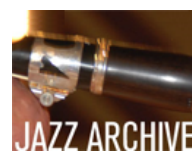


Copyright Statement

The Hamilton College Jazz Archive has made a reasonable effort to secure permission from the interviewees to make these materials available to the public. Use of these materials by other parties is subject to the fair use doctrine in United States copyright law (Title 17, Chapter 1, para. 107) which allows use for commentary, criticism, news reporting, research, teaching or scholarship without requiring permission from the rights holder.

Any use that does not fall within fair use must be cleared with the rights holder. For assistance in contacting the rights holder please contact the Jazz Archive, Hamilton College, 198 College Hill Road, Clinton, NY 13323.



Vi Redd

Vi Redd was born in Los Angeles on September 20, 1928 and has enjoyed a distinguished career as a saxophonist, vocalist and educator. Her father, Alton Redd, was the famous New Orleans drummer, and her aunt, Alma Hightower educated numerous future music greats in L.A. She received her teaching degree from the University of Southern California and her varied career has taken her from elementary school and college classrooms to concert stages both here and abroad. She has recorded with Al Grey and members of the Basie band and she has released albums as a leader on United Artists and Atco. Ms. Redd has been honored by the Los Angeles Jazz Society and the Smithsonian, and has served as a consultant to the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences.

Vi Redd was interviewed in Los Angeles on February 13, 1999, by Monk Rowe, director of the Hamilton College Jazz Archive.

17

18 MR: We are filming today for the Hamilton College Jazz Archive in Los Angeles. I'm very
19 privileged to have Ms. Vi Redd with me. I am very pleased to have you here today.

20 VR: And I'm very happy to be here.

21 MR: And you look appropriate for Valentine's Day too.

22 VR: I should say.

23 MR: You look great.

24 VR: All in red, huh? Just like my name but it's two D's.

25 MR: I've been reading about the L.A. jazz scene recently, and your family, you and your
26 brother and your father, come up so often.

27 VR: And my aunt, Mrs. Hightower.

28 MR: Yes. It's quite amazing. You must have had music in your house from your first memory.

29 VR: Right. As far back as I can remember there was music in the house. Somebody was
30 playing, people were coming from Louisiana who might have had some hard luck or
31 something and they were coming to stay with us for a time, then of course my aunt, Mrs.
32 Hightower, she stayed with us. You know they had extended families quite a bit then.
33 And my mother used to say, when I'd say "there's too much noise in the house." And
34 she'd say "why Lloyd Reese used to rehearse a twelve piece band in the living room. So
35 what do you mean?" And I'm sure you've heard of Lloyd Reese also.

36 MR: Yes. So he rehearsed in your living room.

37 VR: He used to rehearse, my dad played with him too for a while, and they'd have rehearsals
38 there at the house.

39 MR: And your father came from New Orleans?

40 VR: Uh huh. Daddy was born in Baton Rouge, Baton Rouge as they say. But he grew up and
41 spent most of his childhood in New Orleans until he came west with my grandmother.
42 MR: What was the reason for coming west? Did he ever talk about it?
43 VR: She came out cooking. She was cooking for a family, and she'd had a restaurant in Baton
44 Rouge, and this is what I was told, that's why they came out, and for more opportunities.
45 MR: What directed you to first of all singing?
46 VR: First of all singing, well, my aunt, Mrs. Hightower, I mean you did everything with her
47 you know, and as I recall, the first time I ever appeared in a church, and there was so
48 many churches we went to, First Day AME — it a very popular, well known church here
49 in Los Angeles now. It was formerly called Aithen Town, but now it's First Day AME.
50 It's been very active in all the social programs, and Pastor Murphy is a wonderful
51 minister there. But I must have been about five or six when I sang, and that's the first
52 time I sang "I will make you fishes and men if you follow me." And I remember that
53 singing in the church for the first time. And then after that there was piano and then there
54 was the instruments and so forth. But we all sang.
55 MR: You had mentioned a tune that you can recall.
56 VR: Oh that was later.
57 MR: That was later?
58 VR: That was later. We had a friend that came from Louisiana and — one of my mother's
59 classmates, her name was Maeola Gibbons. And she was going to Southern University or
60 something at the time and she had some bad luck or something. She came and she stayed
61 with us and she played beautiful piano. And she used to play this song called "Never
62 Should Have Told You." And she'd sit there and play, and she was a very attractive
63 woman, and that's when I kind of felt like I wanted to sing too. When I heard [sings]
64 Never should have told you/That you're marvelous ... and so forth and so on.
65 MR: So were you a singer before you were a saxophone player?
66 VR: It was all going on at the same time. It was all going on at the same time. Maybe singing
67 first, because I didn't start the saxophone until I was about twelve, thirteen. But I had
68 piano and I regret to this day that I didn't keep it. I can play just to teach myself songs or
69 things, but I didn't keep up on it. I was always trying something new. "Try this. You like
70 this? Play the clarinet." So I ended up with the alto saxophone and the soprano
71 saxophone. And when I was in college I took flute, and oh boy that knocked me to my
72 knees. That was very difficult for me, especially the last register, and I don't think I can
73 play it today.
74 MR: The high one or the low one?

75 VR: The high one. Yeah. I just could never... And then I was busy playing for dances. I had a
76 little band then and Eric Dolphy was in the flute class, and I said I'll never be able to play
77 this thing you know. I had such a hard time with that flute that I said oh forget it. You
78 know when you're like 18, 19, what do you think about the future so to speak.

