drink that. When he was gone first for a month. Muggsy Spanier then took over the leadership. Then in 1960 Hines pulled the band and we went out for a month. Also in 58 for a short time. We went to Cleveland, to Toronto, Canada, to Rochester, to Buffalo, to Detroit, and Detroit home. Muggsy was working with us at the time.

Crawford:

What were the accommodations like?

Watkins:

Very good. Fatha' Hines took care of the details. The itinerary was set and he made the arrangements with the hotels. We flew except we went from Toronto to Buffalo by train, and Buffalo-Detroit and Rochester-New York by train.

Crawford:

How about the audiences?

Watkins:

Audiences were good. They came to see the name. At that time small bands had a regular night club circuit. In Toronto we played Colonial Tavern, the top cabaret-nightclub—we played there three times—and in Rochester Brubeck had played there and in the one in Buffalo and New York other Dixieland bands had played. In Detroit at the Baker's Keyboard Lounge—Miles and Dizzy had played there—it was top of the line.

Then we came back to the Hangover Club. In 1960 Hines talked Doc Dougherty into hiring Joe Derensburg and Jimmy Rushing, the singer, as a front guy. It was a complete disaster and the owner just closed up the club. In later years I visited Doc in Fairfax and he said he closed up because he had told Hines not to leave because he had a home there.

When Hines left in 1960 he took the whole band except Muggsy—in 1958 he took Muggsy, the trombone player and me and in 1959 he went by himself. In 1960 he took whole band and after that we played at the Black Sheep.

In February, '61 we came back from Chicago and didn't have a job. Hines got this job at the Black Sheep and played there during 1961, then he went on the road and came back in December '61 to the Black Sheep and then in 1962 Hines took us to the Brookdale Lodge—just out of Santa Cruz—during summer.

Then in the summer of '62 we went to Detroit, Canada—the Colonial Tavern—then we went to the Iroquois in London, Ontario—that was the big spot. Then we went to New York and did the Today Show just briefly. It was the morning show, which was more politically oriented. From there we went to the Latin Casino in Cherry Hill in New Jersey. Big place with a Las Vegas style, with a dining room seating 2500 people. A line of girls. George Kirby and Ella Fitzgerald had been headliners there, and the night before Ella opened she came into the lounge and listened to us and George Kirby sat in with us—he did his imitation of a trombone. [laughs]

I got to talk to Ella—she was very, very pleasant—and the piano player knew the local musicians. The drummer had been in Hollywood with the Teenagers in 40s and he was playing for Ella. The drummer had gotten a Dear John letter and his spirits were low and we got him to come to our motel and he and Eddie Smith and I would hang out together. That was the Club Hangover band.

After the casino we went to Dayton, to a German club, and by then it was October, I believe, so I told the fellows to put my drums on the airplane, and I went back to Toronto and at night I'd hang out at the First Floor Club and in the daytime I went to Oscar Peterson's school there and at the After Hours Club I'd hang out with the recording musicians.

Ed Bickert would sit in, Peter Appleyard, vibraphonist—I knew them and hung out with them. And in 1961 Nat King Cole came up there. They shut down Detroit after hours and they did a special. His drummer Lee Young and John Collins, the guitarist, and I all stayed in the same motel and we hung out together. I've just been SO blessed!

Crawford:

You have. I wanted to ask you about the language of drumming.

Watkins:

We have what we call rudiments and these exercises are the equivalent of the scales of instruments. “Peradiddle” is part of our language. “Ratamacue” is another. Cozy Cole when he was with Cab Calloway, and Dizzy was with Cab, he wrote two tunes, “Ratamacue” and “Peradiddle.” “Dropping bombs” means accent the bass drum—“four-stroke ruff and a drag”—that’s a rudiment. And “cymbal” is when you ride the cymbal. Ride cymbal. The horn player can say “I want you to use your sizzle cymbal, or man, I like your ping cymbal”—some have overtones and some don’t. [makes drum sounds]. Others splash and the sound dissipates and the pulse is not as positive. It’s a different kind of pulse. Well, it’s difficult unless I’m talking to another drummer! [laughter]

Crawford:

I understand. Let’s move on to bebop—the early 1940s and Dizzy and Charlie Parker.

Watkins:

Dizzy and Charlie Parker are your principal exponents. Art Tatum wasn’t really, but instead of basic chords—sevenths and ninths he’d play a flatted fifth, elevenths, thirteenth, and you’d expand the harmony. And voicings, the background expanded, so that you had the bebop sound. You’d phrase triplets and sixteenths extremely fast. Before that you had the moldy figs, your mainstream. But Dizzie and Charlie Parker completely changed the sound.

