Funding for the Smithsonian Jazz Oral History Program NEA Jazz Master interview was provided by the National *Endowment for the Arts.*

BARRY HARRIS
NEA Jazz Master (1989)

Interviewee: Barry Harris (December 19, 1929 -)
Interviewer: Aaron Graves with recording engineer Ken Kimery
Date: August 20th, 2010
Repository: Archives Center, National Museum of American History
Description: Transcript, 36 pp.

Graves: My name is Aaron Graves, today is August the 20th 2010. We're here at the University of the Streets with Master Barry Harris. And we're going to ask Mr. Harris, if you would to give us – state your name for us.

Harris: Okay. Barry D. Harris. The "D" stands for Doyle. Barry Doyle Harris.

Graves: Barry Doyle Harris.

Harris: That's right.

Graves: That's new to the world?

Harris: All Irish all the way.

Graves: Irish?

Harris: Irish and English and Scottish. And born – when – December 15th, 1929.

Graves: Mm-hm.

Harris: In a little cabin. [laughs]

Graves: When – where were you born?

Harris: Where was I born?

Graves: Where were you born?

Harris: I was born in Herman Kiefer Hospital in Detroit. You know, so Detroit was really my home, you know for quite a few years.

Graves: So, mother and father. What's your mother and father's names?

Harris: Mother's named Bessie, father's named Melvin.

Graves: Melvin.

Harris: That's right, as you know.

Graves: Alright. So who named you? Do you know who named you – your name is Barry Doyle…

Harris: Don't ask me. Probably my mother.

Graves: Probably your mother?

Harris: Probably the two of them together, maybe. You know.

Graves: Yeah.

Harris: So um, that's how I got my name.

Graves: Do you like your name?

Harris: Oh, positively. Positively, you know. See I'd say that your name is what makes you what you are, sometimes. So I – what I have become is partly due to the name, you know.

Graves: Yes. Do you have any siblings?

Harris: Oh yes, um. I had three sisters and a bother, so it's five of us. Right now – we lost two, so there are three of us left. Both older than me, so they were in their eighties. I'm eighty, my brother might be eighty-two, my sister might be eighty-four, eighty-five, you know. So we're all in our eighties, you know.

Graves: What number are you in the family?

Harris: I was the um, one, two, three, four – the fourth one, my little sister was the fifth. So I was fourth, you know.

Graves: Okay. What kind of um, relationship did you have with your parents?

Harris: A pretty good relationship, you know. Mostly my mother, you know. My mother was a pianist, so I got started through my mother. So I say that I was closer to her, you know, because of the piano.

Graves: And what kind of piano did she play? What style, or what genre?

Harris: She was a church pianist, my brother. She was one of them Baptist players. Not one of those Baptist piano players today. Positively not the same. Um, pianists today, they sound like – they sound more like sanctified. Santified was different, 'cause sanctified had drums, bass, um tambourine. The Baptist Church didn't have none of that, you know. Um, so that – my mother was a good pianist too, you know. She was one of them pianists, man – you start singing, she starts playing.

Graves: Any key?

Harris: Any key. No matter what you start singing, she's right with you. So, she was – she was pretty hip, you know.

Graves: Did she ever talk to you about how she started playing, and what her influences were?

Harris: Never. Not really, you know. She was a – she was a teacher down south. You know, and when you come up north, it's not quite as accepted to sing. She was a teacher down there in Georgia

Graves: She's from Georgia?

Harris: Oh yeah. They had to – they had to have her come to Toccoa because she was the oldest – maybe the oldest person from that town.

Graves: She had to go to the court?

Harris: No, she had to go to Toccoa. It's a town in Georgia – 'cause she was the oldest person, she could tell them more about the town than anybody else. You know, so she was there. She went there and got the key to the town, you know.

Graves: How old were you, about, when this happened?

Harris: Oh, I don't know. That happened…

Graves: …Were you ten? Ten years old? Older than ten?

Harris: No, no, no. That happened late.

Graves: Late. Alright.

Harris: I might have been twenty-something or something like that.

Graves: What about your – let's talk about your father.

Harris: Oh, not too much about him, you know. Um, they sort of split after a time, and so not too much.

Graves: What kind of work did he do?

Harris: I don't know, really. My father – I think we worked in Gas stations and stuff, I think he might have been a mechanic, something like that.

Graves: Hm. Alright.

Harris: I don't know too much about him. He was around for a while. They went their separate ways, you know. So that was that.

Graves: So the music in the house when you were – you know, your first ten years. The music that you heard, what was some of the music that you heard?

Harris: Church music. Nothing but church music.

Graves: Nothing but church music.