79 MR: Right. Well Eric did all right with the flute.

80 VR: I should say he did. Yes he did.

81 MR: The music that was played in your house off the records, was it a combination of things?

82 VR: Yes. Because my aunt loved Duke Ellington, and of course we loved Nat King Cole and
83 it's very interesting too, because I have a cousin now that I see often. In those days some
84 of the families frowned on jazz, as some of them still do unfortunately. It's very, very sad
85 to know that they made these wonderful contributions and people would call it the devil's
86 music. But I was blessed in that. I didn't come up in that kind of environment. And I had
87 a Christian home, but my aunt, Mrs. Hightower, who had been in vaudeville and knew
88 Sam and Heddy McDaniels, in fact Sam McDaniels used to work with my father. You
89 know we were all about the arts too. This was important to my family. So we heard some
90 of all kinds of music, and when she would teach us we'd play marches, we'd play
91 overtures, we'd play jazz — just all kinds of music. And she adored Duke Ellington's
92 music. So I heard some of everything coming up. And Carl used to come over because
93 his mother used to say "don't bring that jazz in here." He just wanted to hear Nat King
94 Cole, you know. But he'd have to come to our house to hear it. And I'm very grateful for
95 that experience.

96 MR: And your aunt taught in the public school system?

97 VR: No. She taught in the public schools down south, but when she came to Los Angeles she
98 taught privately, but she filled up the public schools with her students. Many, many,
99 many of them.

100 MR: And some well known people including yourself.

101 VR: Right, right. Melba — Melba Liston, Dexter Gordon took lessons from Aunt Alma. In
102 fact Dexter's father was her doctor. Dexter's father was a doctor and his brother was a
103 dentist. And she just was the greatest teacher in the world. And I used to wonder, how did
104 she learn so much? Where did she get all of this knowledge that she gave us? She was a
105 most unusual woman, a special woman, Alma Julia Webster — my family was Websters
106 on my dad's side — Alma Julia Webster Hightower was her name. She was about, she
107 wasn't five feet, not very tall about four-nine, with little tiny feet and hands, but just —
108 could roll a drum like Art Blakey. She was a phenomenal woman.

109 MR: Just had a kind of all-encompassing feel for music.

110 VR: Right. And not only music, she taught dancing. She taught dancing and she taught my
111 late brother, she taught him a lot of the Burt William materials. And she was just
112 something else. I've never known any other woman like her.

113 MR: Yeah. How did swing music affect your father's profession as a drummer? He started out
114 as a Dixieland oriented drummer?

115 VR: Well I guess it was all meshed for him. I mean and it's kind of hard to divide the idioms.
116 Daddy played with Kid Ory, he played with Les Hite, in fact Daddy took ... when Les
117 Hite, no when Benny Goodman, Lionel Hampton went to join Benny Goodman, Daddy
118 took his place in the band.

119 MR: With Les Hite.

120 VR: With Les Hite, yeah. And he played with all different kinds of ... then his last gig, his
121 really last gig was at Disneyland, the Young Men From New Orleans, so I guess he sort
122 of went back to the traditional. But Teddy Edwards always mentions that during the early
123 Bop era, when it was coming through in Los Angeles, Daddy would be on gigs and the
124 guys, some of the other guys that would be working with Daddy would say "get those
125 guys out of here, those Boppers, we don't want to hear those Boppers." And he said
126 Daddy was always so tolerant. He said "yeah, let the guys play, you know, I'll play with
127 them." He and a gentleman by the name of Poison Gardener, he said they always took up
128 for them. Teddy Edwards always tells me that. "Your dad was so nice" he said.
129 Everybody would run us out but Alton. My father was a wonderful man.

130 MR: That's such an interesting thing...

131 VR: Benevolent man.

132 MR: With Bop music, that it had such an effect. I mean some people just loved it, and then
133 others...

134 VR: Others went nuts. Well we danced to it.

135 MR: Well how did he feel about...

136 [off camera comment]

137 MR: Pardon?

138 VR: How is this coming across? Maybe I should ask him.

139 MR: Oh I'm sure it's coming across fine. How does it look out there?

140 VR: Okay?

141 MR: How did he feel about you — aspirations as a career in music?

142 VR: He wasn't too happy about it. Because I really didn't start off to have a career in music.
143 You just were going to play something. You're going to do music. And then by the time I
144 got out of high school I wanted to teach music. And my first two years in college that's
145 what I started out to be, a music teacher, and then I switched. But all during this time I

146 was performing. For dances I had a band around town called the Futuristic Five, and I
147 was just talking to my friend the other night, I think I was one of the first women around
148 L.A. during that time, early '50's and late '40's that had a band, had nerve enough to get
149 a band. So Martha Young played piano, that was Lee and Lester Young's niece, and my
150 brother played drums, and Walter Benton, a very fine tenor player which you might have
151 heard of, has been in ill health some years recently, he played tenor, and I played alto and
152 sang and got the gigs.

153 MR: All right.

154 VR: Morris Edwards was the bass player. He lives in New York now. I mean that was really
155 something in the early 50's.

156 MR: What did your song list consist of at that time?

157 VR: Oh we were playing Diz's things, we were playing "Good Bait" we were playing let's
158 see, oh boy, some of the popular things, like things that Jessie Belvin might be singing, in
159 fact Jessie Belvin, the late Jessie Belvin, he would come in and sit in and sing with us
160 sometimes, and we played Tea — we had a version of "Tea for Two" that I know would
161 have been a million seller.

162 MR: If you could have got it recorded?

163 VR: Oh yes, yes, yes. And we did "There's a Small Hotel" and [scats] oh we had a deal on
164 that going. And let me see I sang "Don't Blame Me," with the Sarah Vaughan influence
165 and let's see what else.

166 MR: Do you want to pause for coffee?

167 [pause]

168 VR: I'm not going to use it anymore.

169 [resume??]

170 VR: I can say this, when I retired from teaching school you know I taught a long time, and my
171 family's just — my mother went '92, then I went to Europe in '94, and I said well I'm
172 out of school now I can get back to really performing. Then my son was taken sick and
173 he passed in '96. And oh God, that was — I won't even talk about it too much. And there
174 was some malpractice involved and that made it even worse. He had a perforated
175 intestine and they just messed all over it, so it made it very difficult for me. I was in
176 therapy for eleven months, and doing pretty good. And last month my brother went. But I
177 must understand that we don't come to stay here forever. I had my mother and dad a long
178 time. Mother was in her 80's and daddy was in his mid-70's. But the loss of a child at 36,
179 he was my drummer, see, did business for me, had a little property that he managed, and
180 it was just mind blowing. So Al got me to my therapy classes and I did a lot of praying.

