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Jane Ira Bloom

Jane Ira Bloom has established herself as a major player in the world of modern jazz. Her soprano saxophone sound and original compositions are well documented on her eight recordings to date, and she has been honored by Down Beat, Time magazine, and the International Association of Jazz Educators. Jane was the first composer to be commissioned by NASA and her writing has achieved a unique combination of movement, electronics and music. She has performed with Billy Taylor, Charlie Haden, and Cleo Laine and can be seen at major festivals and clubs here and abroad.

Ms. Bloom was interviewed in Clinton, New York on March 3, 1998, by Monk Rowe, Director of the Fillius Jazz Archive at Hamilton College.

15 MR: We are filming today for the Hamilton College Jazz Archive. I'm very pleased to have
16 Jane Ira Bloom as my guest here on campus. Welcome.

17 JB: Thank you.

18 MR: Soprano saxophonist and composer, and I recently learned that you are now in effect
19 orbiting the galaxy. Can you tell me how that little thing happened?

20 JB: Well last week I just got an e-mail from the Lowell Observatory in Arizona, announcing
21 that an asteroid, which orbits around the sun, basically between the orbits of Mars and
22 Jupiter, had been named after me. Asteroid 6083 Janeirabloom — with no spaces in
23 between the names.

24 MR: Tell me about your asteroid. I mean how big it is or —

25 JB: I'll tell you what the research assistant told me, who discovered it, he said it's about three
26 and a half miles across, it's basically kind of a chunk of rock. It has a somewhat eccentric
27 orbit around the sun, after its namesake, and it's kind of new that they're naming these
28 things after artists. In the past they said they used to name orbiting planetary bodies and
29 things like that after Roman and Greek gods. The research assistant said too many
30 asteroids, not enough gods, so they turn now to naming them after other things.

31 MR: Well it must be that obviously he's listened to some of your music. Because you have
32 managed to bring in the kind of space theme into some of your work.

33 JB: Yeah. He'd listened to some of my CDs, which have a lot of titles that resonate from
34 thematic spatial themes. And I guess when you're sitting in the observatory late at night,
35 you put the CD player on so he's been listening to albums, you know, jazz albums.

36 MR: As long as we're talking about that I've noticed that the titles of your own tunes seem to
37 have some significance rather than just, you know, Jane's Blues, or things like that. And
38 in fact when we heard you in New York you seem to have a wide range of things that
39 may affect your compositions. For instance there was a football theme.

40 JB: NFL.

41 MR: NFL. How do you get your inspiration?

42 JB: Well it's a wide, pretty wide span of interests I have. I think because I think that it's an
43 improviser's job to reflect and react to their own time, that those titles reflects the scope
44 of things that interest me today, you know, in the 1990s. And I let them affect what I
45 think about as a jazz player. And the titles, I think of them more like I suppose the way a
46 poet would think about them. They're kind of like springboards for your imagination you
47 know. I never like to explain them, I like to let the music speak for itself. But they speak
48 of something that's been going on in my head about why I wrote these pieces. You have
49 to sort of take it from there.

50 MR: Okay. Well there's an almost programmatic, at least one of the tunes I heard, you had the
51 drummer blowing a whistle and I really liked it. And it was different than obviously the
52 typical situation which we probably will have tonight with you, where you're kind of
53 thrown in with musicians you haven't played with before and it's pretty much okay what
54 standards do we know — which is great to hear from the pros — but to hear a rehearsed
55 group that's actually playing original work, I thought it was very refreshing.

56 JB: Sure. Even when you do play the standards it's always been my point of view to just kind
57 of say something important about why you're playing them. You know you sort of put a
58 different spin on them because of why you're playing them, in 1998, and it's not 1930 or
59 1940 anymore. So it makes sense to me to kind of put your stamp on whatever you do.

60 MR: As you did on your last album.

61 JB: Oh, right.

62 MR: "The Nearness." Some of that work seems to back up what you're saying.

63 JB: Sure. No I love the music of this tradition you know. All the standards that I perform like
64 "Round Midnight," or "The Nearness of You," or what else did I play on that one,
65 "Lonely House," these are beautiful melodies, jazz ballads, and I just thought it was kind
66 of interesting to shape them in a sort of different way.

67 MR: Your start in the public school system was in Boston is that right?

68 JB: Um hum.

69 MR: Did you have the typical experience of learning sax in the school system?

70 JB: You bet.

71 MR: Yeah?

72 JB: You bet, yeah. A list — every student in the third grade was asked do you want to play
73 clarinet, saxophone, trumpet, you know, I forget what it was, violin, flute, something like
74 that, and you had to pick.

75 MR: Why did you pick — or did you pick the saxophone? Was that the first instrument?

76 JB: It was shiny.

77 MR: Yeah.

78 JB: You know that's very important you know when you're nine years old. It was shiny. And
79 it was different.

80 MR: Was there much exposure in your home to music?

81 JB: On record, yeah. My folks had a nice record collection around the house. I remember I
82 used to listen to my mom's Ella Fitzgerald record collection, some Duke Ellington, songs
83 from the American Songbook were around, you know, things like that were around the
84 house.

85 MR: The alto sax, was that your instrument at that time?

86 JB: Sure.

87 MR: Stage band?

88 JB: All of the above, yeah.

89 MR: Yeah.

90 JB: I had to go through all of it.

91 MR: When was it that you decided that, you know music is going to be it for me? Was it kind
92 of a decision that came early, junior high?

93 JB: Well it was never a question in my mind that I was a musician from the earliest memories
94 that you could have as a kid. I can remember being fascinated with musical instruments, I
95 mean now I'm talking really early. I knew I loved music and it was clear very early on
96 that I had a special feeling for it. I started studying piano and drums and saxophone when
97 I was very young. And it just took a while for me to realize that that's what I was going
98 to do for a living. I think it was around college time. It became clear to me that that was
99 the only thing I could do. I didn't really have a choice. Basically you find out it chooses
100 you.

101 MR: If I don't do music, humm, what can I do, right?

102 JB: I couldn't think of anything I could do better than play. And when I understood what it
103 meant to be a performer and what I brought to it and what it felt like doing it.

