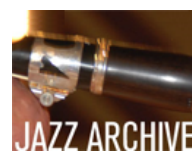


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## Etta Jones

*Song-stylist Etta Jones grew up in New York City and began her singing career as a teenager in Buddy Johnson's band. Since then Etta has collaborated with such greats as J.C. Heard, Oliver Nelson, Earl "Fatha" Hines, Jack McDuff, Kenny Burrell, Cedar Walton and many others, both in concert and on recordings. She has toured Europe and Asia, and has recorded for RCA Victor, Jubilee, Prestige, Muse and HighNote Records. Ms. Jones earned a gold record for her recording "Don't Go To Strangers," a Grammy nomination for her album "Save Your Love for Me," and in 1982 earned the "Eubie Blake Jazz Award." Etta has enjoyed a thirty plus year relationship with tenor saxophonist Houston Person, and can often be seen at jazz festivals and parties throughout the U.S.*

*Etta was interviewed in Clinton, New York on October 2, 1998, by Monk Rowe, director of the Hamilton College Jazz Archive.*

17

18 MR: My name is Monk Rowe and we are filming today for the Hamilton College Jazz Archive  
19 on the Hamilton campus. And I'm very pleased to have Etta Jones, vocalist, with me  
20 today. I'm looking forward to having you visit.

21 EJ: Thank you very much.

22 MR: Welcome. You're in town for a performance with Houston Person.

23 EJ: That's right.

24 MR: And you guys have a long performing relationship, almost thirty years, is that right?

25 EJ: Thirty-one years.

26 MR: Thirty-one.

27 EJ: It's like a marriage.

28 MR: Yeah?

29 EJ: One that works.

30 MR: Those are the best kind, but not always, they don't always happen. We were just talking,  
31 when you guys get your repertory together for certain kinds of gigs, do you each bring  
32 something to the table? You know, "I'd like to do this tune," and work it out?

33 EJ: No. At first, when we first started working together I used to like maybe write a list you  
34 know. But after a while that just went to nothing and Houston started calling the songs,  
35 because I didn't want to take my break to write lists to sing. And I couldn't think of  
36 anything to sing. It got so — you forget what you actually — what songs you actually do.  
37 And he can call them in a minute.

38 MR: I'm glad you said that. I have that same problem, remembering the songs that you know.

39 EJ: Right.

40 MR: You have to make a list yourself.

41 EJ: You really do. So it works so I don't have to do anything but sing.  
42 MR: Do you travel — you said you live in Washington and in New York?  
43 EJ: Yes. I have an apartment in Washington and I get there sometimes twice a year, maybe  
44 three times a year, maybe more. I intend to go down more now because, in between jobs,  
45 because I said wait a minute, I've had this apartment over twenty years and I get down so  
46 seldom, I decided I'm going to go more often now.  
47 MR: But you probably have to travel quite a bit to work.  
48 EJ: We do. We work constantly all over the country and out of the country, and I love to  
49 travel, so it's okay with me.  
50 MR: You're in the right profession.  
51 EJ: Yeah, I'm in the right profession.  
52 MR: You know the last time I saw you was on the Royal Caribbean.  
53 EJ: On the cruise.  
54 MR: On the cruise. And our cameraman was there, and we did some interviews and I wasn't  
55 fortunate to get to find the time with you so this is a real pleasure. And that was a pretty  
56 pleasurable gig I would imagine.  
57 EJ: Oh it is. And we have two coming up, two cruises, so I'm looking forward to them.  
58 MR: I have to laugh because I see that they do blues cruises too. And I wonder how you could  
59 have the blues on a cruise.  
60 EJ: Right. Because you are extremely happy. It's like a different world. It's like no worries,  
61 no phones, and everyone communicates with each other and they are so friendly. We love  
62 the cruises.  
63 MR: And they know the music pretty well too. The people that are on those things.  
64 EJ: And they really love the music.  
65 MR: Well you were raised in New York City, you were born in South Carolina, is that right?  
66 EJ: Aken, South Carolina I was born, but I was raised in New York.  
67 MR: Did the music, as you were growing up, when did you first start being aware of jazz or  
68 swing music?  
69 EJ: Well I remember as a three year old, they tell me I used to sing the songs from the radio  
70 and as I got a little older and a little older, I heard Count Basie and Duke Ellington and  
71 Jimmy Lunceford and all those people, and I went to the Apollo to see them. And when I  
72 heard Billie Holiday that was just the end. I just said oh my God, it was haunting to me. It  
73 was just ... I just wanted to be a singer. But from a little kid I used to sing all the time.  
74 What I heard I would sing, and they would ask me to sing, and at the drop of a hat I  
75 would sing.  
76 MR: No problem. It wasn't like anybody had to force you.  
77 EJ: No.