181 My minister prayed with me much, and there were times when I thought I couldn't make
182 it.

183 MR: Well the church is a big part of your life, isn't it?

184 VR: Yes it is. If it wasn't, I don't think I'd be here to talk about it. Yeah my church is
185 important. I'm a member of Faith United Methodist Church. But I tell everybody I'm
186 very ecumenical. I'm not hung up on people's denominations. Tomorrow I may attend
187 O.C.'s church, O.C. Smith? He has a Religious Science church, and I have a friend here
188 from Chicago and she wanted to see his new edifice. So I may go there tomorrow.

189 MR: Can you recall in those ...

190 VR: Is it okay if I reach over and get some coffee?

191 MR: Yeah, sure, because we're kind of informal here, so.

192 [off camera comment]

193 VR: What'd he say?

194 MR: I have to start the question again.

195 MR: During World War II, when a lot of the fellows were in the service, did that make a
196 difference for the opportunities for women?

197 VR: Well see I was still in school then. I didn't really start until '48, that's when I got out of
198 high school. But see I wasn't playing then. My father wouldn't let me come in the clubs,
199 that was taboo. You know at that age. I got started really like in the early 50's, and the
200 late — oh '48, '49 is when I got my little band together and I started playing all these
201 sorority events and things like that. Sororities, fraternity dances, we used to play over at
202 the place call the Alpha Bowling Club. It's a church now. And I'd play one night and
203 Hampton Hawes would have a band there the other night. And the war thing, when the
204 war was going on, I was in school see? So I wasn't out there trying to compete for jobs.
205 My father was really active at that time. And he did well.

206 MR: When was your first opportunity to record?

207 VR: My first opportunity to record was in 1962 I believe. Leonard Feather came to hear me
208 play one time. He was very impressed with my playing. And then Art Blakey, my former
209 husband, Richie Goldberg, was a drummer, and he knew all the musicians from back
210 east, and when he came out here, we married out here and everybody would end up at our
211 house one time or the other for me to fix spaghetti and chili and stuff. But anyway, that's
212 when I met Art Blakey. And Art Blakey asked me to come and sit in with him one night.
213 And it was at a place called the Renaissance, which is now the House of Blues. And so I
214 took my horn, and ironically Dexter was there that night too, and we had a great time.
215 And Alan Douglas from United Artists was there and he heard me, and he decided to
216 record me for United Artists and Leonard was in the middle of it, and that was my first

217 major recording. The album was called “Bird Calls” it’s a collector’s item now, whatever
218 that means.

219 MR: Did you have control over what you wanted to play on that record?

220 VR: Well for that date, for some strange reason, Leonard thought that the timbre or the sound
221 of my instrument was much like Bird, and I heard that, and I don’t know how to even say
222 that, you know, he was such a master of the instrument. And so he came up with the idea
223 of “Bird Calls” and I did most of the tunes that Bird had done at one time —
224 “Anthropology,” “Old Folks,” oh what else is on there “Just Friends.” But now Bird
225 played “Just Friends” but I just sang it. I had excellent musicians to work with, Leroy
226 Vinnegar and Russ Freeman, Richie Goldberg was on drums, Bobby Whitlock — I had
227 good support so I didn’t have to play every single one. And I did sing “If I Should Lose
228 You” — I did that on there too, a song that I had heard in my childhood that I always
229 liked. This same lady used to play that song. It’s an old song. An old song.

230 MR: Were there opportunities that weren’t available to you, traveling with like perhaps the big
231 bands and so forth?

232 VR: Well the only time that I really traveled with the band was much later, in the late 60’s,
233 when I went to Europe with Basie. And let me see it was after Joe Williams had left and
234 they needed somebody, they needed somebody that could sing the blues, and I mostly
235 sang rather than playing, those guys had some problems with me playing. But that’s the
236 only time — oh well let’s see I’ll go back a little bit. The first time I went out on the road
237 was in the 50’s with a gentleman that’s still very dear to me, his name is Dick Hart. And
238 he was very nice about really hiring women musicians too, he’d always have a woman in
239 the band. So I went to places like South Dakota and Montana — you know that was my
240 first experience like traveling someplace. But later on, as I said, I went with Basie on a
241 tour of Europe in ’68. We were gone, let’s see, I think I was gone for about 18 days,
242 something like that. It’s been quite a while ago. It was great fun. Then before that, when I
243 first went to Europe, I went as a single and then I played with European musicians. I was
244 at Ronnie Scott’s and I worked two weeks opposite Ben Webster, then two weeks
245 opposite Max Road, then two weeks opposite Archie Shepp, and four weeks opposite
246 Coleman Hawkins. So I really had the whole history of jazz right there. You see I went
247 over as a singer to get around this thing they had, the British had...

248 MR: Oh they had a ban or something.

249 VR: A ban, yes. So they said I was a singer. Leonard Feather told them I was a singer that
250 played the saxophone every now and then. But when I started playing they said uh huh.
251 The union over there said no, you’re a saxophone player, and you’ve got to join the
252 union. So I did.