104 MR: Was there ever an indication that you might go in the classical field of music?

105 JB: I remember looking at that possibility once. Because of course studying the saxophone
106 you had to learn how to produce sound on the instrument much in the way any classical
107 artist might study an instrument. But I don't know, even as a kid I think I had a sense that
108 that wasn't for me, that the parameters for how you had to express yourself were a little
109 too tight for me. I didn't feel I could express myself in that genre really.

110 MR: Well you know when you think of the field of classical saxophone, it would be a little
111 tough to make a living, probably harder than jazz.

112 JB: Probably so. But you know also there was a sense, even as a kid I understood the
113 sensibility about the freedom that was involved in expressing yourself as a jazz player.
114 That was more in keeping I think with my personality.

115 MR: Did you establish a reputation in high school as a little bit different because you were a
116 jazz saxophone player?

117 JB: Whatever I was, yeah I was definitely different. I was definitely a music jock and no
118 question about it, I marched to a different drummer in my younger years. But I guess I
119 just felt this passion to study music and to play, and I guess at that time that makes you
120 different from how you spend your free time than other kids spend their free time.

121 MR: What kind of experiences outside of school in that particular area were you able to find?
122 Because obviously you have to get out and play with people other than just the stage
123 band. Were there opportunities to do that for you?

124 JB: Yeah, you know, a suburban underground, playing in a lot of basements with friends and
125 jazz groups in suburban basements you know. And I remember joining, forming bands, I
126 remember well geez, let me think about this, I belonged to a Massachusetts Youth Wind
127 Ensemble where I got a lot of interesting experience just playing in a big ensemble. That
128 wasn't a jazz group per se but invaluable experience learning about what it means to put
129 musicians together to make music. I think my real training ground as a player happened
130 when I got to college, when I was in New Haven. Because that's when I really started to
131 work playing in clubs and putting on concerts of original music. That's when it started to
132 happen was really in college.

133 MR: This was at Yale?

134 JB: Um hum.

135 MR: Were you a music major at Yale?

136 JB: Yeah I was kind of Liberal Arts, but a music major such as it was.

137 MR: But you went out of your way to push your own work out there as much as you could.

138 JB: Yeah.

139 MR: Outside of the music department?

140 JB: Yeah. It existed completely. It had nothing to do with the music department. There was a
141 really vibrant jazz scene that was going on in New Haven in the mid-70s. It just
142 happened that a lot of now very highly regarded jazz musicians, you know, and very
143 innovative ones, all happened to be in New Haven at that time.

144 MR: Like whom?

145 JB: Oh gee, Anthony Davis, George Lewis, Gerry Hemingway, Mark Dresser, Leo Smith,
146 Bobby Naughton, Mario Pavone. It was an interesting time. These are all very highly
147 regarded jazz artists, and interesting innovative thinkers too, and they all happened to be
148 there at that one time. David Naught — I mean all kinds of people. So there were a lot of
149 musicians around, a lot of opportunities to play with like-minded players, and we created
150 a scene there, at the clubs and the concert scene. So there was a little burst of activity in
151 New Haven during the 70s. And it was I guess my training ground.

152 MR: I wanted to ask you about when two things happened for you. First of all, the soprano
153 saxophone — when did that become your instrument of choice?

154 JB: Well you know I think I was studying with Joe Viola in Boston, a very fine saxophone
155 teacher. And soprano was a passion of his. So I can remember him pulling it out during
156 lessons and stuff. I started with him when I was about 12 or 13, so I was exposed to it
157 quite young. And when I heard him play it, I liked that. I want to play like that.

158 MR: Was it a straight one?

159 JB: Yeah, sure. And I'm sure I picked up a lot of love for the instrument from him. So I
160 started studying with him I think I was 12 or so, 12 years old, 13, I think it was 12. So
161 that's when it began.

162 MR: When were you able to get one?

163 JB: Well I rented one early on. Then I remember I had a, I think it was a Czechoslovakian
164 one, it was a Maadi or something. And then it didn't take long before I wanted a Selmer.
165 So I had got myself a Selmer alto and that took some time, then a Selmer soprano.
166 Actually the instrument that he picked out for me, way back then, is the same one I'm
167 playing. I mean I have other ones at home, I have three of them now, but that's my main
168 horn still.

169 MR: The other question I had was composing your own music is obviously very important to
170 you. Did you have a time, can you remember the first time you wrote your own tune?

171 JB: I was very young. I started studying piano, I think I was about four or five, four. And
172 unlike other kind of classical early piano study, I began early on improvising and not
173 knowing it. And I had a teacher who would show me what chord changes were and how
174 to write things out, so that even when I was beginning to study the piano, I was also
175 improvising at the same time. I didn't know it. So my learning process went hand in
176 hand, you know, improvising and studying written form as well. So it was not like it was
177 anything exotic to me, it was just a part of what I did. And I think that's why it seems so
178 intuitive to me to do it.

179 MR: It's fortunate that you had a piano teacher that could give you a little support in that area.

180 JB: Yeah. Harvey Steinberg. I'll never forget him.

181 MR: Thank you Harvey. You know because too often you hear the stories about people taking
182 piano lessons and they want to try doing their own thing and it's like, don't do that.

183 JB: Don't do this don't do that. No, music was pure joy for me. There was never anything
184 associated with music other than pursuing a passion with a vengeance. I never had any
185 bad experiences like that in my music education. I had terrific teachers and was very
186 fortunate I think to live outside of Boston where I had access to a lot of great music
187 training.

188 MR: What was your experience at Berklee like?

189 JB: Well I was a private student of Joe's. Joe Viola's. I was just a private student. I never
190 studied there. But I used to sit in the hall and listen to all the students there talk about
191 whatever. And Joe occasionally used to sneak me into an ensemble or something like
192 that, to give me a little experience or a sax quartet or a sax section or something. But by
193 and large my association was with Joe Viola. He was the head of the woodwind
194 department there and my goodness I studied with him for a long, long time. A long
195 apprenticeship.