78 MR: When you heard Basie at the time, were those the days with Helen Humes?  
79 EJ: Yes. And Thelma Carpenter worked with him also, I was in love with Thelma Carpenter  
80 too, she was my second choice. Like Billie Holiday was my first and Thelma Carpenter  
81 was my second. And of course Helen Humes and all the rest of them. But she was the one  
82 I heard most — Billie Holiday and Thelma Carpenter. And I would go to hear Billie  
83 down on 52nd Street and she was just so amazing to me, and so beautiful, that I said oh  
84 God, I have to be a singer. I wanted to do it professionally.  
85 MR: I wish I'd have been able to see her live. You listen to her records and it's a very haunting  
86 sound.  
87 EJ: You could hear a pin drop when she sang. And they would just put a pin spot on her face  
88 and it was just something to see, she was so wonderful.  
89 MR: Her tendency to sing behind the beat at times, did you think that, when the musicians  
90 were doing that, did they have trouble with that at first?  
91 EJ: I don't think so. Maybe someone would have trouble if they were just new to her, I mean  
92 she was new to them, then they'd probably have problems. Because they also would say  
93 to different people that worked with me, because I have a tendency to lag, and they would  
94 say how do you sing with her? And at first they would have the problems and then  
95 someone would say "just play the song like it goes, and don't even — you know — pay  
96 her no attention."  
97 MR: Yeah, as an accompanist, you must have a feel at first, like I wonder if I should follow.  
98 EJ: Right.  
99 MR: Because I slow down too.  
100 EJ: No.  
101 MR: And then all of a sudden you've got a problem.  
102 EJ: That's right.  
103 MR: So by the age of 15 you had this incident happen at the Apollo was it?  
104 EJ: Yes. My friends talked me into going. They said here's the mike. They got a broom you  
105 know, they said "here's the microphone and you stand there and let me see what you're  
106 going to do." And so I said "no I don't want to go." Oh no, the Apollo. Because the  
107 Apollo was real scary because they would boo you off in a minute. But anyway they  
108 talked me into going and I went and I sang and I did not win, on the contrary to what  
109 some folks thought. They almost booed me off, because I started in the wrong key.  
110 MR: What song was it you were singing?  
111 EJ: "Embraceable You." I'll never forget it. But Doc Wheeler was there. He happened to  
112 have a band there. I don't know if you're familiar with Doc Wheeler.  
113 MR: No, I'm not.

114 EJ: And he held up his hand and said “give her a chance, give her a chance.” And so I started  
115 again in the right key, and of course my knees were knocking, I had to try to place my  
116 feet down hard to stop from being so nervous. But I got through it, and when I finished,  
117 Joe Menard was the male vocalist with Buddy Johnson’s band, and he said “wait around,  
118 he’s looking for a vocalist. His sister is having a baby.” I said “oh no, I can’t do that, I’m  
119 scared.” He said “wait here.” He was very forceful. “Wait here, he will talk to you.” And  
120 so there was another young lady that waited. But she didn’t know the songs, and I did  
121 from the juke box. Because we were always listening to music and playing the juke box,  
122 dropping nickels. So Buddy Johnson played the piano and said “sing this.” And he played  
123 “Please Mr. Johnson.” He started and I said [sings] “please Mr. Johnson.” They said  
124 “that’s Ella, that’s Ella” she knows how to ... and that’s how I got the job.

125 MR: Ella was his sister, right?

126 EJ: Ella Johnson was his sister. And that was a Wednesday night, and I left Friday, two days  
127 later.

128 MR: To go on the road?

129 EJ: To go on the road.

130 MR: At 15.

131 EJ: I didn’t even know how to get out of town. But he went and he talked with my mother,  
132 and it was summer so I was out of school, and he asked, and said he would be my  
133 guardian on the road and he would watch out for me, and she had no need to worry. And  
134 she said yes. I said “oh please, please, oh please let me go.” Oh I was going to die if I  
135 didn’t go you know. So my mother was so wonderful, she let me go.

136 MR: So you were playing dance halls?

137 EJ: Right.

138 MR: Small clubs.

139 EJ: Small clubs and the theaters. We did the theater in Chicago and the Apollo of course  
140 when we came back to New York. And then Ella Johnson went back with the band. And  
141 then I went to 52nd Street to the Onyx Club. Hot Lips Page took me down there and the  
142 musicians have helped me all through my career. They would say “this one is looking for  
143 a vocalist, you go.” And so that was how everything happened for me. Musicians have  
144 really been my friends, very dear, and they taught me, I’ve learned so much from them  
145 because I don’t read music. I can kind of sight read how it’s going to go if I look at the  
146 music, but I don’t read at all, but I just, from doing it so long I imagine, I learned more  
147 and more and more through the years. If you don’t learn from the years, you need to  
148 forget it.

149 MR: Well I think musicians and accompanists, they appreciate a relationship with a singer  
150 that's back and forth, that they value when you're learning something from them, and  
151 vice versa.

152 EJ: Yes. And I worked with such wonderful musicians, you know, Cedar Walton for a while.  
153 I worked with him like before I worked with Houston. We used to do a lot of gigs  
154 together.

155 MR: Well just for historical purposes, can you recall what you were making on that first tour?

156 EJ: I know exactly what I was making. I made \$50 a week. And we did one-nighters, and I  
157 got \$50 if we worked or we didn't.

158 MR: Oh well that's good anyway.

159 EJ: I think the guys got like \$35 a night, I'm not sure, but I got \$50. And you know what? I  
160 lost my first pay. I left it in the restaurant on the counter. I had a little bag, and we left  
161 and I left the bag there. I guess I was so excited you know. And so Buddy Johnson took  
162 \$5 a week out of my \$50, to take back. Because he gave it back to me. So I had to pay it  
163 back. So I learned a great lesson then.