253 MR: You joined the musician's union over there?
254 VR: Over there, yeah, in England, I had to.
255 MR: That reminds me of something I wanted to ask you about and that is the union here in
256 L.A.
257 VR: I still belong.
258 MR: Right.
259 VR: It's called the Professional Musicians, but I don't think it's very effective for — I think it
260 sort of caters to the studio musicians, you know. I imagine in years past I think it was
261 more beneficial when there were more clubs open and more jazz musicians were
262 working. There used to be a business agent there who was a friend of my father, named
263 Elmer Fane. And then later Jimmy Clark. And they kind of monitored the clubs. But I
264 haven't been particularly — I keep up my membership. I should be a life member by
265 now, but they don't particularly do anything for the musicians, unless it's on a large
266 scale. I know like if you're playing in the orchestra for the Academy Awards or
267 something like that, they get your checks for that. But the musicians that are out playing
268 jazz and jazz concerts and things, it doesn't appear to me that they're doing that much at
269 this ... now they may be doing some things that I'm not aware of, but I don't see it much.
270 I don't know when I've seen a union agent come in a club.
271 MR: It was a pretty significant event when the two unions merged?
272 VR: Right.
273 MR: Some people, it seems like I've read that that wasn't a positive thing for everyone
274 concerned.
275 VR: At the time there was quite a bit of confusion about it. Many of the Black musicians kind
276 of got lost in the — that union over there on Central Avenue, and I worked in it briefly
277 when I was in college with Florence Kadries. Oh gosh, now you don't have enough time
278 for me to go there.
279 MR: Sure I do.
280 VR: No you don't. That was like headquarters. Florence Kadries, that's where Norman Granz
281 got his first seven musicians. Florence Kadries was the secretary/treasurer to that union.
282 She was a wonderful woman. A wonderful woman. Piano player. She played a lot for
283 choirs too. And her mother and my grandmother were very close friends. And everybody
284 just loved Florence Kadries. And of course Paul Howard worked there, who earlier had
285 the Quality Serenaders. Did you ever hear of them? The Quality Serenaders?
286 MR: No, afraid I haven't.
287 VR: Paul Howard, and oh it was just like headquarters to all of the Black musicians. You
288 know they went there. And it appears as though when there was a merger, at first they

289 kind of got lost in the shuffle. But then as time progressed and as the Civil Rights
290 movement was becoming more and more prominent, they started to hire. Well Florence
291 worked there for a while, and Elmer Thane worked there and Paul Howard even worked
292 there. They took a few of the people that had been there a long time. And of course
293 Buddy Collette was on the Board, he might still be. But it had its problems, and I guess
294 they just kind of worked themselves out.

295 MR: Did the musicians' union have a place where the bands could come and rehearse?

296 VR: Right. They still have it now.

297 MR: You kind of have a social get together.

298 VR: Right. Now that's another thing I think, the geographics of when they merged.

299 Everything was flowing along Central Avenue sort of. It was sort of the decline but there
300 were a lot of musicians that still lived on the east side, a lot of Black musicians, and that
301 was right at Washington and Central you know, whereas if you want to fraternize you'd
302 have to go all the way to Hollywood. You see what I'm saying?

303 MR: Right.

304 VR: And that was kind of a problem too. And some of the White musicians were very hesitant
305 about socializing and that probably made it more difficult for some of them to feel at
306 home. Because at 767 as it was called, everybody hung out and they played cards and that
307 kind of thing. But I'm sure it has improved.

308 MR: So even though it was a positive let's say social step, it's almost like they closed your
309 building.

310 VR: Yes, they did. They closed the building, then it was sold. I think the building was sold,
311 and I don't know how they figured out the finances, I really don't remember that. But
312 Morrell Young and Buddy Collette, they were really involved in it.

313 MR: You had an opportunity to play with Dizzy Gillespie?

314 VR: Yes, at the Newport Jazz Festival in 1968 I did, and that was a thrill, and I got to know
315 him as a person. And I got to know Mahalia Jackson, because when I went to Europe
316 with Basie she was just so taken aback about me playing and singing with the band. She
317 remarked to me, "hey girl, whatchya doin' up there? Don't you know I'm the star?" And
318 she would call me, and we got to be good friends, whenever she called or came out to
319 L.A. And Sarah, she was a friend of mine and I thank God that I have had the pleasure of
320 really knowing some of the finest people in jazz. Carmen McRae was my buddy, and
321 Hazel Scott, I met Hazel when she came out to Los Angeles. Let's see that was about,
322 before I moved where I'm living now. I met Hazel in about 1970, and we became like
323 sisters. And I'm very grateful to have known the musicians that I know — Max and Eric

324 Dolphy of course, I've known him since school days. I'm playing a mouthpiece he gave
325 me before he left Los Angeles.

326 MR: What kind of mouthpiece is it, just for a technical question.

327 VR: It's a Brillhart.

328 MR: Who do you name as your basic influences or people that you looked up to on the
329 saxophone?

330 VR: Well you can't speak about the alto saxophone unless you say Charlie Parker, Bird
331 Parker. At the time when — I saw Bird one time, in that 767 when he came in there when
332 he had some union problem see. You know he wasn't concerned about a union card or
333 whatever, but he came to Los Angeles and he didn't have his union card, and the Mr.
334 Elmer Thane said "oh you can't play" blah-blah-blah-blah-blah. And he came and I was
335 working there that day, and he asked Florence, "Florence, please ask Thane to give me
336 my card." He was so humble. That's the only time I ever saw him. And he had such a
337 humble spirit. And I said "Florence, is that Bird? Is that Yardbird?" She said "yeah, that's
338 Bird." But I never got a chance to hear him play, you know? I never got a chance. But in
339 some strange way his music was in the air, and it influenced me and so many others. And
340 of course I liked — who was this guy, Tab Smith?

341 MR: Tab Smith?

342 VR: And Sonny Stitt was a good player. I got to know him later on. We played together one
343 night in Chicago in the 70's. But I don't know, music, who influenced me, the whole nine
344 yards, it just seems like osmosis. It's just I can't say that I tried to play like somebody or I
345 tried to sing like somebody, it was just whatever I did it just happened sort of. I like
346 vocalists very much, because my aunt used to make us, when we had to play a solo, she
347 used to make us learn the lyrics to the song. And she'd say "you're supposed to play like
348 you're singing." So I always did. I liked Billy Eckstine very much and I hope that
349 explains it.

350 MR: Yes it does.

351 VR: Does it?

352 MR: And that's good advice about knowing the lyrics to a song.

353 VR: Right. And Buddy Collette paid me a wonderful compliment once. My dad gave him his
354 first job. And he told me when I was playing one time, he says "you know what? You
355 play a melody just like Frank Sinatra sings." And I said "oh really?" And he said "you're
356 singing all the time." And I said yeah, well my aunt made us learn, if you're going to play
357 [sings] In my solitude you haunt me. We had to learn that. We had to learn. And I said I
358 don't know it, I just want to play it, and she'd say "no, learn all those lyrics." And I think
359 that's good for instrumentalists. As they say, the saxophone is sort of like an extension of

360 the human voice. I've heard that said. I don't know if it's true why a trumpet wouldn't be,
361 but I have done that.