196 MR: Did he use the keyboard to teach you improvising? I've always been curious as to how
197 people teach improvising, if they don't provide some kind of harmonic set-up.

198 JB: Well you know we would work on improvising but he didn't teach me per se. He gave
199 me the tools for learning how to do it, but he used to play the chords, he used to plunk out
200 the chords on the piano and I'd blow some choruses on various standard tunes, things like
201 that. But learning how to improvise, that's something — you really learn how to do it on
202 your own. Nobody teaches you how to do it. They just sort of create the settings for you
203 to experiment in. I think Joe approached it that way. And he gave me the tools for trying
204 to hear and reach the things that I wanted to be able to play.

205 MR: This is a tough question I think, but I've often liked to see if I can tell what people think
206 about when they improvise. Are you conscious to a great degree of the changes as they
207 go by or is it a little more esoteric than that?

208 JB: Well here's the way — I'm not entirely sure. When I study a piece of music that has
209 important harmonic material in it, I internalize it. I think this is how a lot of jazz
210 musicians would describe the process to you, but I play it over and over and over again,
211 both on the horn and on the piano, until the coloristic changes that are in the tune aren't
212 symbols on a page anymore, they're inside. I can hear them in their fullness, in their
213 harmonic fullness, where they exist in a structure. And if I've succeeded in really
214 learning that tune, the page goes away and the tune is then inside me. And occasionally I
215 may have the chart in front of me and you use those symbols, the chord symbols as little
216 reminders of what's going on. But like I said I think if you really know the tune, the
217 harmony is inside you and also I think the melody is, on some unconscious level, being
218 sung in my head when I'm playing. It's there. It's inside. And I think that's some kind of
219 guidepost that exists in your musical imagination at some deep level. I don't know it's
220 hard to talk about this stuff. But I have a sense that that's what it's about. Because when
221 I'm trying to teach students and things about it, that's the way I describe it to them.

222 MR: I told you it was a tough question.

223 JB: It is.

224 MR: It's hard to talk about it. But in fact a couple of things you've said right now, I saw
225 yesterday when you were working with some of the students, in that while they were
226 soloing you decided to play the melody of the tune behind them.

227 JB: Right. To help them.

228 MR: To help them feel their way through the song.

229 JB: It's kind of like putting on training wheels. You know? Here it is, remember? And let
230 them just dance on top of it, to help them remember where the structure is.

231 MR: You had mentioned yesterday, I heard you talking about how you feel it's really
232 important for teachers, jazz teachers to be seasoned performers when possible. Do you
233 think that there is stuff about jazz education today that doesn't follow that?

234 JB: You know I'm a bad one to talk to about jazz education, because it's not really my *métier*
235 to even know exactly what's going on. My sense is that because I was an experiential
236 learner and because I know what I know, with the guidance and input of a lot of theory
237 and things like that, but I know that I learned what I learned by doing. So that's kind of
238 my slant on what it takes to be a player. So I haven't really been in the jazz education
239 environment that much. My path has not been as a teacher so far, in the 20 years I've
240 been out there. I'll do the occasional master classes and things like that, but my path has
241 really been as a performer. So I hope I have something to give from that experience that's
242 a little bit different.

243 MR: Did you ever have an experience where you got into like almost an old fashioned cutting
244 session?

245 JB: A long time ago.

246 MR: Yeah.

247 JB: Like I was saying to the students yesterday, I don't believe that jazz is a contact sport you
248 know; that students should be frightened into how difficult it is to learn how to play jazz.
249 Yes it's difficult but it's a beautiful experience if you have this passion for this thing, and
250 when you share it with other people. So yeah you know there's a good healthy amount of
251 ability in all of us as players and we put it out there for people to see at times, but I don't
252 believe the most constructive musical settings come about because people are cutting
253 each other on a bandstand. I mean it's most like a sports spectacle than it is a musical
254 endeavor.

255 MR: Well there's a — I don't know if it's small or large, whatever — movement for women in
256 jazz. Has it ever felt to you like you have been at a disadvantage or at an advantage
257 because you were a woman playing jazz?

258 JB: No easy answer to that question either, that's a big one. There are both sides to the
259 equation. When I began playing in the early 70s, there was a lot of consciousness in the
260 air about women's issues. There were a lot of women's jazz festivals that sprang up that I

261 played at, and I got exposure through, that had they not been there I might not have been
262 heard. But they were the one venue that I saw a possibility to play, and at that point in
263 time I'd play anyplace, anywhere, anytime. So there was something beneficial about that
264 environment at that time. Disadvantages? It's been my point of view that things haven't
265 changed as much as I had hoped they would in 20 years. You know when I first started
266 playing I thought things would be a lot better, the playing field would be a lot more equal
267 than I see it today, and mostly in respect to the business environment of jazz. Because
268 there are plenty of women players who are now out there, and they're playing horns and
269 they're playing drums and bass, all the rhythm instruments, all the things that were not
270 considered instruments for women to play in jazz, they're out there playing them now.
271 But the thing that kind of is upsetting is that when I talk to some of these younger
272 women, I'm still hearing some of the same stories I remember listening to 20 years ago
273 about social acceptance and business acceptance. So it has gotten better but boy, not as
274 quickly and not as much as I had thought.

275 MR: You had talked, yesterday I overheard you talking about recording albums and the
276 business of finding labels and you had mentioned that the business for records these days
277 is not too healthy in the jazz world and that the time you're getting to make records is
278 getting smaller.

279 JB: Yeah. Well this is the middle, the jazz trenches, we're not talking about the major jazz
280 labels, we're talking about all the independent jazz labels that live and operate in this
281 kind of middle ground, on very small budgets. And the fact is it's become so easy to
282 make a CD now, everybody can make one, anybody can make a CD and get it out there
283 and reproduce it and get it in the record stores. And I'm not entirely sure what that says
284 about the quality and the content of what's in those CDs if they're so easy to do, how
285 carefully we think about what it is that we record and want to put out there. There is also
286 a lot of other entertainment options for people who buy CDs now, you know the
287 computer and internet has changed all kinds of things. And entertainment options people
288 have, not just listening to records. People can barely listen to 60 minutes of music, they
289 don't have that amount of time. An LP used to be 40 minutes. People could handle that.
290 Jazz critics say today that they don't even have time to listen to an entire CD when
291 they're evaluating new albums. It takes a lot of time.

