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Joanne Brackeen

Joanne Brackeen was born in Ventura, California on July 26, 1938. A self-taught jazz pianist, she worked in Los Angeles with Dexter Gordon and Charles Lloyd and moved to New York in 1965. Joanne has recorded her original compositions with Art Blakey, Stan Getz and Joe Henderson and leads her own trio in performances here and abroad.

Joanne was interviewed in New York City on January 10, 2001, by Monk Rowe, director of the Hamilton College Jazz Archive.

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- 12 MR: My name is Monk Rowe and we are filming in New York City at the International
13 Association of Jazz Educators. And I'm very pleased to have Joanne Brackeen here. And
14 welcome and thank you very much for coming.
- 15 JB: Oh you're welcome.
- 16 MR: I'd like to congratulate you on your career so far.
- 17 JB: Thank you.
- 18 MR: It's an interesting read. And I'd like to venture kind of guess that your composing is just
19 as important as your playing? Perhaps more so?
- 20 JB: Well I don't know about that. But it's definitely very important, yeah. I mean a lot of my
21 playing, the development of my playing I feel came out of learning how to play the
22 compositions that I play, and the compositions very often come as spontaneously as
23 improvising does. Parts. I mean I don't just sit down and play and spontaneously that's a
24 composition, although that could happen. But I'll edit and put this here or there.
25 Whatever. But many times when I'm doing parts of a composition I'm playing some
26 things that I've never played before and when I write them down and try to play them
27 again I can't do it.
- 28 MR: Isn't that interesting.
- 29 JB: So you're coming from another place which is very similar to the place that happens
30 when I am improvising. So I would say they're very, very connected.
- 31 MR: Sometimes when you look at a piece of music rhythmically, written down, it does seem
32 harder to play when you're reading it than just in doing it.
- 33 JB: Well I didn't mean that, that's definitely true in my case, but I didn't mean just that. No
34 even if you know what that is, it's not like that, it's like somebody else wrote this, how in
35 the world could someone play this. And then in a week or whatever I've got it.
- 36 MR: What kind of caught your ear when you were young, that led you down this path?
- 37 JB: The sound of the piano. Simple as that. I love the sound of the piano. And it's interesting
38 too because when I hear the sound of the piano I love it, but I also hear a sound of an

39 orchestra inside the sound of the piano. So I wrote a string quartet, it was very easy for
40 me to play the violin part. It's like I'm already hearing that. So it's something I didn't
41 really notice, but it was there from the beginning, I hear an orchestra there.

42 MR: I read an interesting little tidbit, that someone said that one of your early influences was
43 Frankie Carle?

44 JB: Um hmm. Absolutely. Really that was how I learned how to play. I liked his solos. I liked
45 his piano playing. And there was one album, I think it was called "Frankie Carle and his
46 Girlfriends," and so it was like Diane and Charmaine and Louise and I learned these solos
47 note for note when I was eleven. I played them actually. I began performing them.

48 MR: No kidding?

49 JB: The whole solos, the whole thing, exactly what you heard on the record, that's what I
50 played. So after doing maybe six months of that, and maybe I did eight or ten of them, I
51 knew how to play the piano.

52 MR: When you were playing them, I'm trying to figure out how to say this, did you know
53 what you were playing from a harmonic standpoint?

54 JB: I just heard. I still, that's how I go now, what I do now. People say "what's that" and
55 "what's that," and I say well it's the music, here it is, this is what it is. And I still don't
56 have a definite definition of everything.

57 MR: Interesting. When you do a lead sheet on a new composition.

58 JB: I try. I try.

59 MR: You come as close as the chord language will allow?

60 JB: Well sometimes it's like a one chord over another chord, but the other chord has maybe
61 it's over the third of that chord, but you also have to have the tonic, the root of that in
62 there too. So it's like well you want the E flat but if you called it an E flat that would be
63 on the bottom but it's not. So then I've got three chords there. So there are different ways
64 to notate it by the time I look at that I would never just spontaneously figure it out. So I
65 do what I can.

66 MR: Was Los Angeles — that's where you're from, correct?

67 JB: Um hum. Actually born in Ventura.

68 MR: Was it a good musical atmosphere to grow up in?

69 JB: Well it had been. It was before I was there. And a little bit was still left. There was a lot
70 of jazz there when I was too young to ...

71 MR: Central Avenue and that ...

72 JB: Yeah. There was a lot. But there was a little bit left by the time I was fifteen, sixteen,
73 seventeen, and I got out to hear that. I heard Art Blakey, I heard Johnny Griffin, and of
74 course I heard Coltrane and I heard a lot of things, McCoy Tyner. It wasn't like New
75 York. And I always had a feeling that I wanted to be in New York, since I was six years

76 old I was growing — and I've never heard or seen anything — but I was growing these
77 apartment buildings with little mice sticking out of them for people, like a lot of people in
78 every window. It was very funny.

79 MR: Neat.

80 JB: Yeah.

81 MR: How did your parents feel about your ... the direction you seemed to be embracing in
82 music?

83 JB: Well they didn't seem to think too much about it until they started hearing me on the
84 radio and then they began to get a bit proud about it, when their friends said "oh I heard
85 your daughter on the radio." They liked that.

86 MR: And I read you played with quite a good list of tenor players early on.

87 JB: Um hum.

88 MR: Harold Land and that group.

89 JB: Yeah, they were from California, Harold Land, Teddy Edwards, Charles Lloyd. Those
90 are the people that you would recognize. There were other people who just kind of that
91 lived in this area that you wouldn't have heard of so much. Walter Benton was one of the
92 major people there. Ray Graziano. There were other people but the people that we are
93 speaking of are the ones that are kind of known all over.