Crawford:

Who were “the moldy figs” again?

Watkins:

The lower, original forms of Dixieland—it referred to Dixieland. And mainstream. So at each level the tone quality got better, there was a lot of improvising, and every intonation, sound, voicing got better, more modern.

Crawford:

Were white musicians involved initially?

Watkins:

Oh yes, why, they heard this and they were amazed. It was something they’d never heard before. Just like people who like classical music used to look on jazz as devil’s music, as lower class, as degrading. But the music kept advancing. Some of our classical moderns—Gershwin—the music was evolving like anything else. It got away from the old style and got better, evolved.

Like anything else, styles in clothing, vehicles; we're in to computers now. You never have dreamed that we could do what we do. And so with music—it changes. And young musicians—ethnicity doesn't matter. In Japan there are very advanced players. I went down to Yoshi's and heard a Japanese drummer—outstanding! Tasty, marvelous technique.

Drummers' styles have changed. Before you kept 4/4 time—if you got away from that the fellows would look around—what are you trying to do, play melody? Keep time! But now there are certain patterns you have to play—reggae, hip hop--the beats that go with that style or it doesn't sound like what it's supposed to. Most of the innovations have been in the rhythm section: basses, guitar, pianists, and drums have gone to the limit!

Crawford:

You said “tasty” about the young drummer--what is your style? Are you a dazzling drummer?

Watkins:

No, I try to lay a cushion down and accompany soloists. No, you are there to lay a foundation for soloists and that's my philosophy. But the modern style has evolved and grown beyond beboppers. It's not only accepted, people you play with demand that and they are looking for you to play like Max Roach and Art Blakey played. A guy like Sid Catlett is at home with any style. You have to develop technique and have full control of your instrument, so that if you hear or see something you can play it. If people want to hear that, you know what beats fit and what is coming. You know the introduction, the interludes--otherwise the music loses something.

Crawford:

Let's talk about some of the specific clubs. You know I've talked to Dave Brubeck, who is a Californian and loves the state, and he especially loved the Blackhawk Club--why was it so special?

Watkins:

The audiences were so receptive, and you could play anything you wanted. Management was music-friendly, too, and the same with the Hangover, which drew people from all over the world. Regulars came from Portland and Seattle and Coos Bay. One fellow was a Nisei, a Japanese-American who had settled in Japan. He would come in—big spender—and always invited us: “Come over, my wife will cook steaks for you. PLEASE COME!” It never happened.

Crawford:

I have read about Blanco's Club. What was the story there?

Watkins:

Blanco's Cotton Club after many names is the Great American Music Hall.

On Ellis between Polk and Larkin. It was called the Music Box and in the late 20s there were the Dumkin Sisters and they drew a tremendous crowd and were the featured act there.

Then it was the Moose Club and then an upscale restaurant, and then in mid-1948 two fellows renamed it Blanco's Cotton Club and they took it over and it was located east of Van Ness Avenue. No one hired colored east of the Avenue but the two new owners wanted an all-colored motif—a line of girls, a cabaret, a union band—and the bartenders and culinary unions said he was using non-contract people.

Our business agent Alex Forbes, for the black union local, said he would sue if they picketed, so they relented and gave permits, not membership cards, but permits to the bartenders and the others, and it was a huge success. I was in the house band with Allen Smith, Curtis Lowe and Johnny Cooper—famous or infamous as musicians.

It was a huge success until Lionel Hampton played in Oakland, and Hampton's managers went over there and sold management a bill of goods about how great he was and what he could do for the club, and so they bought it and put us all on notice, not realizing that all those bands are good for a one-night dance engagement, but they couldn't sustain two weeks at a club.

Hampton opened Labor Day 1948, the place was packed, but what happened was they put a cover charge—which they didn't have before—and when the people left they had no money. So next week nobody came. Our agent got into a fist fight with management trying to collect for Lionel Hampton. But the other agencies had gotten wind of this beautiful spot and they booked Cab Calloway in for two weeks, eight musicians, and nobody came and they had trouble making payroll. And after a few weeks the club closed down. So instead of sticking with the locals they went for the big names and they were gone in three weeks.

Crawford:

What did people drink and eat in the clubs. And dress?

Watkins:

There was always chicken, they would have steak and pork chops and rice and beans. If you had a liquor license you had to have food. During the war the Fillmore exploded. Today if you have liquor I hear you have to have food. At black clubs people dressed and they danced. You might be denied admission if you didn't wear a tie. Mohair and silk and fine woolen suits, and some of the men wore hats. The musicians had uniforms.