164 MR: He was a guy, Buddy didn't perhaps get the recognition that he deserved.

165 EJ: Through the south he did. And in New York, and the big cities like Chicago, New York  
166 and Philadelphia and those kind of places I think he did. But through the south he was  
167 very big.

168 MR: Was it different, in later years, when you would tour different parts of the country? Were  
169 you met with obviously different kinds of audiences, but what was it like being on the  
170 road in different areas of the country?

171 EJ: It was just about, well I think a lot of times the south was more, well I was with kind of a  
172 blues band I guess, and he was so popular so they were like wonderful. Everywhere he  
173 went they greeted him so boisterously. They really liked Buddy Johnson. He was really a  
174 big band leader in that time. But a lot of people don't seem to even remember him or  
175 know of him today. But he was a very big band leader.

176 MR: And you worked on and off with him in later years too.

177 EJ: Yeah. Well we happened to be thrown into the same theater at the same time, but I never  
178 was with the band anymore. But we were in Chicago later, after I had "Don't Go To  
179 Strangers," and we worked together and he was so happy for me, because he was an  
180 extremely nice man. I happened to have very nice bosses. Because Earl Hines was  
181 wonderful, and J.C. Heard was a wonderful boss for me.

182 MR: That's fortunate because it could have gone the other way.

183 EJ: It could have. Because I've heard stories that I don't care to repeat. Some of the band  
184 leaders were kind of rough you know. But I always managed to get the nicest, nicest  
185 people.

186 MR: In the theaters that you played in those days, was that the situation in those days, where  
187 they would show movies, and you would play a few times during the day?  
188 EJ: Yeah. Sometimes we would be on call as soon as we got off the stage because there  
189 would be six shows a day at the Apollo sometimes. They'd say "half an hour is in" so  
190 that meant you had half an hour before you started all over again, to get yourself together.  
191 MR: And could the audience stay there all day?  
192 EJ: They could stay all day.  
193 MR: How much did it cost to get it? Do you recall?  
194 EJ: Maybe 35 cents.  
195 MR: Wow.  
196 EJ: And two movies and a show, and a chapter and the news, everything.  
197 MR: And great music.  
198 EJ: And great music.  
199 MR: Now when your first opportunity to record came up, you had kind of an interesting, if my  
200 facts are correct, it was kind of an interesting combination of people. Was it Leonard  
201 Feather?  
202 EJ: Yeah, the pianist didn't show up so Leonard Feather had to play piano. And it was  
203 Georgie Auld on tenor, and it was, the bassist was, his son is named Pickles, I can't think  
204 of his name right now. But it was all top notch musicians, and Georgie Auld on tenor and  
205 clarinet was ...  
206 MR: Barney Bigard?  
207 EJ: Yeah Barney Bigard, yeah, help me.  
208 MR: I'm trying.  
209 EJ: Barney Bigard. And drums was Stan Levy? Did you know Stan Levy?  
210 MR: Oh Stan Levy.  
211 EJ: And I can't think of the bass player. A very well known bass player too.  
212 MR: It wasn't Milt Hinton.  
213 EJ: No.  
214 MR: He's always a good guess because he played on so many records, you know you've got a  
215 50 percent chance. And this was for what label? Or was it for a label?  
216 EJ: Oh, Black and White. It was for Black and White. And then I got a chance to record with  
217 National and RCA Victor and I think Decca. Some of them I've forgotten the labels I was  
218 on.  
219 MR: Were you paid a flat fee for the recording?  
220 EJ: Yes.  
221 MR: Were you in the union? Were the vocalists in the union?  
222 EJ: No. Not when I first recorded, no.

223 MR: So you were paid a flat fee and after that you pretty much didn't expect to get anything  
224 for the records.

225 EJ: I think they gave me a contract for a penny or a half a cent, I don't remember, but after  
226 they sold 900,000 records.

227 MR: You really couldn't expect too much from that.

228 EJ: And they stuck me with \$50 all the time. I mean I would get \$50 for four sides in those  
229 days, for two records. It was like \$25 a record.

230 MR: And these were 78's?

231 EJ: Right.

232 MR: And so you had one tune on each side.

233 EJ: Yes.

234 MR: And they couldn't be too long either.

235 EJ: Because I think, what was it, 3-1/2 minutes or something like that.

236 MR: Was your mother happy with your career?

237 EJ: Yes, very.

238 MR: That's nice to hear.

239 EJ: I think she was very proud.

240 MR: And I assume that you got to meet Billie Holiday?

241 EJ: I met her at least three times. Once in Chicago she was leaving after one of the shows, a  
242 break, probably going somewhere to eat, and they introduced me to her, and I was just in  
243 heaven, and she had this big white fox fur on, and a big flower. Oh she was so beautiful,  
244 and my heart almost stopped beating. And then when I was at the Onyx Club on 52nd  
245 Street, she was working across the street and they must have told her "this little girl over  
246 here that's working over here sounds like you." And she came and she stood by the cash  
247 register. I could see her over there listening. And I don't know what she said or anything,  
248 but I was just, I don't know why I wasn't so nervous. Because when I met Thelma I  
249 asked her "do you hear any of you in me?" And she said "maybe." I wanted to ask Billie  
250 Holiday "do you hear any of..." because I mean she was my idol so whatever I sang  
251 probably sounded like her.