94 MR: Uh huh. So in order to play with these musicians, what kind of preparation did you
95 undergo. Was it — did someone tell you to learn the standards and all that?

96 JB: No. Nobody told me anything.

97 MR: No kidding.

98 JB: It was very weird. They didn't have really schools that much. There was one school
99 called the Westlake College of Music. And my parents took me there when I was
100 fourteen and I remember studying a little bit with a piano player named Dave Robertson
101 and also one named Gene Garff. And I remember Gene Garff liked Art Tatum a lot and I
102 didn't at that time. And they would give me a tune a week or something, I would learn a
103 tune, and it would be a standard. They didn't say anything and it really, there was no way
104 that you learned scales and how to play on things, they just said here's a tune, you know,
105 improvise on it. So I did. It was kind of hard. But I learned how to do it. I don't know
106 how I did. And then of course I heard Charlie Parker and that did it for me when I heard
107 that. You know whatever Art Tatum had done for the previous piano teacher, Charlie
108 Parker did that for me. And then of course Bud Powell. So those were my favorites right
109 when I was like seventeen, eighteen. And I used to transcribe the whole thing you know,
110 so I could play it on the record, like a record like that over there, that's what we had are
111 33's. And I'd put the record on, transcribe the Bird solo and the Bud solo, so I could play
112 the whole thing. And it would be a half a tone sharp so if it was in the key of F it would

113 be G flat. But you know the funny thing about not knowing anything too much and not
114 having many teachers was that I didn't know that was hard, or I didn't think too much, it
115 was just something I really liked to do. And I thought that the feeling of the music was
116 incredible. I still feel that way when I hear Bird and Bud. Nothing left. So those two are
117 really amazing. A lot of times you hear music, of course I have a different opinion of Art
118 Tatum, I love him now too. But sometimes you know you hear music and it seems to —
119 it changes. It doesn't but you change and so it sounds changed. But they didn't.

120 MR: Do you think Tatum was perhaps too technical for your ears at the time? Or can you think
121 back on that?

122 JB: I don't know what it was. I kind of liked the rhythmical feeling of what Bird and Diz and
123 many other people too, Tommy Flanagan was one of the first people I heard, Sonny
124 Rollins, I just thought they were fantastic. I like the rhythmical essence there, and while
125 Art Tatum had it, he would kind of venture off of it and then like, now why is he doing
126 that. But then later on, as you get to know the piano better, he is totally amazing. And I
127 love him. And I can listen to him any mood at any time.

128 MR: Um hum. I like the statement you pointed out just a moment ago though about the not
129 knowing something was supposed to be difficult.

130 JB: Yes. No, there were no teachers then.

131 MR: Right. So it didn't get in your way, that you had to play in the key of G flat.

132 JB: No, I didn't know.

133 MR: Very interesting. Was there a point where you said to yourself I'm going to make a career
134 out of this.

135 JB: Yes but it was much, much later than you would think. I didn't do it for a very long time.
136 I would say, let's see, it was one year before people began to know who I was. 1968, I
137 thought, you know I think I want to really do this. I didn't really define what it was or
138 who I wanted to do it with but that I think was already defined in what I heard and what I
139 felt and the people who played in that kind of an essence. A strong, a kind of a really
140 strong feeling.

141 MR: Did you do non-musical work before, to make a living, before you kind of jumped into
142 the music thing?

143 JB: No I mean I was always a musician.

144 MR: You were always a musician.

145 JB: Yeah, yeah. I started when I was eleven, so I was working by the time I was twelve.

146 MR: Can you remember what you made on your first paying gig?

147 JB: No. I don't. But well there was one that I do remember, because I remember being able to
148 go out and buy a coat, a cashmere coat. This was so long ago, of what would be the —
149 what it would be now I can't imagine. I guess if you would times it by twenty, it would

150 be maybe about two thousand dollars a week now, what it was then. But that was when I
151 was a teenager. I was still in high school and I was working six nights a week in this club.
152 It was like a Latin club, it was called the Million Dollar Theater and we played Latin
153 music. So that was fun. Six nights a week and then I had to try to get to school the next
154 day.

155 MR: Did your friends think that was pretty outrageous?

156 JB: Most of them didn't know.

157 MR: Oh.

158 JB: Only a few people know. I didn't tell everybody. Because that was another world that
159 was busy, and then there was the school world.

160 MR: Yeah. Were you anxious to get out of public school?

161 JB: I didn't really think school had much value for me after the age of ten or eleven. I had a
162 few teachers that I did like, and I liked the way they taught, and that's what intrigued — I
163 wouldn't care what the subject was, there were a few teachers, but not too many. Most of
164 it I thought was kind of a waste of time.

165 MR: So the pull of New York eventually got you I would imagine?

166 JB: Yes. Well I was married then and my husband was from New York.

167 MR: Charles?

168 JB: And he wanted to come back, yeah. So we came back and we already had three children
169 so we brought them back and then I had a fourth one here.

170 MR: Was it culture shock?

171 JB: No. No. It felt like that's where I should have been from the beginning. Even though I
172 love California, it's beautiful, and being by the ocean, I have to be by the water. Even
173 now you look out my apartment and you see water. And I also have a beach house that
174 reminds me of the place I was born. And it's on the east coast but you know it's kind of
175 like I need both of those things: the busy, busy city and the very, very quiet by the ocean.