Harris: I think one time she did show me a little of the licks she used to do. [laughs]

Graves: Oh, yeah? A church lick?

Harris: They weren't the church licks. [laughs] It wasn't quite a church lick. But it was something, you know, so she knew a little something else, too.

Graves: Okay, alright. So then your siblings, how do they relate to the music? How was that relationship?

Harris: Um, all of us took up music some kind of way, you know. My sister and I – my youngest sister and I, we went to lessons. My brother wouldn't too much. My other sister, she was into music. The oldest sister wasn't. But um, about three of us, we took up music, you know. And um, I'm the one that ended up with music, you know. The only one. Um, they sort of dropped by thw wayside, you know. But um, I have continued the family tradition of music, you know. I'm just a continuation of Bessie, you know.

Graves: So you felt it early, the connection?

Harris: Oh yeah. I felt an early connection, see. My connection started at the age of four.

Graves: The age of four. Hmm.

Harris: I played my first piece when I was four years old.

Graves: You played your first piece when you were four, which means you were already dealing with the piano before four, so to speak, is that right?

Harris: No, not necessarily.

Graves: Not necessarily?

Harris: No. I might have been looking over her shoulder.

Graves: Okay. So you took wings at four.

Harris: That happened sometimes, too. Of course I had one like that. I had one girl who'd bring her child to the class. And one day, you know the child would be standing there, and one day I'd just say, "do you what you're doing here?" She said – she shook her head, said, "yes" and she sat down there and she played the thing like she'd be playing it all the time. You know, and she ended up – she ended up starting out a concert at Lincoln Center, playing *Pannonica,* a Monk song. A concert that was dedicated to Thelonious.

Graves: Alright. So what was the piece that you played? Do you remember the kind of – what the piece you…

Harris: Where?

Graves: …When you were four years old.

Harris: Don't ask me that, I don't remember. I try to remember, I don't remember.

Graves: Was it a church, or was it…

Harris: …Of course it was a church. What else could it be?

Graves: Or did it have other licks in it?

Harris: Oh, no. It was a church song. No, it was a church song.

Graves: So what was the church schedule like, that your mother played. I mean, how often…

Harris: Oh, we lived in the back of the church, so we were there all the time, so we were there quite often. You know, the church was here, and in back was a couple of flats or something. And we stayed in one, you know. So we were pretty close to the church, you know.

Graves: How long was she the church pianist? How long did that last?

Harris: All my life – all my life. Well, you know – years. And then she got old, and you know. I think she died about – in '91 or something like that, you know. S she lasted a long time.

Graves: Did you have the gift of – the memory of lyrics at that time?

Harris: Not necessarily, even though some lyrics come back to me sometimes, you know. When you sit at the piano, or James sits at the piano, when you cats sit there and play some church stuff, lyrics come back to me, 'cause I know the lyrics to all those songs. I played for the junior choir, you know. I played for the junior choir and, let's see – that lasted for a while. Probably until – let's see when – until I went to intermediate school. Intermediate school was probably the sixth or seventh grade. Then I took up clarinet, now don't ask me – 'cause I was music, you know. So I took up the clarinet, and then – well you know in those schools, we had little bands and everything, you know. Then we played little stock arrangements. I remember the one *9:20 Special*, we played [sings *9:20 Special*] You know, that's *9:20 Special*. So we went into – the sort of jazz kind of thing sort of thing at a very early age 'cause sixth and seventh grade, I guess we'd be twelve and thirteen, something like that, you know. So that was part of our thing. And then you go to high school, and I took up bass fiddle, you know.

Graves: So clarinet, you played for how long?

Harris: Oh, not that long.

Graves: You enjoyed the clarinet?

Harris: Oh sure, but I didn't learn it that way.

Graves: You were drawn to it?

Harris: No, not necessarily. Maybe that's what was there. You know, I don't know if I was drawn to it, I can't tell you that. But I know I played it, you know. I couldn't tell you a thing about it right now. I could tell you more about the bass than the clarinet, you know. But the bass part started in high school. You see what happened was, they took a grade – what did they do different? They took a grade that when Joanie was in the intermediate school, and moved it over to the high school. So I went to high school the same time as my brother who was a year ahead of me. I wasn't supposed to be in high school with him, you know, but we went to high school at the same time. So in high school, well, you know, I was quiet, sort of shy, skinny little kid. So all I would do was run home and play my piano.

Graves: So all along this time while you were playing the clarinet, you were coming through all these experiences, you were – still were developing the piano.

Harris: Of course.

Graves: Were you studying with someone?

Harris: Of course.

Graves: Who were you studying with?