252 MR: But did you consciously say I'm going to sing this like I think Billie would sing it?

253 EJ: No. It just came out like that and then people say they still hear it now but now they say I  
254 came through it. And I figure if you're a singer and you like someone, you're going to  
255 sound something like them until ... especially when you first start. And then after that you  
256 will come out of it yourself into your own self. You know you might have a little, still a  
257 little of them here and there, but you'll have your own thing.

258 MR: Well you have to learn from somewhere. You have to have something to aspire to. And I  
259 think it's the same for saxophone players.



260 EJ: Right.

261 MR: Find an influence and then move on.

262 EJ: Yes.

263 MR: Well you recorded on this particular record, this was the follow-up to one of your, I think  
264 when you had "Don't Go To Strangers," I think this was the record to follow it.

265 EJ: Does that have "Through a Long and Sleepless Night" on it?

266 MR: Yes.

267 EJ: It might have been.

268 MR: In fact I was going to refresh your memory here.

269 [audio interlude]

270 MR: I think Nancy Wilson listened to you.

271 EJ: You think so?

272 MR: I think so, when I hear that. It's beautiful. You were on Prestige for quite a while.

273 EJ: Quite a while.

274 MR: Now when your recorded that, I'm always curious...

275 EJ: And thank you for what you said, you said beautiful.

276 MR: You're welcome. "Don't Go To Strangers" it was a really nice hit for you. At that time,  
277 what did people consider a hit? How many records?

278 EJ: Well I got a gold record for that one so I don't know exactly in terms of numbers. But I  
279 was always under the impression that when you sold a million copies or close to it, you  
280 got a gold record. I don't know if that's true or not, but I do have a gold record for "Don't  
281 Go To Strangers." And I tried to do that song for ten years. But it wasn't commercial they  
282 said. Each time I would want to put it on an album. "That's not commercial." You know  
283 because they always think they know what might go and what might not go. But you  
284 never know. And you will never know. Something ... it just went. I guess the people were  
285 ready for something that they could relate to. "Don't Go To Strangers" people started  
286 saying it. It was just, I'm glad I didn't do it ten years ahead of time because maybe it  
287 wouldn't have been...

288 MR: The timing was right somehow.

289 EJ: Right. And so all of a sudden I went from \$50 a weekend to \$750 a weekend. It was  
290 frightening. I just couldn't stand it. I couldn't stand all the attention. How would you like  
291 your hair? How would you like to do... It was bugging me. I'm not a person that likes a  
292 lot of fanfare.

293 MR: Yeah, for people to wait on you.

294 EJ: No. They said well let me help you ... I said wait a minute I can put on my own shoes. No  
295 thank you. So I think now if I had a big hit again I could deal with it. I would know how  
296 to handle it. But then it was very trying.

297 MR: And you were how old then?  
298 EJ: I think ... was I 28? Something like that.  
299 MR: It was around 1960, wasn't it.  
300 EJ: It was '59. And it developed in '60 really, when they started playing it. It was coming out  
301 of the stores, it was on the juke box. And a friend of mine came and he said "your record  
302 is on the..." I said get out of here, don't tell me that. He said "yep, come on, let's go, I'll  
303 let you see." And when you get on the juke box and they're playing it and you hear it  
304 coming from record stores...you know that you've got something going.  
305 MR: Yeah, and you weren't even aware that it was happening.  
306 EJ: I wasn't aware. But I heard Symphony Sid play it and Mort Feeger, on the radio. And I  
307 thought wait, I thought maybe it was going to be played once or twice, you know, but  
308 they started playing it and they started, I couldn't believe it. I was so grateful, because it  
309 meant travel, it meant better clubs, it meant more money. But the money wasn't really  
310 that important to me, I mean I just loved to sing so much, and I wanted to get paid, I  
311 mean it's not unimportant, I wanted to get paid a decent salary and I wanted to work in a  
312 decent place. And so the record afforded me that, it really gave me — and one thing  
313 about going on the road and having something that would make people know you, you  
314 get to have a lot of friends. I have friends across the country. I have so many keys to so  
315 many ...  
316 MR: People's houses and apartments?  
317 EJ: People's houses. When I said that one time I said oh wait a minute now, I have keys to  
318 families, not keys to different guys. But it made me have so many friends and I'll never  
319 forget this singing business for that. I have so many across the country. And they wait  
320 'till I come. "She's coming next week" or "she'll be here." They start calling each other  
321 you know. And I have friends that never see each other until I come.  
322 MR: That's terrific.  
323 EJ: So it's really nice. I love my job. I really do.  
324 MR: And you get to associate, I mean on that particular record, you had Frank Wess and Roy  
325 Haynes.  
326 EJ: Roy Haynes, yeah.  
327 MR: Good company.  
328 EJ: I had George Devivier on bass on that.  
329 MR: Wow. And you've worked with a lot of good tenor players too, starting, well maybe not  
330 starting with Houston but...  
331 EJ: With Gene Ammons, with Sonny Stitt, alto and tenor, with what's his name — let's see  
332 I'm going to get a blank now — Illinois, I worked with Illinois Jacquet. I've worked with  
333 — I can't think, I'm getting a blank — but wonderful tenor players.