176 MR: Do you think there is a west coast sound for jazz? You kind of always see that in the
177 history books.

178 JB: Well you know I mean the people that I heard probably because there was more west
179 coast jazz. Friends introduced me to — I was talking to Chico Hamilton who teaches at
180 the New School, telling him he was one of my first influences because it was Gerry
181 Mulligan and Chet Baker and this is what I used to hear a lot of when I was say fifteen. I
182 didn't hear Bird until I was about seventeen, sixteen or seventeen. So yeah, I like that
183 sound, and it did sound different. And Stan Getz was another one that I heard a lot of in
184 California. So yeah, it did sound a lot different than the other thing, but I like them all.
185 Every tune. I like a lot of different things.

186 MR: It's interesting because some of those things early on seem to have come out in your
187 playing and compositions, the Latin thing and...

188 JB: Also I think, I don't know what percentage, but I have some Spanish in my on my
189 father's side, so that I don't know whether ... well California has a lot of people who
190 speak Spanish. They are not Spanish, they are more Mexican, but of course I had a lot of
191 friends like that.

192 MR: Was it difficult raising children in New York?

193 JB: At the time you know we just made it. We just made it. There was a few schools left and
194 you kind of had to give an address of a friend to get them in the right schools that were
195 left. But just about the time they graduated I would say that it would be very difficult to
196 raise them now, and school them the way that you want them schooled without a whole
197 lot of money. It would have to be done privately. Things may change, but it was on the
198 cusp. I had to move them from the school they should have gone to to one that was good.
199 And they made it through.

200 MR: What's it like trying to — what year was this now? In the 60's you came here?

201 JB: I came here in the 60's yeah.

202 MR: To break in — well the 60's, maybe you can tell me as far as the decades for jazz, the
203 60's wasn't one of the healthiest I don't think.

204 JB: Oh it was very innovative.

205 MR: But as far as finding work, was it hard for you to find work here in New York?

206 JB: Well I was working with Art Blakey so...

207 MR: You couldn't have done much better than that.

208 JB: There was a lot of loft scenes around, and a lot of just sessions. People — I remember
209 working in a club that didn't pay anything but somehow I got hooked up with Pete
210 LaRoca Sims and Dave Liebman and there was — if I could remember the name of the
211 club, they'd know, La Boehme. We worked there six nights a week and Dave Halling
212 used to come down. There was a lot of us that just — we would play, we would get paid
213 something but not what you would consider very much. There was a lot of playing going
214 on, innovative playing. People had their own signatures. They had their own, you know,
215 everybody didn't sound like one person, where we have a tendency now, that a lot of
216 people tend toward that, not that that's bad.

217 MR: Do you think that, this is a point I was hoping to get to eventually so here we are, do you
218 think that tendency for people to kind of sound like each other is because of the education
219 that's going on now or what is that about?

220 JB: I'm not sure. I heard from historians that in art, there are certain periods that take place in
221 finance, there are certain periods that take place, there's periods where innovators are
222 born and thus goes out and moves in a certain way, and then after maybe eighty years or

223 a hundred and twenty years, whatever that cycle is, it seems to begin again. If you do a
224 study, which I haven't had the time but I do have the interest, in looking back at the
225 cycles that's hard to do though. Because our cycles now would be — the Internet and the
226 computer are moving much differently. They are just speeded up so fast. I mean
227 knowledge doubles every two or two and a half years, something like that. So it's very
228 exciting to be here now. But to answer that question, you know, there's going to be
229 another group. Life runs in cycles. And it's nice to enjoy that cycle that we're in. It's
230 quite amazing. But I'm glad that I was there in the cycle that I was in, there were a lot of
231 what we call really innovators, people really seriously listening to their own voice. That
232 comes first. The spiritual aspect, and naturalistic too, coming first.

233 MR: Jazz seems to move pretty fast in its development it seems like. Guys like Miles who just,
234 when the audience catches up with him, he's on to something else.

235 JB: Um hum yeah. It works that way.

236 MR: Yeah, I guess it does. How did the gig with Blakey come about?

237 JB: Oh, that's an interesting story. I lived right around the corner from this club called
238 Sluggs.

239 MR: Oh, Sluggs, I've heard this name, yes.

240 JB: A tiny club. I mean it was bigger than this room, but not that much. It had sawdust all
241 over the floor and you could get a beer for a dollar, and all the major groups were there.
242 Art Blakey, Freddie Hubbard, McCoy Tyner, everybody, Lee Morgan. Everybody
243 worked in there. And I lived right around the corner. So but I lived up like six flights of
244 stairs, and I had four kids in five years, and they were very young, so I didn't get out too
245 often. So one night I heard that Art Blakey was there and I thought oh I've got enough
246 energy, I'm going to go around and see the band. So I'm saying this because I was kind
247 of spaced out. It was late and night, and I also got up early in the morning. So I walked in
248 there, and here was Art's band. And they just sounded incredible. It was amazing music.
249 And the piano player was sitting up there but he wasn't playing. And it sounded like he
250 should have been playing, it sounded like they needed the piano to play, you know, with
251 the energy that they were playing in right there. So because I'm so spaced out, I'm just
252 only hearing the music, I walked up to the bandstand and say "do you mind if I play?"
253 And the piano player said "no, go ahead." It sounds funny but if you ever have four kids
254 and you're going six flights of stairs up and down for everything you're doing during the
255 whole day, by the time you get to the music it's just, you're so happy that you forget.
256 And that's what happened. And at the end of the set he looked up and saw me and I was
257 hired. It was the furthest thing from my mind.