Harris: Different teachers, you know. I had teachers. I had a teacher named Mrs. Lipscum. Really, but the first teacher for us in Detroit like Harold McKinney and, Dorothy Ashby – our first teacher was a preacher. His name was Neptune Holloway. Had a heck of a name – Neptune Holloway. I remember, maybe in the '80s, I found out he was in Indianapolis, and I called him, and I said, "do you remember me?" I was – you know – "my mother, Bessie Harris?" or something like that. He didn't remember, because he was of that age, you know. He taught a lot of us in Detroit. Then Mrs. Lipscum, and then, um… The one that Tommy and I took from together. We took from Mrs. Dillard, that's right, Mrs. Dillard. We did – we did a concert together, you know. I forget what he played, I played the *Revolutionary Etude*. He played something, but he – he played better. Um, when I say Tommy, I better say Tommy Flannigan, so people know what I'm talking about.

But during this period, I was always at the piano. All the young cats knew who was at the piano, so they come to my house. Roland Hanna, Sonny Red, Donald Byrd. All these people came to my house, because they knew I'd be sitting at my piano. Paul Chambers learned to play at my house. Um, that's the early part, you know. Like Roland, Roland told me – last time I spoke to Roland Hanna before he died, he said, "yeah, me and Sonny Red used to climb the stairs to come to your house to learn how to play chords." That's the truth. So a lot of people came to my house. See like, in the Motown book, they talk about before Motown or something. They don't – they don't talk about the right stuff, 'cause I was – I was like a – I must have, I didn't know it, I must have been some kind of a leader back then, 'cause all the cats came to me.

Graves: What was the age relationship between you and those people that you just mentioned?

Harris: About the same.

Graves: About the same age? Did y'all go to the same school?

Harris: No, no. No. Sonny Red and Tommy, they went to Northern, I went to Northeastern. Harold McKennie and his bunch went to Northwestern, and Eddie Locke and his bunch went to Miller High School. Kenny Burrell that's Miller High School, you know, along with Terry Pollard, who most people don't know. She might have been the greatest jazz woman on the piano. Sometimes people should look up Terry Gibbs on – on Youtube or whatever you do, and you'll see a picture of him and Terry Pollard playing

together, you know. Very interesting to watch, 'cause she was really brilliant, you know. She just died last year. She died the day after my birthday. She died December 16th. So Terry Pollard was part of our thing. Then the younger cats, you know, Kirk Lightsey, Hugh Lawson was part of it. Um, what's the name of the other bass player? Um, Doug Watkins was part of it. All these people came – were in my house – Frank Gant. I finally went to the west side, and there were other musicians over there. And me, I could chord pretty good, but I didn't know how to solo too well. So I went over there – the cats could solo good. They couldn't play chords as good as me, but they could solo. So, I went back to the east side, went back home. I called up Bess Bonnier. See Bess Bonnier is one of our special piano players.

Graves: Bess Bonnier?

Harris: Bonnier? Probably B-O-N-N-I-E-R or something like that. Bess, well her name ended up being Bess Makras, M-A-K-R-A-S, um, she was a blind pianist. She had this little – she had this little box, a record player, that you could just take the thing and go like that and it could be in every key, all the back until you get to the other key, low. So she loaned me that, I said, "please loan me that" and she loaned it to me. I went home, I set it up and took a record and started learning how to solo. Now I don't remember much about that, learning how to solo. All I know is I took that record and learned how to solo, and I could solo, you and that's what it was like. Even though I did slow up a lot of records, I don't remember none of this, really. I know I did slow up a lot of records. Um, there was a whole bunch of us.

Graves: The sights, the sounds, the smells, when you were growing up. What were some of the things that you remember.

Harris: About smells?

Graves: The smells. The sounds.

Harris: Not too much. [laughs] Not too much about smells, I don't think so. What do I remember?

Graves: I mean, what was your neighborhood like?

Harris: My neighborhood was poor.

Graves: It was a poor neighborhood.

Harris: Yeah, very poor. And I went to west side, they were better – they had nice homes and flowers and stuff, you know, the musicians over there. And there were plenty of musicians. Clarence Beasley, the pianist. He came to New York for a while, but he came back. We had a bass player named Ernie Phil, we had a bass player named Herman Wright. All these people all came to my house, you know.

Graves: So the west side came to the east side?

Harris: Oh yeah. And then, I moved to the – I ended up on the west side.

Graves: How old were you when you – about that…

Harris: Don't ask me that.

Graves: A teenager?