292 MR: Yeah. You get a stack of CDs on your desk that you're supposed to review and each one
293 of them is an hour.

294 JB: Yeah. It also brings up the point of, you know, how carefully are you thinking about what
295 you are recording, how special you want to make those musical moments.

296 MR: Are you a fan of technology?

297 JB: Yeah.

298 MR: You are.

299 JB: Yeah. Live electronics are an important part of my music, and something I've always
300 been interested in, something I've never been afraid of or ever thought that it was any
301 kind of contradiction to the life and thought of a jazz musician. It's just interesting to me.

302 MR: Yeah. How did that first happen? To say hey, this is cool stuff here.

303 JB: I think I was just always interested in electronic music, got exposed to it in college, met
304 musicians in New York who were a little more technically minded than I was, taught me
305 about how to use effects processing. There was an electronics music studio in New York
306 that was set up to help musicians get access to new equipment called PASS, Public
307 Access Synthesizer Studio, which now has turned into Harvest Works.

308 MR: Oh I've seen that, yes.

309 JB: At the time, we're talking 15 years ago, a very interesting place because that's a place
310 where I learned, I got a chance to learn about how to handle and work around with
311 electronics and get a feel for it. And now, well the whole world of computers and
312 electronics has changed drastically since then, but it was my introduction.

313 MR: Does it add to the time you need in the studio to take advantage of the electronics that
314 you want to?

315 JB: Well if I bring my own live electronics set-up, you have to spend a lot more time setting
316 it up, making sure that all the lines are clear and all the things that can go wrong won't go
317 wrong. So it gets a little more — it's not that bad, but just a few more input lines. You
318 have to sort of make sure everything is A-okay.

319 MR: Right. Well you seem to have pretty wide ranging tastes. And you were the first person
320 commissioned by NASA to write. How did that come about?

321 JB: A letter.

322 MR: You just got a letter?

323 JB: I wrote a letter to NASA in the early 80s. I was just fascinated with whether NASA had
324 ever thought about the future of the arts in space. I was very interested in what zero
325 gravity might mean to the future of artistic performance. You know if there wasn't
326 gravity, how might music and dance and sculpture and theater, how all these things might
327 be different. So I wondered whether NASA might have ever thought about it too. I wrote
328 them a letter and six months later I got an envelope back from a gentleman named Robert
329 Schulman, who is head of the NASA art program. I didn't even know that this existed.
330 And he was an avid jazz fan to boot. And I corresponded with him for years. And
331 eventually our correspondence came up with the idea of how about commissioning the
332 first musician instead of a visual artist to be part of this NASA art program. Basically
333 they would invite you down with special access to go see a launch, a landing, and to tour
334 the various NASA facilities, to see things people never get to see. And it was an

335 extraordinary experience. And from that experience you contribute a work of art to their
336 traveling space art collection. And I wound up composing a piece for chamber orchestra
337 and jazz musicians that got performed at the Kennedy Space Center in 1989, and
338 involved six jazz musicians inside the orchestra, it involved live electronics that I used,
339 and a sound surround speaker system. So it had all kinds of interesting new elements to
340 it. It kind of foreshadowed work that I did later on in my own work.

341 MR: That must have been exciting.

342 JB: Oh it was probably one of the highlights of my life, definitely.

343 MR: What launch did you see by the way?

344 JB: STS 26, which was the first return to flight launch after the Challenger accident. It was an
345 exciting time, yeah. I got to meet a lot of interesting astronauts, I met astronaut John
346 Young, shook hands with a man who had stepped on the moon. He actually spoke and
347 gave a beautiful speech about the future of the arts and music in space, before we did the
348 concert. It was quite wonderful.

349 MR: You also had a piece performed at Carnegie Hall, isn't that right?

350 JB: Yeah. That was like a further incarnation of some of that NASA work. Basically that was
351 a piece called "Einstein's Red/Blue Universe," and it was played by The American
352 Composers Orchestra, a very fine new music orchestra in New York, conducted by
353 Dennis Russell Davies, and it was my first piece for full symphony orchestra and jazz
354 musicians, and sound surround brass choirs in the Carnegie Hall balconies. It was the
355 funniest thing. We had — in order to maximize the use of the musicians there are points
356 in the score where the brass section has to leave the stage and get up to the balcony in the
357 Carnegie Hall. And that's pretty precipitous up there by the way. They had to take the
358 elevator to get up there in the middle of the piece.

359 MR: You had to write the time into the piece for how fast the elevator is going up.

360 JB: Yup, yup. And then there were also some very carefully orchestrated movement aspects
361 in the piece for the brass sections and woodwind sections in the orchestra. Movement,
362 almost these doppler like movement effects, is very much a part of my kind of intuitive
363 playing style. And over the years, through working with dancers and things, I got
364 interested in orchestrating it, trying to notate it so other musicians, actually whole
365 sections of instruments, could sort of use my original impulse and also move their horns
366 in this doppleresque kind of way to create these tambour shifts. So if you can imagine
367 whole trumpet, trombone and brass sections standing up with bells in the air, and turning
368 180 and 360° in different directions and different speeds, in unison, to create these kind
369 of spherical soundscapes I guess you could call it. And it's been a passion of mine, an
370 interest. It came all about from working at NASA.