258 MR: Oh, that's fantastic. Who was in the band at that point?

259 JB: I'm trying to remember. Carlos Garnet was in there. I haven't heard him in a long time
260 but I see he had a record out, I think it was last year, a new CD out. Actually the tour we
261 did Etta Jones was on but she wasn't singing there. The bass player changed. It was Skip
262 Crumbeibe, but it changed to Yon Arnet, someone from Czechoslovakia that we only saw
263 then. Of course we did go through several bass players and different people. And I think
264 it was Randy Brecker, but he didn't do some of the tours with us. We had Bill Harman
265 and we also had Woody Shaw, and other tenor players came in later, Ymon Morris, I
266 think Buddy Terry did one job with him. So it was kind of a moving group.

267 MR: He had a lot of energy, that band, didn't he?

268 JB: Yeah, he did. It was just like a jungle, it was great.

269 MR: Did he encourage you to write for the band?

270 JB: He was always telling me to write for the band but so was Stan Getz and I think that the
271 only people that wanted to play my music were the rhythm sections. It was a long time
272 before horn players came in and wanted to play. I think maybe one of the first was Mike
273 Brecker. He's on one of my first albums. He loved it. And then after that, now I have no
274 problem. Not that everyone wants to do that but there is maybe five or six people that
275 really ... I've had Greg Osby do some thing, Javon Jackson, Ravi Coltrane, Chris Potter
276 was on one album, so, and there's more, I don't want to forget them but I can't think of
277 everyone at once. But in those days mainly the trios just wanted to play my music. So
278 Stan tried a few times. Then what he did was actually feature the trio at the beginning of
279 each set and we would play.

280 MR: Now he was not a music reader, was he? He could read some?

281 JB: He could read, I know he didn't but he could.

282 MR: Okay. And he preferred not to.

283 JB: My tunes were a little bit more than what he wanted to get into.

284 MR: Right. How is it different playing behind him than with Blakey? Did you feel...

285 JB: Well it was two totally different things. I mean with Art Blakey you felt like you had a
286 jungle power every time you played. It was incredible. With Stan it was much more
287 sensitive. You had to really listen to every note. It was like playing with a singer. You
288 know, you had to play all the right notes, all the right voicings, play just the time he
289 wanted to hear, and he never said that but you could tell from the way he was playing.
290 And with Stan I just got so very spoiled because he played so in pitch, you know his pitch
291 was so perfect it really bothered me a long time afterward to play with anyone who
292 wasn't aware of — they could play out of the pitch but if they didn't know, if they
293 couldn't play around with it and know where that center was, and I'm the same way with
294 fingers, so I became that way then with horn players.

295 MR: That's an interesting statement about playing behind singers. What do you tell, do you
296 have advice for piano players when they are going to have to branch out into that kind of
297 accompaniment scene?

298 JB: Well I think now you just go tell them to buy ten CD's of your favorite singer and listen
299 to the piano player. Because that's the best way to actually hear what the possibilities are.
300 It's much easier than the way we had to learn, in a miff.

301 MR: Yeah.

302 JB: But you have to hear everything, you don't want to put something just before — every
303 little hair matters, everything matters. It has to be relaxed and swinging too. It's a lot of
304 balance is going on and you just need to know that plus the harmonies and the lines.
305 There's a lot to it.

306 MR: Have you had occasion where you've tried experimenting with maybe some substitutions
307 and so forth with different singers, and you find that — not to do it.

308 JB: Well I don't really play with singers but you know the first thing that I always tell, and
309 not everyone does this so you don't have to do this, you know the way Herbie was
310 playing behind Miles. Sometimes it sounds, he's just got his rhythmic thing, and it's so
311 much fun, seemingly having nothing to do with Miles you know. So you could play that
312 way too. He was hooking up a lot with the rhythm section and I'm sure that's what Miles
313 wanted at that time, if we're thinking back into the mid-60's. But I always, when I'm
314 playing behind someone I just hear what notes they're going to use and what notes
315 they're not going to use, and I'm certainly not going to play things that are going to
316 offend that. I'll stretch it as far as I can go but not — to make it sound like one thing.

317 MR: You've had pretty good success it seems with your recording career. Is it a challenge? Is
318 it difficult to get records out and has it changed over the years?

319 JB: Well I have a contract now so we've done four and we're — I don't know how many
320 more we'll do. It's a long deal so probably there'll be a lot more coming out. But if I look
321 back over the ones as a leader that I've done I do on average one a year. Because I think I
322 started in 1975, so there's about 25 out. That's the average. That's the way it works out.
323 There's more than one some years, and...

324 MR: Do you do your own business, I guess, pretty much?

325 JB: Well I have a manager. You know I work with people and yeah, I get some help. Because
326 you know when you're touring it's too hard, even with the — well I have to get a palm
327 pilot, that's what I think, so I can get the e-mail. I don't have that yet. I just got a new
328 computer. But even at that it's a little difficult sometimes to keep up with things. You let
329 too many things slide that you really want to do. So it's good to have some people
330 supporting you.

331 MR: Is it somewhat easier now that your kids are grown?

332 JB: Oh yeah. Of course, yes.

333 MR: I had a couple of things people have said about you. And Bill Dobbins at Eastman, he
334 said your “approach to playing is unique especially in regards to rhythmic development.”
335 Does that strike you as a good statement do you think?