362 MR: Was your soprano playing something that you carried through your whole career?

363 VR: When I had my band, I used to like to play Latin music with the soprano. And it wasn't
364 that popular then, when I first started my orchestra about 1951 or something like that, and
365 I have a soprano now that I don't play much because for some reason the mouthpiece
366 doesn't work right.

367 MR: It's hard to keep them in tune.

368 VR: Oh isn't it though. My aunt used to call them a fish horn. Yeah, she's say in New
369 Orleans when the fish man was coming around, he had a soprano saxophone. That's what
370 she told me. And he's play the fish horn.

371 MR: Is it a straight one.

372 VR: Yeah. I have a straight one. But I have played the curved one. But I have trouble with it. I
373 don't know maybe I need a new one. I was talking to Wayne Shorter about it, but they're
374 so terribly expensive nowadays.

375 MR: Yes, they sure are.

376 VR: You used to get one in the pawn shop for fifteen dollars, but not anymore. You can't get
377 anything in the pawn shop for fifteen dollars.

378 MR: Oh that's interesting. Can we talk about how you got into education?

379 VR: Well I used to teach a couple of blind students when I was in college and after a while my
380 — let's see I graduated, at the time I graduated I didn't have a teaching credential, I
381 received my B.S. in social sciences, so I had to go back to get the credential at USC. But
382 then my oldest son, Charles Meeks, used to say "Mother, I'm tired of going to Nanna's"
383 you know, when I'd go away to play. And one day that just stuck with me, I've got to be
384 home now with these guys, the two of them. So then I started teaching. And I still played.
385 And I'd go like on Christmas breaks, two weeks, you know spring break I'd go to
386 Chicago or something like that. I was able to fuse it and keep working some and then
387 keeping steady money coming, you know with my teaching salary, which wasn't the
388 greatest but I enjoyed it. I enjoyed it and part of the time I taught the special education
389 children and then the other time I just taught regular — fifth grade was my favorite grade.
390 And of course I gave the kids a lot of music. I would teach theory to the children, music
391 theory. And that's how I really got off into education, because my older son just sort of
392 demanded, "Mother, we want you to stay home."

393 MR: He wanted you to be there.

394 VR: It's very ironic because I don't see him that much now.

395 MR: Right. How about, gosh you've had so many nice honors here.

396 VR: Oh yeah.

397 MR: The Smithsonian, and you've also done some lecturing at USC and UCLA.

398 VR: Yes. Last quarter, the third quarter of last year over at SC I was a lecturer on jazz and
399 women in jazz. Last night I got a call from my grandson, who's down at Hampton
400 University in Virginia. And he said "Nanna, guess what I'm doing?" He said "I'm doing
401 a paper for English on women in jazz." He said "Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughan and you,
402 Nanna."

403 MR: Good company.

404 VR: Yeah. He said "did you know..." I said "yeah you know I knew Sarah." I didn't know —
405 I'd met Ella once but I didn't know her. He said yeah — and he was so excited. He said
406 "it's going to take five minutes so before I finish it I'll call and read it to you." That's
407 Charles' son, his name is Jamal Meeks. And he's taking music and business down at
408 Hampton. So he's interested in music. He's starting late taking music but it's in the genes
409 so I know it's coming out, it can't escape.

410 MR: Yeah right. It's inevitable.

411 VR: Right.

412 MR: How do you feel about the history of how women have been treated in the world of jazz?

413 VR: Like they've been treated in other professions, not too good. But it's improving as I see
414 some of the younger women musicians playing. Not a whole lot, but I saw, recently there
415 was some television shows that were using an all-women's band. But it was like a
416 gimmick thing again, like going back to that gimmick thing and I don't like that. Terri
417 Lynn Carrington, she's a marvelous drummer. And the Bloom lady?

418 MR: Jane Ira Bloom.

419 VR: Uh huh. She's serious. And there's a violinist here, I speak to her every now and then,
420 can't think of her name right now. I think she's out of the road with, what's this guy's
421 name? He's real big in the New Age sound?

422 MR: Oh, Yanni or one of those fellows?

423 VR: Yes. She's playing with him now, Yanni. And of course there's Nedra Wheeler. Have
424 you heard of Nedra?

425 MR: No.

426 VR: Oh she's a very fine bassist. Very fine bassist. She played with Elvin a couple of times
427 when he'd come to town. And she's traveled to Japan and about. But it's improved some,
428 but just like I mean for women, and then the gender thing and the race aspect, where
429 Black women are concerned, we have two strikes, but it has improved, I'll say that.
430 You'll run across a guy sometimes that don't want you to play with them. A lady was
431 asking me that. Her daughter was concerned because the guys wouldn't let her play. I

432 said “well just keep practicing, and just get on up there and just play, push them out of
433 the way.” If they don’t want you to play you just play anyhow. And you always have the
434 audience on your side. So just play. Practice and get good, and the more you play the
435 better you’ll be. So that’s it. You have to get kind of — you don’t have to particularly be
436 masculine but you have to be forceful.

437 MR: Aggressive.

438 VR: Aggressive, that’s the word. You have to be aggressive and say hey, I want to be heard
439 too you know? I still get snubs after all these years sometimes, and I just get on up there
440 and play and then after that then they say “oh, okay.”

441 MR: You have to prove yourself.

442 VR: Right. Absolutely.

443 MR: You had worked on a project with Benny Powell?

444 VR: Oh yeah, for the National Endowment.

445 MR: Yes.

446 VR: Oh what a great time we had. We were on the jazz panel for about three years for the
447 NEA, the National Endowment for the Arts, and we traveled to different spots to where
448 they were having problems with jazz or there was no funding or that kind of thing. But
449 now the NEA has been cut back so, you know I can imagine the jazz program is really
450 catching h-- now. I’m not too familiar with what they’re doing right now in the jazz
451 program. But that’s what Benny and I did together. And we had a great time, he’s a
452 wonderful guy, a fine musician.