Crawford: Were they dangerous?

Watkins:

No, you could walk out of Blackhawk at 2a.m. and nobody would bother you. Same in Oakland on Seventh Street. The police might stop a mixed group, and if someone were drunk they might take them home. But no, nobody bothered you.

Crawford:

What has happened to the San Francisco scene? Pearls just closed and there are few others operating. [Pearl's recently reopened in 2004]

Watkins:

It's economics. Young people are your core but they don't have the money. And people at home get used to you and take you for granted. I'm lucky at Scott's. Jack London Square has tourists and people come there to that nice environment—it's restful—and people say, "Let's go to Jack London Square, to the farmer's market." It's casual and you don't have to dress up.

But San Francisco was the magnet—people would come from all over the Bay Area. And now we have the gas problem--when the prices started to go up the economics entered the picture. Right after the war when the war industries shut down disposable income dried up, and people were raising families and going to school and pretty soon priorities are different and you can't go out and hang out all night like you used to.

Crawford:

You have had a long history with the unions, and I'd like to go into the details of union development a little more. Could you say something about the history of the racially separated unions, I think the black local was 669, a subsidiary of American Federation of Musicians, Local 6, and what inspired the merger?

Watkins:

We were a subsidiary of the parent local, Local 6. We joined that because the white local, they wouldn't take in any black musicians or Asian musicians. They took in Hawaiians because at one time Hawaiian music was the big thing in San Francisco, as a matter of fact, all up and down the coast. They hired Hawaiian groups to play in major hotels. So Local 648 was the black local.

In the mid-30s, I was told this by Wilbert Baranco, who was working at the Dawn Club downtown behind the Palace Hotel. We were usually relegated to the Fillmore District, as I've said. We couldn't play on the other side of Van Ness Avenue except for maybe just a few instances where selectively there would be a group.

In Oakland, all out East Fourteenth Street from Broadway going east, there were all kinds of restaurants and clubs and cabarets before the war and even during the war, but they were Italian owned, and the clientele was white, Italian and Portuguese, and we couldn't play there. Not only that, they wouldn't serve you. After the war things started to open up because they needed the business to stay open. Things eased up too because the Fair Employment Practices Act came into being and since we went to war and risked our lives, why, we demanded to be treated as human beings.

But anyhow Wilbert Baranco was playing at the Dawn Club. That was in the mid-30s and it was an accomplishment. One day Wilbert came to work and his instruments had been moved and

there was a Local 6 union band on the stand. Wilbert had a contract and so he sued. He didn't win the lawsuit and the AFM pulled the charter and then they set up this subsidiary local, until 1945. Then Petrillo abolished the subsidiaries, and the parent local was given the choice of taking in the minorities or issuing new charters to these newly formed black unions. So we became Local 669.

On many occasions we petitioned for amalgamation and were turned down. In 1959 the state of California brought a discrimination suit [against AFM Local 6 and Local 669] because we were in conflict with the FEPA. Petrillo sent the team...we all sat down at a table. I was on the board of directors of Local 669, and we hammered out this agreement, and we merged, April 1, 1960.

Some of our people feel as though maybe we made a mistake because we lost our identity. I was lucky because I benefited by it in a way—I was appointed to committees and after five years I was appointed to be the Oakland branch office secretary. 1965. By then rock and roll had come into the picture and jazz players were just being shoved out of the door. Rhythm and blues was bad enough...but what really pushed us out of the door was rock and roll.

But in 1965 we instituted the pension plan and I was getting pension contributions from my office salary and from my salary at the Claremont Hotel. I was the branch secretary. I would take dues in, write up all the dues, do the banking. People called in, I'd give them the wage scales. We also had a system where if I'm the bandleader and you work for me I'd give you an advancement tag and you could take it to the union and you'd get your money the next day. Once a week I'd go over to the City for a reconciliation of our books with their books over there.

Crawford:

You mentioned Martin Luther King and the push for integration that he inspired.

Watkins:

At that time with Martin Luther King, the big thing was integration. It was felt you were denied so much—an education, a decent place to eat, movies in certain sections—we didn't have the problem—but it felt that you could get into the good life, and people wanted to integrate.

Alex Forbes, who was big in the union, he worked in an insurance company downtown and he wanted amalgamation—he thought doors would open for the black musicians. Los Angeles felt that way, because the studios were closed to black musicians so it was felt in LA that integration would be good. A few opened but it's not that open any more.. We thought we'd have better housing, better environment, schools, jobs—everything would be better, that with integration there wouldn't be this hostility and violence inflicted on the minority community. We felt that integration would put an end to all of that.