336 JB: I guess so. I mean that’s me. I would have to agree that he’s certainly — my students use
337 so many of his transcriptions in learning things and learning how to play. There are some
338 key things that he’s done, been a transcriber of, so he does a close study of people and
339 things. So I highly regard him and respect him.

340 MR: Good. This one is a little funny. It’s from the CD Guide to Jazz and it says “her chord
341 voicings are quite dense but this music is strangely accessible.” Is that a left handed
342 compliment? Isn’t that interesting.

343 JB: Well I guess he probably just thought, I don’t know, it’s hard to make that out because
344 you don’t know if he’s saying that the chords are dense in this or maybe they’re not dense
345 in this. And also from about 1995 on up to now, 2001, the harmonies have worked in a
346 lot more and also rhythms and time meters. There is a lot more going on in the music
347 now than there was before, where you can so-called get away with almost anything you
348 want to do. Not anything, but a lot. A lot more. It’s a lot more acceptable to play now like
349 I did in 19... let’s see when I did that one for Columbia “Tapan Zee,” 1979, 1980, I go
350 back and listen to those about once every five years, and that playing is what people are
351 doing now. So it’s okay to do that now. So maybe that’s what’s happening. I don’t know
352 what the phenomenon might be.

353 MR: Playing, as you describe almost anything, if your students were playing something and
354 you thought they had no basis for what they were doing, is there a point where you want
355 them to at least have some grounding? I’m not asking this very well. I’m trying to think,
356 playing outside, but still knowing what you’re outside from. Does that make any sense?

357 JB: Yeah, yeah, yeah. They have to — sometimes usually if they do that it’s the rhythmical
358 sense that isn’t developed that much. And so I bring them in and make sure that they can
359 do that too. But I never stop them from doing what they’re doing. Because I think you
360 can learn in many different realms, you know, points of view at one time. And if a person
361 has started developing one thing, they’re very interested in that. So to stop that doesn’t
362 make sense to me. So I let them keep on unless it’s something just totally disastrous. But
363 that seldom happens. But what I’ll do is given them examples and show them how
364 important, you know, usually I’ll do it through players. You’ve got so many players,
365 recordings are so available, you need to give references, and then they can understand.

366 MR: Who are your musical — oh, pioneers for you, besides Frankie Carle?

367 JB: Well he wasn’t really a pioneer. My parents had the record and that’s how I got that. But
368 the first people like I think I mentioned before that I heard, it was like you know Bird and

369 Bud and Miles and Tommy Flanagan, Arthur Taylor, Max Roach, some of my favorite
370 people. I guess I'm not naming bass players. They change so much. And then we had
371 Paul Chambers later on. So I liked the piano and the sax and drums most, until I started
372 like that.

373 MR: You've had some marvelous bass players on your recordings over the years.

374 JB: Yeah. Well when I was in Los Angeles we played, I mean Scott LaFaro was one of the
375 bass players that I played with. Charlie Haden. They were from there. So that was right
376 from the start so that was kind of my expectation was people like that.

377 MR: Is it possible to keep a band together these days?

378 JB: Well you know what you do, or what I do is, you kind of have multiple bands. You find
379 people, maybe two or three people that are really into your music on each instrument.
380 Because people are working in so many different groups and we travel so much, so it's
381 really great when you've got your key people there. But I try to have maybe two people
382 on each instrument, maybe a third. Then if one's not available, they kind of know the
383 vocabulary. Because outside of that it wouldn't work. I'm even going to Tel Aviv next
384 week and I'm lucky because Ira Coleman has been working on and off with me for about
385 ten years, and Dion Parsons is new but he's a friend of Ira's, so he's been working with
386 me for about a year. So it's easy. We call one rehearsal. They already have a good idea of
387 what we might do. And that way, you know, maybe there's twenty-five tunes, maybe
388 we're only going to play fifteen but we can decide, and put something new in there. It's
389 difficult just to get a band and rehearse a set, this, this and, you know.

390 MR: Do you find it different overseas as far as the audience for your music?

391 JB: Well I haven't had too many calls to do that music — no I can't say that, I do do that. I
392 worked at the Jazz Standard every year here and then I kind of work some subterranean
393 clubs because I like to do that. So one club is, they get so many people in the club that
394 they don't advertise.

395 MR: Is that right?

396 JB: It's fun, yeah. And I do that maybe two or three times a year, and then I worked in the
397 main club, the Jazz Standard. We get great reception now. We get great reception also in
398 Europe. So it's hard to say. Sometimes in the European audiences, I mean you can tell
399 they haven't heard this kind of music, whereas in New York it's a great audience, but
400 they are a little more sophisticated — maybe less jumping up and down and like little
401 kids. That's great but I can't say that one is more appreciative than the other. I think that
402 there's a lot of appreciation. The one thing that does seem to happen more in Europe is
403 there are more venues per the population so the sense of culture and art is, and it's a
404 much older country, they developed more. But we have just great music here. I still prefer
405 our music. You know, our musicians, our music. I was reading articles and hearing