453 MR: What’s your opinion of the state of jazz music today?

454 VR: I mean those that are playing jazz are playing great. Those that are playing. I hate the fact
455 that there’s no jazz on AM radios, where a lot of younger people could hear it. Most of
456 the jazz is on the FM dial, and so, well I guess most people have FM’s now but that’s
457 unfortunate, that we don’t hear enough of it. Or like in Europe where they have the bands
458 play for the radio stations and they play jazz. The music that’s being played by the
459 Marsalis family, and the other, what’s his name, Roy? Hargrove?

460 MR: Hargrove, yes.

461 VR: Oh I love his playing. And Geri Allen. They are performing well, it’s just that there’s not
462 enough of it. When I was young that’s all you heard was jazz, jazz bands, and rhythm &
463 blues bands, like Roy Milton and those kind of groups. But you don’t hear too much of it
464 now.

465 MR: Is there much of a live jazz scene in L.A. these days?

466 VR: Yeah, it’s sort of activating up over in the area by Lamerd Park. Billy Higgins has a club
467 over there called The World Stage. And on Saturday afternoons he has many jazz people,

468 the jazz veterans come over, like Max is in town, or Elvin's in town, they'll come over
469 there and play with the other young people. In fact they do that every Saturday,
470 somebody's there. And it's sort of a Renaissance over in that area over there in Lamerd
471 Park. But there are not a lot of clubs like there used to be a long time ago. So the kids
472 really don't have a place to perfect their craft. I think Billy's about the only place in L.A.
473 where they're doing that now. It's called the World Stage in Lamerd Park. And he's had
474 some fine musicians come out of there. Black Note, have you heard of that group? B
475 Sharp Group? They came out of Billy's place. And there's a fine young lady that plays
476 flute, that unfortunately I cannot recall her name now, she's doing great, and she's this
477 offshoot of Billy's program over there on Saturdays.

478 MR: Maybe we should go over there this afternoon, huh?

479 VR: You should. But oh I have something else to do. But you should. You should see it. You
480 really should.

481 MR: It says on your page you gave me here that you're frequently spotted making the rounds
482 of churches in the Los Angeles area.

483 VR: Yes. Somebody's always wanting me to play for somebody's funeral or something. I
484 played for Dorothy Donegan. And I play at my church and that's where I began playing
485 you know, in church. And that's where my roots are. And I enjoy it, and if a friend of
486 mine will ask me why will you play for our women's day or something like that — in fact
487 I have to play for Sister's Day, Sunday after next, at my church, for Black history month.
488 I'm on the program for that. So I enjoy it. I enjoy the music of the church very much.

489 MR: Is there a connection between jazz and Gospel for you that you can put into words?

490 VR: It's kind of hard. In fact, Kid Ory told me many years ago when I was in college, that jazz
491 started in the church. Now I don't know if he meant the traditional kind of jazz or what.
492 But I'd like to say even your, just say like an Aretha Frankin. Your strongest artists have
493 church backgrounds. Your best singers and instrumentalists — Milt Jackson told me
494 once, "you know I came up in a sanctified church" you know, the influence of the music
495 of the church, you could hear it so in the Gospel music. I'm sure you hear it in my
496 playing, when I play at church. It was something that was just in your bones so to speak.
497 And if you come up in the church, and this is another interesting thing I found out too, as
498 a sort of a side way to get to your question. I guess I get pretty animated sometimes.

499 MR: That's fine.

500 VR: I used to think growing up in a Black community, everybody went to church. That's what
501 I used to think you know, because that's all we knew. The church has been the
502 centerpiece for Black life for so many years. But then there are some musicians that did
503 not come up like that. And you ask them to play something — "Precious Lord" or

504 something like that, and they don't know what you're talking about. You understand
505 what I'm saying? But for those of us that grew up in churches, and the majority of us did,
506 the music of the church is definitely heard in jazz. The rhythm and like I said, some of the
507 people were in Gospel so they look down upon jazz and jazz players. And it's unfortunate
508 that they have these feelings about jazz musicians and people that sing the blues. I'm sure
509 God thinks just as much of a B.B. King as he thinks of some top notch Gospel singer.
510 You know what I'm saying? It disturbs me. Because it's very selfish and ... I'd better
511 stop.

512 MR: I think it's well said.

513 VR: It's very selfish for one thing. And how can you deny that the two aren't akin to each
514 other?

515 MR: Well look at Duke Ellington.

516 VR: Oh, come Sunday, the "Black, Brown & Beige Suite" This music is gorgeous. And at
517 UCLA that lecture I gave, there was a young man there in the class who was feeling the
518 same was as I'm feeling about this snubbing of people who play jazz and rhythm &
519 blues. My church is not like that though, fortunately. And some of them are doing better.
520 At First AME they have a saxophonist over there who's definitely jazz influenced, and at
521 my church, Faith United Methodist Church, we've been trying to get a jazz vesper going.
522 So maybe it's changing but still some of the people who just do Gospel music, they look
523 down yet on jazz as not something God would condone, that kind of thing. I hope I've
524 explained that.

525 MR: I think you did.

526 VR: Because I don't want to be misunderstood about that. But I am very concerned about that.
527 The whole world loves jazz, but a fraction of those who created it predominantly.

528 MR: It's certainly been one of America's great contributions.

529 VR: I should say.

530 MR: To the whole world.

531 VR: I should say. What else? Everything else is European. I mean it's the truth, other than
532 maybe the native Indian music. You see? Then that's a long — it gets really involved in
533 sociological whys and wherefores I guess, and religious conservatism and that whole
534 thing.