371 MR: Did the people in the orchestra, like how did they handle that?

372 JB: This is a tremendous new music. There's nothing these guys can't do.
373 MR: Because they're used to new—
374 JB: Yeah. And they were very generous with their time and their creativity, and they did it.
375 MR: Tell me, were you really nervous with that premier?
376 JB: Oh sure. Are you kidding? I mean I've stood in front of an orchestra as the soloist, you
377 know like in a classical sense, but with all these other things going on, there's actually a
378 danger element in this music. I had a choreographer friend come in, just to help teach the
379 brass players how to move and play at the same time without getting dizzy, how not to
380 hyperventilate. This is a new, new technique you know.
381 MR: God forbid one of them went the wrong way too.
382 JB: Naa, these were pros, these were professionals.
383 MR: And were you playing also in this piece?
384 JB: Oh yeah, yeah. I was like the featured soloist with the improvising jazz musicians, who
385 were still inside the orchestra, but toward the front.
386 MR: Right. Have you ever had an occasion to — a situation somewhat like that — where you
387 weren't involved in the playing at all, that you just were maybe in the audience or in the
388 wings?
389 JB: In my writing for film I have, yeah. Film and television and things like that. I'll write for
390 instruments, not my own saxophone, it's not called for. And that's been a wonderful
391 experience, because you get to work with musicians who still have extraordinary feeling
392 and how to communicate that to them, just on the page or with words.
393 MR: Do you get to see the film beforehand or is it somewhere along the way you actually get
394 to see the footage that you're writing behind as it happened?
395 JB: Oh of course. Oh yeah you live with it. If you're lucky you get to live with it for a while.
396 But often it's quick, they give you two or three weeks with it. But yeah you spend a lot of
397 time just looking at it, feeling the rhythm of it.
398 MR: In its sequence of it, you know that you have, let's say 30 seconds to do a certain thing
399 and then you have to hit a cue?
400 JB: Sometimes you have to mark it yourself with the director. You have to go through the
401 cues, and kind of figure out where is the most effective place for music, and that's a
402 learning process too, and each director has their own feel for that that you have to sort of
403 work with.
404 MR: You did a film with — Brian Dennehy was in that?
405 JB: Yeah. He has a tremendous gift for music. He sat down and he knew exactly where the
406 musical energy should be and where it should be directed. It was quite wonderful to work
407 with him.
408 MR: And your husband is Joe Grafasi? Did I pronounce that right?

409 JB: Yeah.

410 MR: And being that he's an actor, both of you are in professions that can be a little perilous at
411 times I would think.

412 JB: Well we're both performers. We understand what that means. The lifestyle and the travel
413 and what it means to really prepare yourself for performance. We understand that about
414 each other.

415 MR: Without getting too personal, has there ever been a time where you've both had a stretch
416 of a month or so where the work seems to be down?

417 JB: I'm sorry, say it again?

418 MR: Your work flow. I imagine being that you're both basically self employed, it's kind of up
419 and down.

420 JB: Sure.

421 MR: Does it ever happen where you're both like down?

422 JB: Of course, sure. It's just in the natural flow of events. But you know you have faith. If
423 you've been doing it long enough eventually something's going to happen. But sure
424 there's been all kinds of matches, you know I'm up, he's down; he's up, I'm down; we're
425 both up; we're both down. All possibilities exist in the life of artists.

426 MR: Have you both lived in — New York has been your base?

427 JB: Yeah I've been there about 20 years.

428 MR: Has it ever occurred to you that you'd want to go somewhere else?

429 JB: I can't think of where else I could be. It's where my whole family is from to be honest.
430 And it's where I feel I have to be musically. I don't know, I couldn't think of any other
431 place at the moment.

432 MR: But you had said that as far as playing right in New York, do you play a lot in New
433 York?

434 JB: Here and there. It's not as frequent as you would think. But the work is generated often
435 because I'm there, which is a strange kind of contradiction but that's just the way it is.

436 MR: What's the competition like? Let's suppose you've got a good quartet of people and
437 you'd really like to get them into the Iridium or something. How do you go about that?

438 JB: Well your reputation has to speak for itself. I mean your recordings and the recognition
439 that you get through them, and your playing and your acceptance among the jazz
440 community and the music business community. Usually that has a lot more to do with it
441 than the acceptance among the music community, the music business community. And
442 then you have to have a solid reputation about what you do and I think time helps, people
443 know and see your body of work over a period of time.

444 MR: Do you call the club yourself?

445 JB: No, no, no, no. You always work through representatives when it comes to that kind of
446 thing.

447 MR: Right. They don't want to talk to the artists.

448 JB: No, no.

449 MR: I mean I was interested one day to pick up the book from the New York — I guess it's
450 802, the Local, and look at the number of saxophone players in there. It's like how do all
451 these people work? I suppose some of them are part timers.

452 JB: There's a lot of musicians that aren't even in that book. Yeah there's a lot of great
453 musicians in New York City. That's what makes it the interesting place that it is too, so
454 yeah.

455 MR: Does the musician's union have a part in what you do at all?

456 JB: No. No I don't have much to do with it at all.

457 MR: It used to be I guess really quite powerful.

458 JB: Yeah. Not so anymore. Not particularly in the underground jazz world.

459 MR: Have you ever done any of the big band opportunities, or pit work?

460 JB: No. I did that when I first came to New York and I had a very bad experience, and when I
461 left college I was asked to join the Mercer Ellington Orchestra. I went on some road trip
462 with them to New Jersey. I was still in music school at the time. And I just didn't think
463 that that was the direction for me. I know that's a way that many instrumentalists
464 apprentice before they find themselves in the world of jazz, but I followed a different
465 path, I really did. I just didn't think that that was going to be musically helpful to me at
466 that time. And so I went it alone.

467 MR: To get your own stuff played, it must be imperative that you have a core of people that
468 you try to work with as much as possible, as we saw at the IAJE.

469 JB: Yeah, and it changes from time to time too, but yeah a body of musicians who get inside
470 your work.

471 MR: Is it hard to keep a core of people to provide enough work for them?

472 JB: Sure. And often you have a number of people, not just one bassist who you work with but
473 several, and likewise rhythm sections, so that you've sort of worked on your music
474 intimately with a number of musicians so that you're not locked into just one or two
475 people. Although when you really want that special feeling there are certain people that
476 do a certain thing a certain way, and no other people can do that, or no other chemistry of
477 a group of people can do it the same way. So you get used to understanding that.