406 people saying oh the music here is becoming like kind of backwards and it's more
407 creative in Europe. But I don't join that. I'm kind of international. I see it all as one thing.
408 MR: The term "world music" has entered kind of just as a phrase. And it's amazing how fast
409 things get spread around now with communication. And I like to think of our music as
410 world music too.
411 JB: Well it is. It is. I know those computers, they really do something.
412 MR: Did I see you had a part in this "Hundred Fingers?"
413 JB: Oh, Gold Fingers, yeah. Yeah ten piano players, we go to Japan every other year and they
414 take what they call, what I heard, one token woman each time.
415 MR: Is that right?
416 JB: Yeah. And I think it was 1995, I guess that's when it was, I was the token woman. That
417 was great. It was great. We played quite a few concerts in Japan and we went to Korea
418 and then I had my own concert in China, so I just made a nice little debut around there. It
419 was great. We had Hank Jones and Kenny Barron and John Lewis. I'd never really hung
420 out with these people, my idols from when I first started listening to music. And Cedar
421 Walton, they put us together to do duos and it was a lot of fun. Junior Mance, the Blues
422 Brothers, Ray Bryant, Roger Kellaway. I know I'm leaving — Barry Harris — I'm going
423 to leave somebody out. Gene Harris.
424 MR: I'd like to hear you and Roger together actually.
425 JB: Oh wow.
426 MR: I think that would be quite something.
427 JB: Oh yeah. Well we had some kind of — I don't know whether you call it a metaphysical
428 or — something that happened to me on an airplane. It was really bizarre. And I
429 mentioned it to him and he couldn't believe it because that had happened to him and then
430 I couldn't believe that could happen to anybody else. So we had that connection right
431 away. I remember talking. I think he'll remember it too, because it's something you don't
432 run into. But they put him together with, was it Gene Harris? I think they would couple
433 people together. So I was with Cedar. That's what they liked. And I think they based
434 some on the audience too, you know, with what the audience liked. And they had Roger
435 with Gene Harris. So we didn't stand a chance.
436 MR: I wanted to play just a bit of one of your tunes here. And maybe you can tell me...
437 [audio interlude]
438 MR: It's great.
439 JB: It was fun.
440 MR: Now, I'm curious about those thick horn harmonies, how you got that. Because you only
441 had two horns, but are you playing that kind of with them or something?

442 JB: Well that was “A Dog,” written for my dog, my little FiFi. Tujai FiFi Tee Tai Tae was his
443 whole name but his nickname was FiFi.

444 MR: What was his full name again?

445 JB: Tujai FiFi Te Tai Tae. So it was a little Yorkie dog. Crazy. A very crazy Yorkie dog. He
446 would, we had loft beds that were about up to the top of the curtain there. And if you
447 were chopping carrots, that was his favorite thing to eat, raw carrots, he’d jump right off
448 the loft. This little tiny dog. I mean a very crazy dog. And the little call at the beginning
449 of the recording, that works for ninety percent of any Yorkies. If you go down the street
450 in New York and see a Yorkie and you want it to turn around and come to you, you do
451 that, in that pitch. They come. I’ve done it. There’s some mad owners too. That was
452 Branford barking.

453 MR: Oh it was Branford? Well you asked him to do a couple different things then. He was on
454 alto on that thing, right? “And you have to bark...”

455 JB: You know I didn’t do that, no that was Al Foster. Because Al, you know I called Al, I
456 wanted him to be the drummer and there was a tenor — I can’t remember who I had, I
457 just know I wanted alto. And you know he said “well why don’t you get Branford?” I
458 said well he’s like tenor. Al says, no, no, no, I’ve seen, he has an alto, I’ve seen it, call
459 him

460 MR: He can do it.

461 JB: So he kept telling me that and finally I did. I didn’t know Branford then so I took his
462 word for it, and he did, he didn’t have, I remember he didn’t have the neck strap, so he
463 was like playing with no neck strap.

464 MR: No kidding. That’s funny. When you write a tune like that, earlier on we had kind of
465 talked about this, is it a result of sitting.

466 JB: The dog died. So in the evening I’d begin to feel bad and I thought okay I’m going to
467 write a tune for him. And the tune came right out.

468 MR: Wow.

469 JB: Very, very simple, but it sounds just exactly like the dog. And it’s in four four, which I
470 think is not a problem, but there was a Town Hall concert we played that Randy Brecker
471 and Dave Liebman were the horn players and Pat Martino was on guitar. And they were
472 trying to get this tune. And it was like, no, no, you wrote it wrong, no that’s not four four.

473 MR: You wrote it wrong.

474 JB: And finally they said yeah it is, but what is this? I never thought of it that way but that’s
475 how the dog was, so you know you would never know what he was going to do next.

476 MR: Wow. You really captured it, huh?

477 JB: He was just off the wall. Yeah.

478 MR: Well suppose I wanted to commission you for a new piece of music. And I basically said
479 "whatever you want." How do you start the process?
480 JB: Oh I have a lot of ideas. Whatever you want, that's a pretty big field there. I'd think about
481 it and, you know...
482 MR: Do you get ideas away from the piano?
483 JB: Well the ideas come like in a form of energy that doesn't have a form. It's like a feel.
484 And then I go to the piano and it comes out. That's how I translate it. But it's there before
485 I go to the piano. However, the piano is such a great translator, almost equal to going on-
486 line on the computer. How could you get on-line without the computer? That's how the
487 piano is for me. It's like it really makes things very easy. So I write from the piano. But
488 it's already written before I get to the piano.
489 MR: Interesting. You have a rhythmic feel perhaps?
490 JB: Well it's hard to define it. It's the whole thing.
491 MR: You seem to be someone who is always searching for something new to me.
492 JB: Yeah. I was thinking in the taxi on the way up here, I'm really happy I'm living in these
493 times now. Because I've always been kind of like that, and now the outside world is as
494 crazy as I was on the inside, and I feel good. I feel like really more at home.
495 MR: Oh, that's very interesting.
496 JB: It is. Yeah. It certainly is.
497 MR: The world caught up with you.
498 JB: With whatever it was in me, I don't know.
499 MR: Are you a technical oriented person.
500 JB: No. But I don't have anything against it.
501 MR: You still like to write your music with a pen?
502 JB: I do. I have the computer now that will work that way easily, I just got it last week so I
503 probably will end up having to do it the other way, that's for sure. But naturistically yeah,
504 I like to just write it out.
505 MR: What's coming up in the future. I know you're going to Israel you said.
506 JB: Yeah. And then I'm going to do a concert in Toronto. It's like a solo concert but it's two
507 of us, it's Junior Mance doing solo and myself. And then I'll work a week at a Montreal
508 Bistro.
509 MR: Neat.
510 JB: And then I start my teaching at Berklee College of Music. I go straight from Toronto
511 there. And then I have some college dates coming up, Smith College and some of my
512 underground New York dates and then once again the Jazz Standard and a possible tour
513 of Europe in July. Things are starting to fill in now.
514 MR: The majority of...