334 MR: Can you think of something that a piano accompanist would do that you would have to  
335 ask him not to — have you ever had situations where you need to instruct the piano  
336 player ... well you've been pretty lucky then.

337 EJ: No I don't do it. Even if it's something, no I don't do it. I don't tell the drummer, I don't  
338 tell the bass, I just...

339 MR: You deal with what they play.

340 EJ: With what they play. Houston will tell them, like since I'm with Houston — “don't do  
341 that... stop that.” But I don't. And I never turn around. If something goes wrong, I'm not  
342 going to turn around, I'm just going to go like, smile on through it.

343 MR: Well why broadcast it to the audience, right?

344 EJ: Right.

345 MR: Because a lot of times the audience will not be aware.

346 EJ: And sometimes I do something wrong, and when Cedar and I were together I'd say “what  
347 did I do that was wrong?” I know he knows the music better than I do. He said “no that  
348 was me, Etta, I did...” I said “no I think I did that.” And I would never — even though if  
349 something happened, I don't want them to think — well I know they know more about  
350 the music than I do, because they read music, they play it. All I do is steal it. And I kind  
351 of like know four bars from eight bars and different things like that but why tell the  
352 teacher what's wrong, you know, if you don't really know. But if something is wrong, I  
353 just try to deal with it if something is wrong, I just try. I say no I'm not going to tell them.  
354 I don't want to get into that part of it. When we are working with someone that I haven't  
355 worked with, I'll tell them like “don't listen to me, just play, play what you want to play  
356 and just go ahead.” That's what I do. But I feel like I'm chastising them, and I don't want  
357 to do that.

358 MR: Well you must be a pleasure to work with.

359 EJ: I try to be. I try.

360 MR: What have been some of your favorite places to play outside of the country?

361 EJ: Well I like San Francisco very much and I used to love to work Kimball's — you've  
362 heard of Kimball's have you?

363 MR: No I haven't.

364 EJ: That was a nice club, I used to like to go there and work. And Philadelphia was always  
365 one of my places to work. I had lots of friends that loved my music there. And I like the  
366 Tavern on the Green working there, because it's so plush. And after working a lot of  
367 dives for so many years, here and there, although they're fine with me too, I want to work  
368 so, but it's extra special and it's very nice when you work someplace like Tavern on the  
369 Green. So that was one of my favorite places.

370 MR: This is usually a hard question, but can you think of some of the nastiest places you've  
371 played, and why were they nasty?

372 EJ: Oh, I wouldn't say.

373 MR: You wouldn't say it?

374 EJ: You can see I'm a cream puff sitting over here next to you. No I wouldn't say.

375 MR: Just tough joints, huh?

376 EJ: Yeah, some of them were real tough. The bathrooms are not together, and that type of  
377 thing. The people were nice but the surroundings were, yeah.

378 MR: When you traveled down into the south, was the audience that you would play for racially  
379 segregated?

380 EJ: Yes. When I was with Buddy Johnson's band. They had a rope down the middle of the  
381 dance hall and the Black was on one side and White was on one side. But they all seemed  
382 to be enjoying themselves. And I went in a liquor store one time down there and they had  
383 a rope down the middle of the liquor store. But all the money was going in the one cash  
384 register. But I didn't see too much of that, just while I was with Buddy Johnson's band.  
385 Because I didn't travel that much in the south. And I didn't live in the south. My mother  
386 left when I was six months old she said. So I didn't come across any of that until I went  
387 with Buddy Johnson's band.

388 MR: Were you prepared for that at all?

389 EJ: It was just strange. It was strange but we had no conflicts, no. The only time we were  
390 traveling one time, after I got "Don't Go To Strangers" and it was the middle of the night.  
391 We were in Tipton, I think it was Tipton, Georgia. And so my pianist was with me and  
392 the fella that drove for me and everything at that time, and they stopped at this place, it  
393 was in the middle of the night, it was like a little side restaurant on the side, and they  
394 were going in to get some food. And they said "come on, Etta." I said "I'm not going."  
395 This was in '60. Everything was still going on. So I said "I'm not going in." So Walter  
396 says "well if you're dressed nice and you've got your shirt and your tie, there won't be no  
397 nothing." So I said "I'm not going in." So who stayed outside with me? Oh, my pianist  
398 stayed outside. And my manager and Walter went in. And when they went in there, they  
399 came out telling me what happened. They said the woman said "you can't come in here.  
400 You can't." And he said everybody turned around at the bar. She said "go around to the  
401 back." But there was no back. So anyway they came out. I said "see you don't talk about  
402 if you're dressed nice." I said "no I'm not going in" which, I avoided that. But they told  
403 me what happened. So they didn't want them in there. And I figured as much. You knew  
404 what happened in the south I mean at that time. So I wasn't taking any chances. That's  
405 the only think I know of that happened.