Harris: Oh, I was still probably a teenager, yeah. I started college one year. I saved money – I graduated in 1947, and I worked in a grocery store for a year, 1948, as a clerk, and I went to college – I saved money to go to college for a year. So that means, my college thing was 18, 19. I graduated 17. 18 ,I worked a year. 19, I went to college. I met a singer named Shirley Brown, and I met some musicians on the west side, Harold McKinney, Ray McKinney, Clarence McKinney, Bernard McKinney, who was Kiane Zawadi, um, and then I started hanging on the west side. Shirley could sing good, and Shirley had a sister, named Christine, you know. And so what is I ended up married to Christine, you know. We have one child, Carol, you know. And that's when I ran into – these other people started coming. When they came – when musicians came to town, they came looking for me, you know. Sonny Clarke, Walter Davis, and they came to Detroit. It's like somebody must have told them, "you better look up that pianist in Detroit" or something.

Graves: And when they came to look for you, what kind of things were they looking for you to share with them?

Harris: No, they were just looking for – somebody must have told them that I could play or something, I don't know. We became good friends, you know. And then – Pepper Adams was in this too. I gotta bring in his name, 'cause we're doing this special thing for Pepper Adams this year. Um Pepper Adams, and other – other jazz musicians, a lot of them, you know. We were a whole big colony. And then here comes um, Joe Henderson came and started talking lessons, Yusef Lateef started taking lessons, Kirk Lightsey learned from me. The people at Motown – the bass player at Motown, James Jamerson studied with me in Detroit, you know. The pianist learned some things with me, Griffith, Johnny Griffith. Um, so that's why I said I should have brought that page from that yearbook, 'cause you'll see that what it said in there – it said, most of the musicians that came out of Detroit come through one person, Barry Harris, who not only taught them music, but taught them to write stuff – other stuff too.

Graves: Like?

Harris: Life.

Graves: Life stuff.

Harris: That's right, life stuff. Example of that, Charles McPherson, he was about, he might have been fifteen when he started with me. But I tell you, when he graduated from high school, he graduated with all A's because I insisted that, "you're gonna get all A's." So Charles McPherson was a cat who would call me and say, "they're having a jam session, can I go?" I said, "did you do your homework?" He said, "no." I said, "No, you can't go until you finish your homework." You know, so everything I said, he would do. He might have been mad, but he would do exactly what I say, you know. So, Charles McPherson, Lonnie Hillyer, the other pianist, what's his name? The one that really has really never been recognized much – worked at Arturo's he's part of me too, you know. He grew up with Lonnie and Charles. He worked at Arturo's here. I hadn't heard him play for years, and I went to a birthday party in Brooklyn, and he played and he said something like, "Barry, this is the first time you heard me play in all these years," and it was true. And – what's his name? Maybe I'll think of it later.

Graves: So to put this in perspective a little bit, are we talking now the 1950's, and you'd be in your twenties?

Harris: Well right now – no you're getting into the '50's. I went to New York the first time, maybe 1952.

Graves: Right.

Harris: See, I left out a whole lot of people, though. I left out Sheila Jordan, you know. I left out Skeeter, you know these are people who are all important to me. And when I went to New York for the first time – me and Doug went together, we stayed with Sheila Jordan, you know. Um, 'cause Sheila Jordan is from Detroit. Her famous story is she almost got me killed.

Graves: She almost got you killed.

Harris: Yeah [laughs] she come walking in that bar in Hamtramck. See I was working in a bar in Hamtramck, in Polish town. And she and this other girl came walking in there, and walked straight to us black musicians, my brother. Every eye in that joint was looking at us. Yeah, I think everybody in that joint was after us. So when the gig was over – good thing there was a streetcar going by, 'cause we made it to that streetcar, but they was coming after us. We made it to the streetcar and got on the streetcar.

Graves: How did that play a part in your life, that – the racial part coming up…

Harris: No, really in Detroit, I'll be honest with you, we didn't know nothing about race anyway, see. We didn't know nothing about this segregation until they told us about integration, 'cause we were all so mixed up, you know. Um, oh man, I can't think of names now.

Graves: So there were other cultures there, when you were on the east side?

Harris: Oh yeah people – it was white and black and yellow and green, you know. We were all just jazz musicians, you know. We found out about that segregation stuff when they said – you know, we'd get together – we said, "huh, we've been getting together all this time. I don't know what they're talking about." They probably separated us – yeah probably then we were supposed to be separated. I don't know, you know. But um, that's taking me over into the '50s. The '40s, we just about got that. The '50s, my daughter was born in the '50s. Yusef was part of my life in the '50s. There was the club called the Blue Bird, which was maybe four blocks from me, which was a part of my life. At the Blue Bird, even before I was twenty-one, you had to be twenty-one, I used to go over to the west side with Harold McKinney, Ray McKinney, 'cause I hung out with Ray. We'd go over to the Blue Bird, I'd knock on the window [knocks on the table] and the piano player, Phil Woods, he would look out and say, "huh," so when they finished the song, he'd get off the piano, go to the bar. I'd run in and jump up on the piano and come and run right back out of there after the song, you know. So, my twenty-first birthday was celebrated in the Blue Bird. I made sure that they knew I was twenty-one.