478 MR: You've been able to — in addition to having your own band — played with quite a list of
479 people, and I wonder if there's been some folks that have stood out in your mind as being
480 really memorable experiences.

481 JB: Oh a lot. And for different reasons too. Working with Cleo Laine — some kind of special
482 feeling I had about playing with her, and it meant a lot to me. Playing with Charlie Haden
483 and Ed Blackwell was probably the most exciting rhythm section I've ever worked with
484 in my life, and I played the Village Vanguard with them. I mean I will never forget
485 Blackwell, ever. I think Ed Blackwell, of the instrumentalists, Ed Blackwell probably had
486 a more profound influence on me, absolutely, not because we talked about anything, but
487 completely musically. It was just completely about music communication of what he did
488 and what I played with him, and what happened when we played, that I'll never forget. I
489 don't think I've ever felt a cymbal like that in my life again, since he passed away.

490 MR: Was that a fairly spontaneous gig too?

491 JB: Well I recorded with them on Enja Records in the early 80s. And it was a recording that I
492 was asked to pick whatever rhythm players I wanted to record with and they were them.
493 And it included pianist Fred Hersch and a number of festival appearances and concert
494 appearances happened after that recording. It was called "Mighty Lights" and at the time
495 it got a lot of attention, and the most exciting for me, opportunity, was to play a week at
496 the Vanguard with this group. So I always remember that.

497 MR: I guess. I understood you did "Piano Jazz" with Marian McPartland?

498 JB: Sure. And I interviewed with Billy Taylor. I mean I've been through it. You know, been
499 through it. Ups and downs you know.

500 MR: Did you ever have a point where you felt like, man this is just too hard. I can't do this
501 anymore.

502 JB: Sure you say that to yourself sometimes. One of the times when I was feeling like that
503 was when I wrote that letter to NASA. And look what happened. Somehow you pull
504 yourself up, somehow. And the music pulls you up you know. Anytime you just play,
505 that's the kind of magic that makes you want it more, and you keep striving for that
506 moment again. That's what we live for. It's in the music I think that gets you through all
507 that hard stuff.

508 MR: Did your parents support you in your eventual choice to become a jazz musician?

509 JB: Well you know I think I was kind of a mystery to them, what it was that I was doing. But
510 you know I'm sure they were happy that I was doing what I wanted to do. That was
511 probably the most important thing to them. They didn't entirely understand it but you
512 know that's the way it goes.

513 MR: Are they still with us?

514 JB: Yeah.

515 MR: And how does your mother describe to other people what you do?

516 JB: I don't know you'll have to ask her, you'll have to ask her.

517 MR: That's interesting. When you hope to make a record, do you have a number of labels that
518 you're working with? How does the opportunity to record come about. I know you've
519 done seven or eight over the years.

520 JB: At the moment I'm with Arabesque Jazz. And it's nice having an association with a jazz
521 record label that's interested in pursuing having you record a number, not just one, but
522 following your career and to have you continue to record on their label as you develop.
523 So that's been a nice relationship. Over the years I worked — oh I was with CBS for
524 about four years, and I was with Enja Records and JMT Records. It's very common you
525 know for jazz musicians to record wherever they can.

526 MR: And they approach you. Do the small labels approach you?

527 JB: Yeah. You get to meet them at various times.

528 MR: Yeah. Was there any advantage to being with CBS as a larger label?

529 JB: Sure. Are you kidding?

530 MR: It's a rhetorical question.

531 JB: Yeah. I mean talk about distribution, yeah, obviously a whole lot more people become
532 aware of your work because of its visibility. Absolutely.

533 MR: Do you ever have to buy your own recordings back from the labels?

534 JB: I haven't done that but a small jazz label bought the masters from CBS when they turned
535 into SONY you know, and has re-released those two CBS albums under the Koch Jazz
536 label. So I'm very happy to have them out there because otherwise they would be sitting
537 in a vault somewhere in New York. So great — that's great that happens.

538 MR: Getting back a moment to your compositions, do you write at the piano, at a keyboard?

539 JB: Yup I do, most of it. Sometimes ideas come to me on the horn, but for the most part, yeah
540 I'm a piano thinker.

541 MR: Do you have any kind of set-up in your apartment, a four track or any of that kind of
542 gear?

543 JB: All of the above, yeah. Yeah I've got a synthesizer keyboard and a JB 1080 which is a
544 beautiful orchestral — a synthesizer with a lot of orchestral sounds on it. All kinds of
545 tools to help.

546 MR: Do you ever take a tune — you had mentioned the orchestral sounds and everything —
547 you find a really great sound on the synthesizer, it's really lush and it's got all kinds of
548 reverb and the whole thing — is there a danger in building a composition around a sound
549 like that, that the melodic and harmonic content of the music may be kind of light? Do
550 you ever take things back to the piano and see, does this thing stand on its own?

551 JB: Oh absolutely. I mean if you're a composer, the musical impulse comes from here. It's
552 not in your hands, it's not in the sound. I think that's what you're getting at. The same
553 criticism is often made about using electronics, it's like a black box. That it dictates what

554 you do. But I think if you're a true compositional thinker, the ideas come from here and
555 translate through your use of sounds and whatever. But you should be very much in
556 control of the musical materials, no matter what tools you're using, whether it be a
557 synthesizer or electronics or whatever, which are just as valid as playing an acoustic
558 instrument, you know, it's just how you do it, how you do it.

559 MR: Who do you like to listen to these days? Who or what?

560 JB: I was thinking last week I was listening to Aly Akbar Khan play North Indian Sarod.

561 MR: Oh everybody listens to that sure.

562 JB: Different stuff, no, different stuff. Not what you would think too. And I have my Frank
563 Sinatra albums, the Capitol years. It's pretty eclectic, pretty eclectic.

564 MR: Are there saxophone players out there these days that you go out of your way to hear?

565 JB: Oh there are a lot of good players, yeah. I mean for me to like itemize, to say this person
566 or that person, that's not important, but sure there are a lot of great players doing
567 interesting things.