406 MR: Well that's fortunate that that was just the one incident I guess.

407 EJ: One incident. That's all.

408 MR: How did the thing, your tenure with Earl Hines come about?

409 EJ: Well I was working in Harlem on 145th Street, and the vocalist that was with him, Dave  
410 Tyler, that had worked with Earl at that time, and he was getting ready to go on the road  
411 with him, but he said that Earl was looking for a female vocalist also. So he said "I'll take  
412 you down to meet him and he'll audition you and let you sing." And so I said okay, thank  
413 you. And we went down and he auditioned me. I think I sang [sings] "I fell in love with  
414 you" — "Them There Eyes." So he said "okay, can you go on the road?" And he hired  
415 me. And I felt so bad because he hired me and then he left Dave Tyler. He said "you will  
416 join us after." And he never came. And I stayed 2-1/2 years, almost 3 years with Earl.  
417 And I felt very bad. But I was very grateful to him for taking me. So Earl was a  
418 wonderful guy. But near the end of his life he had forgotten me. I went by to see him  
419 when he had the band and Marva Josie — Marva Josie was the vocalist with him. And he  
420 looked at me and he said "you're part of my family?" He said "are you some of my  
421 family?" So I said "no, don't you remember me? I'm Etta." And he just thought — he  
422 knew I was so familiar, but he thought I was part of his family. And I read — the bass  
423 player that was with us, Peter Martin Weiss, for my birthday he bought me Earl's  
424 biography. And I read a page in there and it said "Etta Jones was a cross between Ella  
425 Fitzgerald and somebody else, I can't remember, but I have the book at home." He said  
426 "it's too bad she changed her style." He was thinking I was Etta James then. He said it's  
427 too bad I changed my style and went into Rock 'n Roll. So he had remembered me, but  
428 he remembered me wrong.

429 MR: I'll bet that's happened more than once.

430 EJ: Oh God.

431 MR: I'll take that as a yes.

432 EJ: Yes. They introduce me on the radio, "and now we have Etta James" and the people in  
433 the front row say "Jones, Jones" you know, they'd be telling. But it happens to her also.  
434 She was working in San Francisco and somebody hollered "Don't Go To Strangers." And  
435 she said "oh, did you come to see Etta Jones? I'm so sorry, because I'm the other one."  
436 So she had a little speech that she used to say, about she sings this way, and she sings the  
437 soft stuff, and I sing the other. Something like that. I don't know exactly, but they were  
438 telling me. But they took pictures of us one time, we were on the same show together in  
439 Chicago. And so *Ebony* came, I think it was *Ebony*, and they took pictures of us. They  
440 gave us dueling guns. And I had my gun in her nose, and she hers in ... and someone gave  
441 me the picture, and someone stole it from me so I don't have it anymore. But probably if  
442 I wrote to *Ebony*, maybe I can get that picture again.

443 MR: How long ago was that?

444 EJ: It was probably '61. Something like that. We were at the Regal Theater together and they  
445 came. And then they had us back to back with our guns in the air. And they wrote "it's  
446 going to be hotter backstage than it is on stage with the two Ettas back there. But we were  
447 friends.

448 MR: Of course.

449 EJ: You know I don't dislike her and I'm sure she doesn't dislike me. But we talk to each  
450 other. But our paths don't cross that much, but she's a wonderful singer to me, with what  
451 she sings. And it's so different, I don't know how they mix us up.

452 MR: Do you enjoy singing like straight blues songs?

453 EJ: Yes, sometimes, yeah. And I love ballads. And I like them all. I like swing tunes too and  
454 I like blues. And I think that's how Leonard Feather heard me, as a blues singer, when I  
455 was working someplace, I don't remember — at the Onyx Club. And that's when he got  
456 me my first record date. He came by and he said he would like to record me. And that  
457 was like, are you kidding? Yeah I'd love it. And that was the beginning of my recording  
458 career too.

459 MR: How long did you have to make a record? A few hours?

460 EJ: Three hours. I think it was three to four hours. I think at that time if you went into four  
461 hours it was a little overtime, I think it was just three hours they would allot to you for  
462 recording. Of course if you didn't get it they would go a little longer. But that's what it  
463 was.

464 MR: Were you able to — especially in the early days, say "look that take, I didn't feel good  
465 about that, can we do it again?" Or was it kind of the producer would say...

466 EJ: No, you could say, and they could hear, and you could hear when it was wrong. In those  
467 days everybody was in the same room together. And they always told you to go through,  
468 even if it was bad, just go on through, because you might salvage something. It might not  
469 be as bad as you thought it was. And they would ask you to keep on. But sometimes it  
470 was so bad you'd forget something and you'd just stop.

471 MR: Have you done, in more recent years, with the headphones, singing to something that's  
472 already been recorded?

473 EJ: Oh like overdubbing?

474 MR: Overdubbing?

475 EJ: Yes, I've done some of that.

476 MR: Did it take a while to get used to that? Did you like it at first or was it not that big a deal?

477 EJ: No. It was like singing, because you hear the music so forcefully in your ears that it's like  
478 being there. But I'd rather do it when we're doing it, because everyone is there. But  
479 sometimes you have to overdub.