Graves: Alright.

Harris: That I would never have to run anymore. So now, let's see I'm on the west side. Then came Charles and Lonnie and oh, I can't think of the boy's name. But I've been talking about him because he's been sick. The piano player. Let's see most of the musicians, they came through me, you know.

Graves: And who – who affected you? Who were some of the older musicians who affected you and changed your life?

Harris: Don't ask me – oh, oh there were some. Okay, we got to say – Tommy Flannigan played better. Terry Pollard played better, Will Davis played better than me, so I watched them.

Graves: They're older? Not much older?

Harris: Not that much – Terry Pollard, I wouldn't say was older. We might have been about the same or something. She might have been a little younger. Tommy – we were about the same. I didn't find out until New York – maybe fifteen years ago –that Tommy Flannigan was younger than me. I always thought of him as being older than me. Then I found out his birthday was March 16th 1930. My birthday was December 15th, 1929. So I was the oldest, you know. Who did I leave out? I left out um – there's so many people, man. You know, I went out – one of my first gigs was with Lewis Brown and Willis "Gator" Jackson.

Graves: Where'd y'all go?

Harris: Gary, Indiana. I got in the Union through a guitar player named Emmitt Slay. He was doing a show opposite Mantan Moreland in Cleveland, so I got in the union and went

to Cleveland. I went out with Ruth Brown, and we played shows and we played for shake dances.

Graves: What kind of person was she to work for?

Harris: Ruth Brown? Very nice. You know, and then there were a lot of older musicians, who were good musicians, you know. Abe Woodley, I mean I can name names, you know. I can see faces probably more than name names, you know. Um, I can remember a cat telling me, "Barry, you need to learn how to play *I Got Rhythm*." This must have been really early on – or maybe not – a tenor player – I say, "well what do you mean?" He said, "you're playing two choruses of the blues, and then the *Rhythm* bridge, then a chorus of the blues. That's not *I Got Rhythm*." So he showed me how to play *I Got Rhythm*. So people showed me, too, you know. But I was real –real diligent. I was really – always tried to do it right, always tried to be right with songs. All this stuff I tried to be. So, we're into the '50s. I um, I ended up leaving out – that was 1955 – what year did Clifford Brown die? I think he died in 1955, or '56. One of the two. Bird died in 1955, I think. I'll never forget that, March 12th. That was my wife's birthday – Hugh Lawson's birthday. Hugh Lawson, another pianist. Um, I joined Max Roach. Clifford Brown and Richie Powell got killed in a car accident, so – I think on the Pennsylvania Turnpike, which is a dangerous turnpike anyway. I hate that turnpike 'cause too many times it looks like the side that you are on – and no, I don't like – I don't like the Pennsylvania Turnpike at all. I'd rather go to New York through Canada, Buffalo, that kind of thing than go through – no Pennsylvania Turnpike for me. Um, they got killed, so Harold Land, who had played with Clifford Brown, he was saddened so he went back to California. So that left Max and George Morrow, the bass player. So Donald Byrd, Sonny Rollins and myself, we joined Max's band. Um, we never recorded, which is a drag. We should have.

Graves: Now, what year was that, again? '52?

Harris: I think it was about '55. Probably about '55 – I think it was '55. We got to find out when Clifford Brown died.

Graves: Okay.

Harris: When we find out when Clifford Brown died, we can tell.

Graves: So that group. Sonny Rollins.

Harris: We never – we never recorded.

Graves: Max Roach. And the bass player was?

Harris: Yeah, Donald Byrd, George Morrow.

Graves: George Morrow. M-O-R-R-O-W

Harris: Yeah, something like that, I think. And um…

Graves: …How long were you together?

Harris: Oh, we might have been together three months or something like that. 'Cause I ended up back home. Donald Byrd – I think Donald Byrd stayed in New York. All of us split up. Um, I went back home and that might have been oh – see when I left Detroit, most of the musicians left with me, you know. That's what it was.

Graves: Which was about what year?