Crawford:

Did it?

Watkins:

Good question. The AFM has programs now where they are trying to bring talented black musicians to an in-between period with orchestras so they can get exposure in classical music, studio music, legitimate music, so that if an opening comes up you can get a black musician in there. If you look at classical music you see Asians there.

Crawford:

Is that a question of qualifications?

Watkins:

The excuse is that they aren't qualified. That's what they tell you .We had Elayne Jones in the San Francisco Symphony, but when the probation period passed they wanted to keep her on probation and didn't give her tenure and she sued them on the basis of discrimination and ended up in the opera orchestra. Kurt Adler took her. I don't know what happened to her.

Crawford:

She was a Bajan and went back to live in Barbados some years ago, I think.

Watkins:

She was wonderful and would make a point of coming to say hello when she came into the union office.

Crawford:

Today how many African Americans are there in the symphony, ballet and opera orchestras? You told me you hire from the union today—who gets the jobs?

Watkins:

There aren't any today. We had Elayne Jones and we had Denis deCoteau. After him there haven't been any.

Crawford:

Very discouraging! Would you talk about your activities in the union now.

Watkins:

I'm on board, serving my third term on the board. I got the highest number of votes in the election, so I'm a trustee. Before, if anything happened to the president of the union, whoever got the highest vote would be head trustee.

Now we have a vice president, but when I was assistant to the treasurer, from 1994, I tried to help everybody. I'd get the phone calls and then when they closed the Oakland office and moved

all of us to San Francisco, any time there was an infraction and a case before the board of directors I would have to set the case up and do all the background work and handle all the traveling of the members of the organization. I would do all that and when I ran for office I guess it was payback time. When they reduced the staff , why they wrote the job I was doing out of the budget along with the other two old timers in 1994, so I ran for the board and this is my third term.

Crawford:

Congratulations! That is quite a tribute.

Watkins:

Well, I knew everybody. I don't know all the young people now. But we meet every other Thursday and we deal with policy questions.

Crawford:

Are hip hop musicians joining?

Watkins:

So many don't join because they think the union is not getting them any work, and it is true we don't have a hiring hall like the Teamsters. You can't send out a hip-hop artist to a show, or a wedding. They don't know it. They do their own original music. They've always had to hustle their own work. And their parents may belong to Teamsters or Longshoremen or be civil servants who have health programs. It used to be you could join Kaiser as a group but you paid your own premium. We don't have that now. Kaiser is one of the best but they don't cover you fully.

Crawford:

So what do they do?

Watkins:

You have to look up your own health plan and pay your own premium. I was at Kaiser for years. We do have a pension plan. Employers put that into your contract and pay the pension. You write it into your contract and the employer pays into that. He has to make out a separate pension check and fill out a form and that goes to the pension department. And the pension participation agreement gives the pension department leeway to come into the club and look at the books if you aren't making the contribution you should.

The Federal Government has placed a lot of requirements and restrictions on pension plans, especially the union pension plans. Corporations are hostile to these and the government is right now in bed with corporate America. Ours has been under attack since its inception.

Our industry resented it. The recording industry had steady employment, and the theater, symphony, ballet and opera have pretty steady employment, but night clubs come and go. We once had restaurant and hotel associations, and as an owner you would belong. The unions would negotiate with the unions, so then you didn't have to deal with the individual hotels, but then corporate America started buying the hotels—Mariotts and Hiltons—then you had to deal individually because a lot of the associations and others went belly up and wouldn't have anything to do with unions. Our membership is failing—we are down to less than 14 percent of the work force. We're way down.

Crawford:

You said, and I agree, that you have been blessed in your life. Can you fill me in?

Watkins:

You know, you come into this world with nothing, and if you are lucky enough to have an affluent family with the values you hear so much about and if they try to get you an education and you can hook into the old boy network through parents—you are lucky if you can make a living, get married, put your kids in college.

For me I just feel I'm blessed because I come from humble beginnings. My father was a chauffeur, which was a good job for the time, but losing my mother at fourteen and being boarded out and having practically to raise myself...even as a kid I had to buy my own clothes, and I was twenty-two when I left home and got married and was on my own. What can I say? Even now my phone never stops ringing, because the musicians don't want to contact the bureaucracy—the personal touch is lost—and I can still refer them.

Crawford:

Thank you so much, Earl. This is a fine interview and I have enjoyed working with you very much.

[End of interview]