515 JB: New Orleans too.
516 MR: New Orleans too?
517 JB; I do that once a year.
518 MR: Neat.
519 JB: It should be in March.
520 MR: Do you find most of your colleagues do some educational type gigs?
521 JB: A lot of them do, yeah. A lot of them do. In fact that's how I get inspired to do it. It was
522 Cecil McBee that told me about students in Boston. Because he teaches at the New
523 England Conservatory and Berklee had called me up there to do a concert. And there was
524 a clinic right before the concert. And it was an unbelievable clinic. I got these great
525 questions, which I had never gotten before in a clinic. So then they called me to do a
526 residency, but I was like, I can't go there three days a week, no. So I told them I would do
527 a half of a residency. So they found somebody. It took them about six months, but they
528 found someone else to split it with. So I did that, and after I did that it was great teaching.
529 I had just really great students. So I told them if they wanted I would teach one day a
530 week if that would work in their program. And it did. So now I do one and a half days a
531 week.
532 MR: You actually commute?
533 JB: Yeah. Oh I wouldn't move from New York.
534 MR: Right.
535 JB: No.
536 MR: The city I guess has a certain energy that's just right for what you do.
537 JB: Yeah I don't know why I like it, I just do.
538 MR: Is it possible to tell students something extra to prepare themselves to make a living with
539 this kind of music?
540 JB: Well they should be very serious about the music and if they are a student in school that's
541 what they really should be delving into. At the same time they should be thinking where
542 they would like to present this music, how they would like to present it too. I don't really
543 teach that but if they ask me I certainly try to help them. A lot of them just want to teach
544 as well, and then some ones who perform. I try to just prepare them for what it is they
545 think they want to do. I don't tell them what they should do or what they want to do. I
546 just kind of let them be the guide.
547 MR: Are there musicians out there that would be on your wish list to either record with or for
548 you to hire?
549 JB: Well I just saw Russell Malone downstairs. We were, Bob at Arcadia, Bob Carsey and I
550 were talking about maybe doing a duet album at some point. Not right now but at some

551 point. And I knew I wanted Russell, to do one with Russell. Another one might be Sonny
552 Rollins. I haven't talked with him yet though. That would be really fun. I would like that.
553 MR: He's kind of a — I'm not sure what word to use — you don't hear that much from him
554 and then he comes out with another album.
555 JB: Yeah. He's great. Another person I really like is the couple Chick and Gayle.
556 MR: Chick Corea and Gayle...
557 JB: Yeah, I really like them. I'd like to do something with them.
558 MR: You know, I didn't even know, are they still together and working.
559 JB: Oh yeah.
560 MR: Oh I hadn't heard that.
561 JB: Well I see them usually here in New York, with some bass with them.
562 MR: You have any kind of spiritual connection with your music.
563 JB: Well I've always been like into metaphysics, and it wasn't until after my grandmother
564 died that they finally told me she was a metaphysician.
565 MR: You know you're going to have to explain what you mean by that for me.
566 JB: Metaphysicians? That's somebody who does, the visualize, they can image certain things,
567 either for themselves or someone else, and the thing will take place. And it could be
568 something really bizarre. But if they get the feeling of it and they can see it, it happens.
569 So I think I just picked that up from my grandmother without even knowing. So I do a lot
570 of things in that way without even knowing, expecting everyone to understand what I'm
571 doing and how I'm doing it. And I think little kids, that's why I feel really close with
572 little kids, because they can do that. I'm always looking at them. Even the little kids, on
573 Channel 13, the little kiddies program, they hardly even talk, so it's got to be like one
574 year old. They've got a program for little kids. And I'm like ten minutes watching this
575 program. I don't know there's something, it's nonverbal but it's very, very definite, and it
576 brings results in the visible world. So I love things like that. That's one of my hobbies.
577 MR: What kind of reading do you like to do?
578 JB: Well that's ...
579 MR: That's a big part of it?
580 JB: That would be it. That it would just be mostly. I like some biographies too, but if
581 someone comes up with something I'll read it. I don't go searching for things. There's so
582 many things to do.
583 MR: I know you've already said that this is the time for you. In New York, this is the time.
584 JB: I can't say — ten years from now I might think it's even more or less, but...
585 MR: Is there a time in history, going back as far as you'd like, that you would have liked to
586 participate in?