Harris: 1960, when I joined Cannonball. See most of the musicians left when I left, 'cause they were closely associated with me. Mostly all the musicians. Bennie Maupin, all them – all them cats. In some way, they were connected to me. I saw Bennie Maupin, he almost cried seeing me. He hadn't seen me in years, and um – a lot of those cats, they came. When we were younger, probably Kenny Durrell and Tommy Flannigan were the best young musicians – the bebop kind of musicians, and they were young, you know.

Graves: And did Mr. Flannigan go to New York before you or after you, or around the same time?

Harris: It might have been before me. Yeah, Tommy might have left before me.

Graves: I believe that Mr. Clifford Brown passed on in – I think Mr. Brown passed on in 1956.

Harris: Was it – that's what it says? It shouldn't have been.

Graves: June 26th, 1956.

Harris: It says 1956? You sure?

Graves: At the age of 25.

Harris: Maybe it was '56. As I was saying, it was either '55 or '56. That's what I said. So it was '56. See, I stayed with the band maybe about three months. I went back to Detroit, stayed there, played around Detroit. I played for – I was the house pianist – I played for – oh, I played for Lester Young.

Graves: How was that? What was that like?

Harris: Really something. He counted off the tempo with his shoulder, yeah, see that. See that – one, two, three, four, like that, like that. Right, I played for him, I played with other people. I played with – for other people there too.

Graves: Who was – were there a lot of clubs at that time?

Harris: Sure there were quite a few – quite a few clubs, yeah. You know, we went to hear – I missed part of my early life, I should say – we went to hear Charlie Parker and people like that at dances, when we were teenagers. We didn't go to clubs to hear that, we went to dances. We went to a dance to hear jazz, you know. You didn't go to a club to hear jazz. That might have happened – that happened later. I – one of the last times I heard Bird was at a club. But before that I heard him at the Mirror Ballroom, the Graystone Ballroom, the Grand Ballroom.

Graves: People were dancing to the music.

Harris: Sure. People danced to the music. Probably the biggest drag is that we disassociated jazz from dancing. WE should never have done that. See, people dance to jazz, you know. And um, that's how people can relate to – you know people also, like our contemporaries, they knew a lot of the songs and stuff. And we had pretty songs to remember. See, this generation, I have pretty songs – not too many pretty songs to remember. But Stevie Wonder, he's written quite a few pretty songs, but that's it, not too many, you know. We have noisy songs. Noisy, clingy guitar songs. Guitar players who can't play at all, all they know is one thing and they make a million dollars. What's the biggest thing – the biggest drag about that is that they make all the money, and they become authorities on living, and they end up being all these authorities on, "well people should do this and do that" and all they know is three chords on the guitar, you know. But they're gonna tell you how to live your life. But um, see me – I got spoiled early. I got spoiled by Charlie Parker. Don't ask me why, don't ask me how, don't ask me why. I used to – when I first started, when I first got that record player from Bess, I started with Bud Powell. But I went on, I ended up with Bird a lot – Charlie Parker a lot. And I can remember hearing Charlie Parker for the first time, and my brother, he was with strings – I guess it was the first time. Or the first time with strings, I should say. He was with the strings, and I'll never forget, they came to the forest club, which was a roller-skating place. But it turns into a – you know, a dance place. And so here we are, we musicians standing in front, the other people ready to dance. The strings tune up, Bird comes, and he's – he rolls over the horn and does something [mimics Charlie Parker warming up] and then they start playing, my brother, and Bird start's playing. That feeling, you'd have to experience to know. That feeling was the – it starts – it starts in your feet, and it goes all through your body. To hear somebody play like that, it'll go all through your body, man.

Graves: So that's a major event in your life.

Harris: Oh, sure. Because, you know what, it's a spoiler. See the way it spoils one is this: when I go to hear somebody, I expect them to make me feel like that, and I haven't had that feeling. I don't go to clubs, 'cause I know they aren't going to give me that feeling. Now, they don't think enough about the soul part of the music. They think a lot about the technique part of the music. Not really involved with this technique thing. Are not involved with playing the melody beautiful, no. Really, man – so I was spoiled by that. That's why you don't see me go out that much. I've had the feeling again, 'cause

I've listened to the Mormon Choir, the Mormon Choir – when you look at the Mormon Choir and see all these plain looking folks, they're all plain looking. They look like farmers and hard workers. But when they start singing, my brother, you can't beat it. And you take Take Six, like we were listening to that last night – that kind of stuff, that's amazing stuff. That's the stuff that they give you that feeling, you know. Um, there's not too many things that give you that feeling.

Graves: Can I digress for just a little bit with a question?

Harris: Yes.

Graves: You said you took up the bass fiddle in high school. How long did you do with the bass fiddle?