480 MR: Well I wanted to ask you, you mentioned that you have a birthday coming up. And you  
481 said two of them.

482 EJ: Well this is the story on that. I went to Japan with Art Blakey in '69 I think it was, yeah it  
483 was '69, going into '70. It was New Year's Eve when we were flying. But before I got  
484 my passport I sent away for my passport and it was taking so long, and I was wondering  
485 what's wrong, what's happening. So I was born November 25, 1928. When I got the  
486 passport I was born October 15th 1927, that's what they said. Now my mother told me  
487 my date, I believed my mother, but for important or legal things, I have to take October  
488 15th, 1927. The only reason I remember the date is because it's my girlfriends, my best  
489 girlfriend, it's her birthday. So we used to celebrate hers and then celebrate mine.  
490 October 15th, unless I would have had to refer to it, to remember what it was. So that's  
491 how I got two. So when we were on a cruise in October one time, they came [sings]  
492 Happy Birthday To You. I said where are they getting ... they were coming to me.  
493 Because they know the dates from your passport. And I said "I wasn't born..." and then I  
494 said oh, yeah. So that's how I got the two dates. But I still say my mother's right. I don't  
495 know. Well you know I was born in the south and by a midwife, so they didn't — I don't  
496 know how they could have gotten confused like that, but they didn't care in those days  
497 that much I don't think. But I'll take the two birthdays. It's not bad.

498 MR: Tell me about this recent recording. After all these years what prompted the tribute to  
499 Buddy?

500 EJ: Well actually we kept saying it. Houston was always saying well why don't you do — I  
501 said yeah because he was my first boss. And we'd let it slide and let it slide, and then  
502 Houston brought it up again, because it was his idea. "Why don't you do a tribute to  
503 Buddy Johnson and do all of his songs." And I said yeah that would be nice. Because I  
504 liked all of his songs, because I think he wrote beautiful tunes. And I was so grateful to  
505 him too because he was the beginning of my career.

506 MR: And Norman Simmons plays on it?

507 EJ: Norman Simmons, yeah. Houston got the group together, because he always knows. If  
508 I'm going to record certain songs he wants certain musicians he thinks would be best for  
509 that type of music I'm doing. So I listen to him. It hasn't been bad so far.  
510 [audio interlude]

511 MR: That pretty much answers my question about the blues.  
512 The early blues singers — Bessie Smith — did they have any influence on your singing  
513 style?

514 EJ: No. My influences came from, I didn't hear them at all until later on in the years. Because  
515 they started like talking about them. I don't know exactly what year, but no. I had never

516 heard Bessie Smith or her sister Mamie Smith. The only one that I remember is “L’il  
517 Green.” [sings] In the dark it’s just you and I. You remember that?  
518 MR: No I don’t.  
519 EJ: You’re too young. I tell my friend that. He’s a drummer and he works with me  
520 sometimes. And I say “do you remember this, Joe?” And he’ll say “Etta, I was in my  
521 playpen then.” So I say “God will get you for this.”  
522 MR: Can you think of a tune or tunes that you’ve been singing almost from the start of your  
523 career that you still do?  
524 EJ: I’m trying to think.  
525 MR: How about “Embraceable You?”  
526 EJ: I don’t sing that anymore. I think it was “The Masquerade is Over.” I still do that  
527 sometimes, or “Ghost of a Chance.” Although it seems like I’ve been singing some of  
528 these songs all my life.  
529 MR: Do you still do “Don’t Go To Strangers?”  
530 EJ: “Don’t Go To Stranger,” oh yes. They still ask for that. And I say oh God. But you know  
531 I was so happy to get that song that it pleases me when I do it because I would still be...  
532 MR: Doing some dives?  
533 EJ: Oh yeah.  
534 MR: That we won’t talk about. Those kind of places. Are there people out, new jazz singers,  
535 that you enjoy these days? Do you get a chance to listen much?  
536 EJ: I don’t hear too much but I like Vanessa, Vanessa Rubin. Are you familiar with her?  
537 MR: Yes.  
538 EJ: And I still like Lorezza Alexandria. Are you familiar with...?  
539 MR: No.  
540 EJ: But she’s not a new singer. Della Griffin. Have you heard of her?  
541 MR: Yeah.  
542 EJ: That’s my sister-in-law. She’s just new recording, and she’s been singing a long time, but  
543 they’re just beginning to hear her, but she’s a very wonderful singer. So I like her. And  
544 there’s a young lady, her name is Denia, Denia Green. But I don’t know if she’s recorded  
545 yet or not, but she’s very good. I know you’re speaking of probably you’re speaking of  
546 Diana Reeves, and I’m not too familiar with them, Diana Reeves, and Kral?  
547 MR: Diana Kral?  
548 EJ: I’m not familiar with them, and some other singer they asked me did I hear ... I can’t  
549 think of her name.  
550 MR: Do you have any feelings about the state of jazz music today and the future of it?  
551 EJ: I think it’s going to go on and on. I believe as long as people can understand it and  
552 understand what you’re playing and pat their feet to what’s going on, and if they could



553 dance it would be much better. But it's going to always be around. There are going to be  
554 people that still, when they talk about jazz people think it's something they can't  
555 understand or it's going to be so out that ... but it's not. It's not like that. If they give it a  
556 chance they would know it's beautiful music. And when I came up, see when I came up  
557 singing, you had to hear every word. I mean you couldn't sing [slurs]. You had to hear  
558 [enunciates] You Don't Love Me. And you couldn't take breaths. You couldn't hear that  
559 on a record. that was a no no. They'd say "what are you doing in there?" I'd say okay, I'll  
560 calm down. [sings] "I fell in love with you the first time I looked into them there eyes." I  
561 would take them down. They didn't want to hear. But now I hear [breaths]. I hear all kind  
562 of breathing. And if you said a word and they didn't understand, you'd have to record  
563 again. "What are you saying back there?" Now you don't even have to hear the lyric.