587 JB: I don't know, maybe the time Michelangelo and the time these people that did many,
588 many things at one time, and they also lived long, some of them lived long lives and they
589 had a chance to really get into a lot of different fields and things. Maybe. I don't know. I
590 like it now.

591 MR: Good.

592 JB: So I don't want to go back in history. But it's exciting.

593 MR: Being in this hotel right now crawling with jazz musicians and educators and everything,
594 it kind of skews this question perhaps, but how do you feel about the health of jazz these
595 days and for the future?

596 JB: Well people are healthier while they play it.

597 MR: People are healthier, uh huh.

598 JB: Less things that are ... you know, but we know more about the body too, so that's kind of
599 nice. The energy is better. And a lot of people learn so fast in the schooling, these kids
600 learn so fast. It would be nice if we could, well you know, try to balance the inner
601 knowledge, I think that's the thing that has to happen now because we're kind of going
602 for the outer knowledge and at some point it's just like the NASDAQ dropping way
603 down. I think we have to get that together with the inner knowledge so that the human
604 knowledge gets associated fully with the musical knowledge. But it's taking place. It's
605 very interesting. Well when I went to hear Chick he had just gotten an e-mail from an
606 eight year old boy, I didn't hear the end of the story, Chick was going up to Boston to
607 play, but this little boy, or he was seven years old, he had transcribed like Chick's solos
608 and he could play them, and then he could do free improvisation. So he sent an e-mail
609 with some of his free improvising. And Chick said it sounded very mature, really great.
610 So they were going to meet in Boston. That's where the little boy lived. So it's like they
611 were ten and twelve, well the Monk competition was won by a ten year old in third place.

612 MR: Is that right?

613 JB: Yeah Latin percussion. Ten years old. That was this year. An then Maria Schneider was
614 telling me, we did some big band, we split a big band concert, and she was telling me
615 about this horn player from Sicily that was like ten or eleven years old, just kind of
616 leading this whole band and having incredible knowledge of how to make the rhythm
617 section, which was not together, sound like it was together. And I'm like okay it was
618 teenagers, now they're going down into the single digits. Like the wind chill this winter.

619 MR: Yeah, wow. You wonder if they're not possessing someone's spirit from...

620 JB: It's very interesting. Exciting.

621 MR: Well is there anything I haven't asked you that you'd like to talk about.

622 JB: I like to swim.

623 MR: You like to swim.

624 JB: I just had a swimming class yesterday. That was fun. Kind of cold for a while, I kind of
625 did it.

626 MR: Well you said you like to be near the water, so it keeps you healthy. I know you've done
627 Marian McPartland's show.

628 JB: A couple of times. She's a good friend. She's always calling. She's an amazing person.
629 Always sending me articles, she does this with people, sends them articles on themselves
630 that they never would have seen. She's unbelievable, as well as getting better at the
631 piano. I think she's playing this week at the, it's part of Lincoln Center, where they have
632 duets. The Penthouse.

633 MR: Oh, right.

634 JB: Yes. Near here.

635 MR: They have a nice piano there as a matter of fact.

636 JB: Oh. I tried to go when Joe Lovano and Gonzalo were there but it was totally sold out both
637 nights so.

638 MR: Wow. Well we can only hope that we'll be that vital when we get that age I think. She
639 was at Hamilton in September. She did a great show.

640 JB: Fantastic, yeah.

641 MR: Well I wish you a lot of luck in your travels.

642 JB: Well thank you.

643 MR: And I hope you keep writing, you have a very distinctive sound to your work.

644 JB: Oh thank you, thanks. Well I have two new CD's, they're not out yet, and they both hae
645 new compositions on them. One I recorded live at the Jazz Standard that was with Negro,
646 my regular drummer and Ira Coleman and Ravi Coltrane. And then I did a CD that was
647 very interesting, Latin American music but world Latin American. Like some from
648 Spain, some from Cuba, from Chili, from Brazil, from all over, and that's like featuring
649 Paquito as one of the guests on there and Fari Taque is playing guitar, with Negro once
650 again and Sante DiBriano is on bass. So we're doing all these different tunes, and some
651 of them were difficult for me, just to transcribe, to give them, like to transcribe for guitar,
652 for piano, and to get that to sound right. But I did do some originals on all of these.

653 MR: Is the Latin music of so many different places rhythmically, it's all a little different, isn't
654 it?

655 JB: Yeah.

656 MR: It must take some study and absorbing before you can play.

657 JB: I can hear a lot further than what I can play. But Negro was so perfect. He can do
658 anything I write, anything I do, he's just right there. Just right on it. So it was a lot of fun.
659 And those should come out this year so I'm looking forward to that. It would be fun to
660 tour doing some of that music. And Paquito knew everything. These tunes that I thought

661 were really, I mean I went to Hawaii and they had this one tune. Nobody would know
662 that, no piano anywhere near that with a singer. And he says “oh that’s ... I know that,
663 yeah.” And he started playing. He knew every tune I had on the album. Nobody knows
664 all of it. But Bob Carsey was responsible for getting this music to me. You know
665 “Joanne, I think, listen to this one,” you know, he gave me a whole album to listen to.
666 Some Piazzolo, all different things.

667 MR: Now there’s a name that seems to be on the hot list these days.

668 JB: Oh boy, yeah. So he came up with these great tunes. So that was a learning experience for
669 me.

670 MR: Well it’s been a pleasure to meet you. And I wish you the best.

671 JB: Thank you. It’s been great being here and I’m glad to be a part of your series.

672 MR: Good. Thanks so much.

673 JB: Okay. You’re welcome.