Harris: Not that long. A couple of years. Three years.

Graves: And what drew you to that? Three years is a little while.

Harris: Well, that was what was there in the band – in the orchestra. So I took up the bass. Maybe they had all the other instruments.

Graves: Did that change the way you – how did that relate to you musically? How did that affect you?

Harris: No, it didn't do that much changing. You learn, that's all, like I say. You learn from it. It just – puts you in the music. Because there's no pianist in the orchestra, you know what I mean…

Graves: Right.

Harris:…and to stay in the music, you took up another instrument. So, that's why I took that.

Graves: Right.

Harris: That might have been the only thing there for me to take up. I don't know, I don't remember. And trying to remember, it's hard, you know. But that experience with Bird, really sort of messed me up. I even think of it myself, I think do I give people that kind of a feeling? You know, I even that about that. I think I say, if he gives me that feeling, then I should be able to give that feeling to somebody else. But maybe what I have to do first, is give that feeling to myself. That means I have to be on the other side, listening to myself. And maybe if I can give that feeling to myself, I can pass it on to somebody else. That kind of thing. It's hard to say.

Graves: So this is in the '50s when you saw him.

Harris: Oh yeah.

Graves: Would we say? Or this is before?

Harris: Oh, I don't know, might have been before.

Graves: Before the '50s.

Harris: Might have – it was before. No, it was before the '50s, it was in the '40s.

Graves: Okay. It's in the '40s and the big band revival had happened, the big bands were jumping up again?

Harris: Oh yeah, big bands were going all the time.

Graves: Okay, I thought at one point…

Harris: No, there was a theater for big bands in every city, almost. You know, you gotta think about it. Every city had it – don't think that New York had the Apollo, and that was the only – no, no. Detroit had the Paradise, Washington had the Howard, I think it was the Howard. 'Cause Cannonball – we played opposite um – who did we play opposite? Ray Charles at the Howard. We played opposite Ray Charles at the Apollo and never went to the Howard Theatre in Washington. I think it was the Howard. Chicago had the Regal, or something like that. Yeah, the Regal. Yeah so every place had a theater where big bands came. Big bands were strong. And um, I had people accuse me of playing with Dizzy's big band. But what they saw was this kid who had a head like mine, yeah that's right. But his name was Hen Gates.

Graves: Hen Gates?

Harris: Hen Gates. H-E-N.

Graves: Hen.

Harris: Hen Gates. And it really was James Foreman, Philadelphia pianist, you know. He looks a lot like me, you know. Maybe a bit taller. And people thought I was Playing with Diz, but I wasn't, you know. So, come to the '60s with Cannonball, I stayed with them maybe for the same amount of time I stayed with Max, maybe about three months, yeah.

Graves: *indistinguishable speaking*

Harris: [To somebody else in the room] I think he just come. Hey, come on in here.

Graves: [Back to Harris] So, in what other kind of ways would you say Charlie Parker affected your life? The music…

Harris: Just playing, that's all. [laughs] No, he was more than that, man. I had the opportunity to sit in with him quite a few times. And not – I say quite a few times, but it was probably three, four times. And he always was beautiful, you know. I felt the same – I also felt that kind of beauty when it came to Gene Harris 'cause he would let me sit in all the time, too.

Graves: So, I've read some things where some people have said that Mr. Parker was a – not a kind gentleman, but you didn't have that kind of experience with him.

Harris: No, no, no. He's very kind. You couldn't beat him. You couldn't beat that man. He was nice to all of us. We played a – we played a song with him because his band was late one time. It was very beautiful to us, you know. In no way, not once, did he in any way, act any way other than beautiful.

Graves: And these are in your teenage years? In your twenties?

Harris: That's in – teenage, um – yeah teenage years, because they were at dances, and we could go to dances.

Graves: Okay, and how early was it that you went to dances? I mean, in terms of your mother and father taking you to dances.

Harris: Don't ask me that. Ain't nobody take me to no dance.

Graves: Oh, nobody took you, you just – you know, you went like that.

Harris: No, you went with your buddies. I might have been sixteen, seventeen.

Graves: Who did you see at dances that sticks in your memory? Anybody that touched you in a…

Harris: I mean, other than them?

Graves: Other than Charlie Parker.

Harris: Well, you know we go to dances anyway. We even gave dances ourselves, so you know we did things like that. You know there might have been others – there were others. We went to see Milt Jackson one time with Jimmy Heath and maybe Max, or somebody.

Graves: What about Ms. Dinah Washington?

Harris: Dinah Washington? Oh, yeah. Her, we go – we'd have her records at house parties. We loved house parties. You know, and um 'cause that's where our fun was.