568 MR: What's the immediate future for you as far as upcoming gigs, concerts?

569 JB: Museum of Modern Art in New York this coming month. Continuing to play with my trio
570 with Bobby Previte on drums, Cameron Brown will be playing bass and sometimes Mark
571 Dresser plays bass. Finishing a recording for Arabesque that's coming up this spring, I've
572 been doing some quartet recording, that also involved Fred Hersch on piano, Mark
573 Dresser on bass and Bobby Previte on drums. This was the group that played Sweet
574 Basil's last year, and just raised the bandstand it was so wonderful. Anyway, what else
575 am I up to? Planning a tour for January 1999, this is how far in advance the real world of
576 jazz musicians has to think, I've been invited to play at the Melbourne Jazz Festival and
577 the Sydney Jazz Festival in Australia, and preparing and find funding to get over there
578 and do all that. All kinds of things are in the air.

579 MR: Are you able to take your own group when you go?

580 JB: Take a trio. Yeah take bass and drums with me. Planning a concert at the Einstein
581 Planetarium down at the National Air and Space Museum. That's also in the works
582 probably for the fall. I mean it's not like the old days where you get a gig and you show
583 up, next night — lot of long term planning's involved in being a jazz musician now.
584 Different, huh?

585 MR: Yeah, different, and also calculating what you have to charge in 1999 — in January of
586 1999 to go to Australia, what's a fair price for me to ask to go over there.

587 JB: Oh and it varies from country to country, yeah. A whole lot of factors. You have to be a
588 business person as well as a musician and a lot of things, a lot of balls you've got to keep
589 in the air.

590 MR: You and your husband. Constantly juggling.

591 JB: Sure. Sure. It's life in the arts.

592 MR: I forgot to ask you about your Pilobolus. That must have been fun, huh?

593 JB: Well I met the Pilobolus Company in 1979 when I lived in New Haven and they worked
594 out of Connecticut. So one of the dancers, Allison Chase, became aware of my work and
595 she wanted a solo saxophone score for her new solo piece that she had done, it was later
596 called "Moonblind." So we spent a lot of weeks working in her studio. I loved it. And I
597 didn't realize at the time how much I loved modern dance and working with dancers.
598 And as time moved on, when I got to New York, I started working with an
599 improvisational dance company, which was run by a choreographer named Richard Bull.
600 And I spent many years performing with them, not only as a player but learning how to
601 play and move at the same time with the improvisational dancers. It was some very bold
602 stuff. And I think again it was kind of like an experience that I jumped off from, learning
603 about playing and moving and why I'm interested in how sound changes when it moves,
604 and not being afraid of the physical aspect of myself as a player, kind of becoming more
605 conscious of it, more aware of it, more interested in it. Because the dancers were
606 fascinated with it. Musicians might go huh, but the dancers were just fascinated and they
607 helped me you know. So over time my work with Pilobolus, I did the "Moonblind" piece
608 for them early on, late 70s, and a couple of years ago I orchestrated a piece for the full
609 company called "The Doubling Cube" which they're now performing on tour all over the
610 world, so it's on tape and it has a lot of drums and saxophone and bass on it too, as well
611 as some electronic sounds.

612 MR: It must be a thrill to write something that has some longevity to it like that, that goes out
613 and is spread around.

614 JB: Yeah. Well that's how you think about records too. You know you don't realize what a
615 life they have after you've given birth them. They go out into the world and effect people
616 in ways you never know, sometimes not until 15 years later.

617 MR: Like the astronomer.

618 JB: Yeah, right.

619 MR: Do you listen to your own work much?

620 JB: No.

621 MR: Never?

622 JB: Just keep doing something that you hope is better. You keep wanting to do something
623 different. Ask a musician what they're most interested in, it's what they're doing right at
624 the moment you know. That's what interests you.

625 MR: Is Joe a good critic of your work?

626 JB: Sure. It goes both ways. It goes both ways yeah. We see inside each other pretty well.

627 MR: Have either one of you ever done a gig or — how shall I phrase this — that turned out to
628 be really like oh man, I wish I hadn't done that?

629 JB: Sure. Oh there's always those things that happen. Absolutely. At least you have
630 somebody to commiserate with. It happens, yeah. Sure. There are always events that
631 happen that, oh just, this was a hard one or something like that. But you know, you just,
632 you know you've got to pick yourself up and keep moving on, because if you've been at
633 it long enough you realize that there's always another day you know, there's always
634 another chorus, there's always another opportunity to play another improvisation that's
635 going to make that one go into history.

636 MR: Right. Help keep things in perspective. The high is that much higher I guess.

637 JB: Yeah. It's just time that teaches you that. You can get upset but it doesn't last for too
638 long.

639 MR: Would you suggest to someone who is just in high school and has aspirations to be a jazz
640 musician, would you have any advice for them?

641 JB: Play as much as you can. Whatever opportunity you have to perform, take it. The whole
642 idea is you can't learn how to improvise without doing it, and hopefully every day you
643 know. That's how you learn how to do it and do it well. So take every opportunity you
644 can to play and play with musicians who might be better than you are, to learn from
645 them, and take any opportunity you can, even when it's scary.

646 MR: In New York is there any kind of racial scene connected with jazz that is uncomfortable
647 or is there any issues about race these days in the music that you've been able to see?

648 JB: Well if you were to look, as time has gone on, whether the music community has been
649 polarized into black and white, I've felt that a lot, when it did exist, and when I saw it, it
650 seemed like it was the musicians who are not in control of it, it felt like the music
651 business community, the promoters, the club owners, were having more input into this,
652 and the critics as well too I think, than I think the musicians. And that was a scary
653 moment, a scary perception. That choices were being made about who musicians would
654 play or not play with, based not on musical reasons, but something else. I remember there
655 was a period, I remember talking with Billy Taylor about this in that interview, it
656 probably wasn't on the Charles Kuralt show, but I remember we had an interesting
657 discussion about this. And he was very concerned about it too.