535 MR: Do you have any feelings about popular music these days?

536 VR: I don't listen to much of it. I don't. You know I just don't listen to it much. The melodies
537 that I've grown up with, where have they gone? They were so beautiful. I liked some of
538 Burt Bacharach's things that he did with Dionne Warwick. There's a new singer, a young
539 singer, I guess he's in the pop idiom, Maxwell I think his name is, I like some of the

540 ballads he's doing. But some of the things I hear — and these people are nominated for
541 Grammys and you know, nominated for this award and that award, and making bookoos
542 of money, I just wonder, where is the talent? Where is the talent? I don't hear it and I
543 don't feel it. You know so most of the times I'm listening to either the jazz station or I
544 listen to the talk stations a lot which are non-musical. But I listen to the jazz station and
545 on Sunday I listen to Stevie Wonder's station, KGLH because they play a whole Gospel
546 thing on Sunday. But just like they are, this and that, this is the latest star, you know, the
547 average public doesn't know from one year to the next who's the big person this year.
548 Like I mean we knew Ella Fitzgerald forever.

549 MR: There's some longevity to those...

550 VR: Right. Nancy Wilson forever. But these people, once it's Suzy so... Carmen Bradford I
551 listen to. Have you listened to her?

552 MR: Uh huh.

553 VR: She's marvelous. But I consider her in the jazz idiom. She's a great singer, and why we
554 don't hear more of her I don't understand it. I don't understand that. But as far as just
555 regular pop stuff? Ut umm. I listen to the talk station. You can't feel it. You've got to feel
556 something when a person is singing or playing. You've got to feel something. Some of
557 this stuff, you can't even understand the lyrics. It's just out there.

558 MR: It seems like the emphasis on the music has switched so much to the rhythm end of
559 things.

560 VR: Maybe so. Maybe that's it.

561 MR: That the melodies and the lyrics have...

562 VR: The melodies are gone. Just gone. You don't hear much melody.

563 MR: I've noticed it when students go out and they'll buy great hits of 1993, and they'll bring
564 them to the lesson and they'll want to play them on the saxophone. And you look at the
565 melodies, and there's very little there that they can transfer to their instrument.

566 VR: To their instrument.

567 MR: Where with the melodies from earlier era, they could be sung or they could be played.

568 VR: Absolutely. "In a Sentimental Mood" or "I've Got it Bad," or "Stella by Starlight," and
569 "Here's that Rainy Day," "A Foggy Day." You just don't hear it anymore. I miss it and I
570 really feel as though I try to be very open minded too, because I listen to some of what
571 the contemporary artists are doing sometimes. I mean I just don't turn off the radio, I'm
572 not going to listen — I used to listen to a station every night from 9:30 to 10 that was
573 playing some, that was on television though, that was doing some more contemporary
574 things, and I really tried to listen. And like you said, I can't hear any melodies. And
575 melodies are important. Lyrics are important too. But I guess...

576 MR: Well do you ever take out your recordings from years ago and put them on?
577 VR: Yes, I do, I do. And I must say they still sound fresh. When I listen to the — I did a thing
578 too with Al Grey and the Basie band. Well most of the guys were from Basie's group.
579 And hey, when I listen to me play "Dinah" or play "Put it on Mellow," or something like
580 that, I think it sounds pretty good for being you know like 30 years ago or something. I'm
581 really pleased at the contribution I've made for women, to inspire women, not for
582 women. But I get calls too nowadays from the younger women wanting to take
583 instruments. And how do I get started and all that kind of thing. And my aunt just found
584 that reasonable saxophone that time and said "open your mouth" and she put the
585 mouthpiece in there and said "ta" and that was it. You're just going to play. And we
586 didn't have much choice. And my mother used to say, and I hear people say nowadays,
587 oh I wish I had taken the piano. I wish I had taken the so-and-so. But my mother would
588 say "listen, I'm the mother because I'm supposed to tell you what you're supposed to do
589 and what's good for you." That's what mother does. I mean nowadays the kids tell
590 mother everything. Like "I don't want that. I don't want this, I'm not going to Sunday
591 School." There's a lot of kids telling parents. But when I grew up, my parents, my mother
592 said well what's the point in having a mother? I mean a mother and a father are to direct
593 you, and to tell you what's going to be beneficial to you in the future. Because they
594 know. See but there's a lot of kids telling the parents nowadays, what they're going to do.
595 And then when grew up they said "ooh I wish I had taken that, my mother bought a piano
596 but I just wouldn't listen."
597 MR: Well it sounds like you came from a very strong family, and strong in music.
598 VR: Yeah. Strong. My father was like a gentle, very benevolent man. Always concerned about
599 the sick, and the musicians in those days had more of like a — they were concerned about
600 each other and each other's families, that kind of thing. And my mother was strict though.
601 But I don't regret it today. I don't regret it to this day. "No you can't date yet, you can't
602 date until you're 16." And then when I got to be 16 it was a bus ride across town. And
603 then she said "oh no, you have to wait until you're 18 to be unchaperoned." That kind of
604 thing. I mean you tell a kid that today, you know — but then the whole society has
605 changed.
606 MR: I saw an interesting quote from Marshall Royal about your father.
607 VR: Oh you did?
608 MR: He said your father could sell cheese to Wisconsin.
609 VR: Oh you did? Daddy was a wonderful guy I'm telling you, he was a wonderful man.
610 MR: And he must have been a good promoter of his own talents.

611 VR: And he was a good provider. I had a wonderful childhood. And when I see poor little
612 babies now, not enough food, no Christmas trees and no this, and oh my God, we'd have
613 the tallest tree and the most Easter eggs and that kind of thing. That was fun to us. Maybe
614 it's not as much fun now. Maybe the kids have other things to compensate. Maybe they
615 have all the video games and that kind of thing. But Daddy took us riding on rides —
616 he'd get us in the car and drive us out Wilshire Boulevard. And he was a special kind of
617 guy. And maybe he could sell cheese to the ... But you know why he probably said that?
618 Because in addition to Daddy doing his drums, that was number one, Daddy sold
619 tombstones, and Daddy sold cars. And he made a good living for the family. And my
620 mother loved it.