564 MR: I think that's very well said. I think the music has seemed to move more toward just the  
565 rhythm end of it.

566 EJ: Right.

567 MR: And the rhythm has gotten louder.

568 EJ: And the voice ... and the story, when you're singing a ballad people should get the  
569 meaning of what that story is about. If it's a love story and you love someone, you're  
570 supposed to make it [emphasis] I love you. You're supposed to let the person know that  
571 you're singing to someone that you love. Or if it's a little ditty, it's supposed to be happy,  
572 then you sing... but you still should understand what the person is saying. I'm not saying  
573 be overbearing with it. But it should be understood. Because sometimes I say "what did  
574 she say?" And I won't name no names.

575 MR: Well great. When I'm listening to you tomorrow night, I know I will understand all the  
576 words.

577 EJ: I'll kill myself if you don't.

578 MR: No, no, no, please don't. Houston was talking about how he'd love to see people dancing  
579 again.

580 EJ: I do too. See when I came up we were dancing to Count Basie and Jimmy Lunceford and  
581 Andy Kirk.

582 MR: Yeah, and I think the musicians got off on that too.

583 EJ: And Benny Goodman and Stan Kenton. We'd go down to the Paramount downtown to  
584 see Stan Kenton. And I mean we almost wanted to get up in the aisles and sometimes  
585 they would do that, get up in the aisles. But now...

586 MR: What about The Savoy. Did you ever get to the Savoy?

587 EJ: Oh yeah. I went to the Savoy all the time. I used to put my age up and go. One time my  
588 girlfriend and I went and she said a date and I said another date and he said "get out of  
589 here" he wouldn't let us. He said "where were you born" and "where were you born?"

590 She said 19... He said “go.” But we used to go. After a while they got so they knew us  
591 and they would let us in so I’d see all of them, Lucky Millinder, all the bands there.  
592 MR: And did they have the two bands sometimes?  
593 EJ: Two bands. The Savoy Sultans would be there, and the main band that was really nice.  
594 MR: And they would take turns.  
595 EJ: Yeah. It was continuous music, and continuous dancing. It was wonderful.  
596 MR: I’m curious about when you, in the early days of not that much amplification, did you  
597 ever have trouble hearing yourself or did the musicians adjust?  
598 EJ: They adjust, yeah. When they can’t hear you, they want to get down lower. Because it’s  
599 hard to play behind somebody and you can’t hear them. And it’s hard to sing when you  
600 can’t hear yourself, or play. Because you want to force yourself, you want to make it, and  
601 you’ll say I’m not going to try too hard, but you will and you’ll get hoarse or you’ll ruin  
602 your chops when you’re playing something. So you need to hear what you’re doing. And  
603 if you don’t hear what you’re doing sometimes you go out of tune, you must hear. That’s  
604 why the monitor is so important.  
605 MR: Well it’s really been a pleasure talking with you and I...  
606 EJ: I loved it.  
607 MR: I haven’t asked you — anything that you’d like to add?  
608 EJ: It’s easy talking to you. Sometimes when I get started, you know, you’ve got to shut me  
609 up.  
610 MR: It doesn’t sound like that you guys have too much trouble finding work these days, you’re  
611 working a lot.  
612 EJ: No. If there’s a job anywhere, Houston will find it.  
613 MR: Well it’s nice to have someone taking care of that end of the business.  
614 EJ: When we started working together, that was really wonderful for me, because I don’t  
615 have to worry about a thing. He’s like my brother, my father, my husband, only he’s not  
616 my husband. People say “are they married?” I say “yeah we’re married but to two  
617 different people.” Because they’ve married us all over the country. But he’s wonderful,  
618 he’s been very good for me, and I hope I’ve been good for him.  
619 MR: I think so. I could tell.  
620 EJ: Thank you.  
621 MR: Well it’s been a great pleasure and I wish you the best for both of your birthdays coming  
622 up, and I hope you have a great cruise.  
623 EJ: Thank you so much. Are you going to be on this cruise?  
624 MR: I don’t think so. Tim, can we go on this cruise? That was a slice of heaven. I mean I have  
625 to tell you that I agreed with you, it was like being in another world.  
626 EJ: That’s what it is.

627 MR: Just going from room to room and hearing all these great artists.  
628 EJ: And having people cut your lettuce up. I mean...  
629 MR: Something to look forward to.  
630 EJ: It was very nice Monk, I enjoyed talking with you.  
631 MR: Thank you so much.  
632 EJ: And thank you too.  
633 MR: All right.