658 MR: That there was control being exerted from—

659 JB: Subtle. This is covert. I mean we're not talking about overt stuff. It was covert pressure
660 in terms of what was accepted in the club and what was considered the right thing and all
661 black groups or all white, whatever it was. It was as if the musicians were not in control
662 in deciding what they thought was best for their own musical development, who they
663 should play with or who they shouldn't. That was the real issue.

664 MR: Who was trying to control it?
665 JB: Oh it's not a who, it's not any particular person, it was prevalent in, you could see it in
666 the way festivals and the way groups were lining up to play at certain clubs at certain
667 places, and the way they were being recorded too. It's not a finger pointing thing. It was
668 — you could sense it in the consciousness of what was going on, and it had to do with
669 also the kind of conservatism that had overtaken the music community as well too. I
670 think it went hand in hand with what was going on with it in the country. In the class I
671 spoke to here at the college we were talking about gender issues in music, and Dr. Woods
672 brought up the fact that what was going on in the music community was reflecting what
673 was going on in the society and the conservatism of the culture at the time as well. And
674 I think there's something very true in that.

675 MR: Has the music been affected by the fact that it's become almost institutionalized, that
676 mostly it's taught in colleges now as opposed to kind of on the job training?

677 JB: It definitely will change the nature of what that music is, how you learn it. I suppose
678 that's why I'm even more adamant, even having come from a college environment, but
679 knowing deep in my heart that that's not how you learn how to play. It's really through
680 experience so you have to take the best from both worlds is my advice to any students
681 who are going through a music education whatever, a formal music education. But
682 there's something to be said for both those approaches and how you use it as a player,
683 composer, whatever. Take everything you can but you have to do it.

684 MR: Well you've certainly been doing it. I know *Down Beat* has recognized you as a top
685 instrumentalist on your instrument. Are you bothered at all by — let me start again with
686 that — contemporary jazz, where they put Kenny G and a few other folks in the jazz bins,
687 do you think that that term is healthy for the music?

688 JB: I don't know. Words don't mean that much to me. I don't think about it that much with
689 that kind of perspective who they call jazz or not jazz. Is it important or isn't it? It's a
690 hard question. I have to kind of plead — from the view of most performing musicians,
691 our concentration is really on doing the thing. I don't sit around thinking about that, you
692 know to be honest.

693 MR: You're doing your own thing.

694 JB: Doing it.

695 MR: And promoting it.

696 JB: No not just that but you know that's not, yeah, it's just not where my attention is, it's not
697 where I put my energy into thinking about.

698 MR: Okay. That's a good answer.

699 JB: Yeah, it's true you know. You know Kenny G can do whatever he wants you know.

700 MR: Right. Well I want to thank you for your time today, and I hope that if I haven't asked
701 you anything that you had on your mind —

702 JB: Well let me think about that for a minute. Well you know here's something, this is
703 interesting, I mean to put on a videotape. Because when you have these kind of talks and
704 you're trying to talk about music and get these issues sort of out, it makes it seem as if
705 it's clear what you do and what you think. I think I always like to make sure that after I
706 have one of these experiences that whoever I'm talking to — you at the time — or
707 whoever's listening to this videotape, that the words that were used to describe what we
708 do help us understand things but it's not the thing itself. And I always worry that talking
709 so much about it may demystify something about the ambiguity of what we do. It's so, I
710 am sitting here trying to put it into words but it doesn't exist in that realm in my mind.
711 And so it's like a conscious effort to talk to you about it. I'm using a different part of my
712 brain to do it, and the part of my brain that plays music and lives in that music world.
713 And I guess I always like to just leave with the thought that it's much more ambiguous
714 and abstract and emotional and passionate thing that we're talking about than these words
715 convey. And that's why we play instead of talk.

716 MR: The answer in on your records not in talking about them. Yeah.

717 JB: Yeah.

718 MR: Well that's a good statement to make and I'm glad you said that, that talking about it only
719 goes so far. Do you have any other passions besides music? Hobbies?

720 JB: Photography. I've been in to black & white photography since I was teenager and I kind
721 of re-discovered it this past couple of years. So a lot of time I spend in the darkroom.

722 MR: Neat.

723 JB: Tai Chi. I practice Tai Chi and I've been studying Tai Chi for two years and I find it very
724 complementary to things I think about musically. And again it gets in line with my
725 feeling about the physicalness of things that I feel, you know the old sound body, sound
726 mind, you know, when I'm physically aware I feel mentally aware too for playing and
727 clear, empty, you know what I mean, to play. So I think there's a relationship between
728 physical disciplines and musical too.

729 MR: Good advice also. Think we'll ever see one of your photos on one of your CDs?

730 JB: Maybe the next one.

731 MR: All right. I'll look forward to that. You have recording plans coming up?

732 JB: Yeah. I think things will get underway I hope this spring yeah.

733 MR: Is it hard for you to — let's say you have a record date coming up and you're able to do
734 six of your own tunes. Is it hard for you to pick six? Do you have that much material of
735 your own?

736 JB: Always.

737 MR: That you say I want to do all this?
738 JB: There's more than enough material to keep recording for a long, long time. That's not a
739 problem. That's not a problem. It's just when I make a record I like to think about
740 recordings, like I said, in a special way. I like to think about how they make a statement
741 from beginning to end. In the old days they used to call it kind of thematic albums, but
742 even if there's some you know kind of thread in my own mind, about some kind of
743 concept I'm trying to get across, you know, in everything that this music states in an
744 album, so it's not just about cut, cut, cut you know. Here's a song, here's a song, here's a
745 song and we're going to splice them together you know. I try to think about an album as a
746 curve from beginning to end, and what connects it and what I'm trying to say with each
747 statement. And hopefully that makes it the kind of album that you want to listen to not
748 just once, but many times, and after five or ten or fifteen years it might be worth listening
749 to again, if the values on it are strong enough.
750 MR: Good thoughts.
751 JB: A different approach you know.
752 MR: All right. Well you have some things to do later on today, and —
753 JB: Yeah. Nice talking to you.
754 MR: — here on the campus and thank for your time and I'm sure we'll be hearing some great
755 things about you in the future.
756 JB: Thanks.
757 MR: All right.