621 MR: Oh boy.

622 VR: Well I'd like to read that about Marshall. Ironically I played at Marshall's funeral. I did, I
623 played "Tenderly" for Marshall. He and Evelyn used to come over when I was a kid and
624 they loved my mother's gingerbread. And they used to come over often for dinner. And
625 every time he'd see me he'd say "Mattie could sure make good gingerbread."

626 MR: Well it's in that book.

627 VR: About his life?

628 MR: No it's in that book *L.A. Sounds*.

629 VR: Oh is it?

630 MR: Yes, in Marshall's chapter.

631 VR: Marshall's section.

632 MR: Yes.

633 VR: Daddy could sell cheese to Wisconsin. Well he just about could.

634 MR: Well this has been quite fascinating. Is there anything that you'd like to say that I haven't
635 thought of asking you?

636 VR: I'm looking at my husband. I'm looking at my husband. Let me see. Oh I can say I'm
637 very happily married. I have two sons, I lost one. And I have three grandchildren. And I
638 hope that they will — I know their lives won't be like mine, you know things are so
639 different, but I hope that they will be able to experience, well Jamal, the other one, he's at
640 UCLA, he's a business major, that's Brian Meeks. And then I have a little tiny one, he's
641 three, that's Shawn Meeks. God only knows what he's going to do, he's a smart guy. But
642 I hope they will be involved in the arts in some way. You know it's one thing that I hate
643 too is that so much of music and the arts have been cut out of the school programs you
644 know. And that might be another reason why we're not getting so many musicians. I
645 don't know if it's happened where you live, but here in Los Angeles, we lost so many of
646 our music teachers and kids used to rent a clarinet for \$3 per semester, then if you didn't

647 like that then change to the trumpet. But that's kind of gone by the wayside now. And I'd
648 like to say something about the use of alcohol and drugs before I — stay away from it.
649 Stay away. It's destroyed too many fine, fine musicians so early in life. And I
650 recommended it.

651 MR: People that you were acquaintenced with along the way, you saw that it just...

652 VR: I saw that it wrecked so many lives. And I am blessed that I've never gone down that
653 way. It's not my goodness, it's been God's mercy, because I've seen everything and been
654 exposed to everything. But I tell all the young people, stay away from it, you don't need
655 it. You don't need anything to make you feel better. It's a false sense of what you really
656 are. They say a glass of wine is good for the heart. But you don't know what that might
657 lead to for you, in a given situation. So I tell all the young people that I come in contact
658 with, stay away from drugs of any sort. Because you don't know how it's going to deal
659 with you. I once read a book when I was in college about drug addiction. And it said
660 never underestimate the power of the poppy. And that's always stayed in my mind. And
661 then when I saw so much around me, what was happening to so many of my
662 contemporaries, it really enforced it in my mind. So you have to ask God to help you
663 sometimes. You may not be able to do it of your own self. But that's one thing I say to
664 young people all the time. Keep away from drugs.

665 MR: I'm glad you said it.

666 VR: I think it's very important. Be happy. As I said before, I'm very happily married now.
667 There was a time when I wasn't so happily married, but I kept trying.

668 MR: All right. I understand Charles, your son is playing professionally with Chuck Mangione?

669 VR: Oh yeah. He's back with Chuck Mangione now.

670 MR: He's a bass player, isn't he?

671 VR: Yes, he's a bass player and sings also. And I'm proud of his contributions. He's quite a
672 talented person. Quite a talented person. He was teaching school for a while but I think he
673 kind of got — he wanted to perform some more years.

674 MR: Well, it's in his genes, right?

675 VR: Yes, I think so. On both sides. His mother and father, so I guess he just wanted to do his
676 thing. And I think he's doing his thing now.

677 MR: Well I want to thank you for sharing your time with me today.

678 VR: Oh it's been a pleasure. I think well, you know there are not too many of us around that
679 were active in the 50's and 60's and 70's, and in sound mind and body. And I consider it
680 a blessing that I'm still here to talk about things that have happened in the past and were
681 very significant in terms of jazz history, and in terms of the roles of women in that. Oh
682 we didn't mention Mary Lou Williams.

683 MR: Well how could we — wasn't she an unbelievable talent?
684 VR: She used to write to me when she became so ill that she was down at Duke University,
685 she used to write to me, and I'd write to her, at the time she was quite ill. But I'll have to
686 come back another time.
687 MR: We'll do Part 2.
688 VR: Part 1 and 2, huh?
689 MR: Yes. All right. Well thanks for your time.
690 VR: My pleasure. God bless.
691 [false ending, away from mike]
692 MR: I'd just like to wrap up and ask you if there's something that you'd really like to do in the
693 future that you haven't done yet?
694 VR: Okay. I've done a lot of things you know with that instrument playing and concerts, but I
695 would like very much when I hear my instrument, when I hear me on a record or
696 something, I'd like for my instrument to be used in a movie. That's the one thing that I
697 desire. And I think that it would be very effective. I'm not saying it in any vanity, but I
698 just want to play in a movie. If just my instrument or even my instrument with other
699 instruments. I just feel that so intensely, and that's what I'd like to do.
700 MR: Do you have a picture in your mind of what would be going on?
701 VR: Something with children, or even a mystery, some kind of mystery. But I hear myself.
702 I'm wanting to hear myself I guess I should say, in a movie. And Lalo Schifrin does
703 movies and I met him when he was with Diz, and I've been saying I was going to call
704 Lalo and let him know what my desire is. And often times people will say "jazz
705 musicians? Do you read music?" Of course I read music. I had a guy ask me that one
706 time. I was doing a record date for Rahsaan Roland Kirk. And he says "well do you read
707 music?" And I thought that was so strange. Of course I read music.
708 MR: I'm a musician.
709 VR: Yes, absolutely. But some people feel like jazz musicians — but hey, I had a heck of a
710 teacher.
711 MR: Well I hope you find that desire fulfilled.
712 VR: I really hope that that wish is granted.
713 MR: And remember, you said women have to be a little aggressive in the music business.
714 VR: Right so here I go.
715 MR: So maybe you should make that call.
716 VR: All right.
717 MR: Thank you.
718 VR: Thank you. It's been a pleasure.