Graves: Y'all enjoyed yourselves at those house parties.

Harris: Oh yeah. We had house parties and that way – we listened to music that way. And we danced, and felt good that way too, you know.

Graves: And did you ever play music for house parties?

Harris: No, I never played no music for a house party, no. But we had – there was things we had to learn, like all the pianists had to play *After Hours*. Every tenor player had to play *Flying Home*. There were things that we had to do. We better know something about *After Hours*. I were never too good for that. But we had to play *After Hours,* we had to play *Flying Home,* other things, too, you know. And we played for – we played for everything, you know. We played for shake dances, you know, rather fun, too. We had one shake dancer named Baby Scruggs. My lord, could she shake. She was a shake dancer that – she would shake, say, "play *Cherokee* as fast as you can play at." And boy, you start playing *Cherokee* and she starts shaking, my brother, she could move one tassel at a time. Oh, you'd go crazy, I know you, [laughs] you'd go start raving mad. She'd move that tassel like that, and be shaking at the same time. Man, you'd be talking about lord, have mercy, Jesus. You'd aint never see anything like that. And fine, not just a shake dancer, I mean everything. She could move tassels in the back too. Oh Lord, man. You aint seen anything so beautiful in your life as a shake dancer. Wooh, so it was beautiful. We had some beautiful time, you know. We had shake dances, female impersonators, everything. All kinds of things. You know, we played rhythm and blues gigs, [sings part of a blues song] Oh man we had so much fun listening to Louis Jordan, Nat King Cole.

Graves: Louis Jordan, he was major, wasn't he?

Harris: Oh yeah. Nat King Cole, they were the majors. See the drag about Nat King Cole was everybody fell in love with the singers. See, all over the world they fell in love with the singers. They didn't fall in love with the piano playing, which was brilliant. He was a brilliant pianist, you know. So you heard less of the piano playing, and more of the singing, even though we enjoyed the singing, you know, don't think we didn't. But it would have been nice to hear the piano a little more – keep going, you know. So we had a lot to listen to, you know, you had all them good musicians to listen to.

Graves: Would you say you had an incredibly large proportion of musicians that came out of Detroit, related to other areas of the country? Would you say that?

Harris: Yeah, well what it is, is all the musicians that left with me, they all made it in New York. Every musician, I don't know any one that didn't, you know. Um, what's the pianist's name at Arturo? Um, Richard – the pianist at Arturo's? No, the regular pianist that played for the singers and stuff

Graves: Harry…

Harris: Harry Whitaker. See, Harry – Harry Whitaker grew up with Lonnie and Charles, so that's another one of my piano players. All these musicians – what I decided – what I've decided is that, I must have been – I must have been – one cat even told me when I got to New York, he said, "man, you have too much reputation before you came here." That's what he told, me, you know. "You got too much reputation." See I had a reputation before I ever got to New York. That's why musicians look for me, pianists look for me, that's why I got to play with beautiful people.

Graves: Let me get back to that in a minute. I want to ask you, starting like classically, how was that working throughout all of this? Were you – what kind of classical – were you still studying classical compositions?

Harris: Yeah, for a while. I even started – when I came to New York, I even started taking lessons. No jazz musician plays enough to know what he is. We don't work enough. The closest to working enough is the cat who stays home and works four nights a week at a place, and he works there for years. He might be able to find out how good he can be. The average jazz musician works, what, two or three jobs a month, maybe two. You work three jobs a month, how you gonna find out how good you gonna be? So what you have to do, you have to find a way to keep yourself occupied. So what you do is take lessons. So I started taking lessons in New York. I started taking lessons right at NYU.

Graves: Do you remember the person you…

Harris: Padwa.

Graves: Padwa?

Harris: That was his name, Padwa. P-A-D-W-A I think. Cat named – a piano player comes to my class named Charles Jordan turned me on to Padwa. So I started taking with Padwa, and then I was having my class one day, and I decided I'm gonna start looking for another piano teacher, 'cause Padwa had passed away I think. So I went to a cat on 57th street. I had an audition, nice cat. But one of my students, who now lives in Madrid, named Joshua, he said, "Barry, maybe you aught to go to my piano teacher 'cause he's different. He's like you." I said, "Like me?" So I decided to go audition for this cat. My brother, let me tell you. I auditioned for this cat, and he told me, he said, "well what have you been doing?" You know, I go to get down, I said, "oh I've been working on strengthening my fingers" or something like that, you know. See I had been hanging around Joe Zawinul. Joe Zawinul – Joe Zawinul could take his little finger and hit this piano, and you'd hear that go all around the block, you know. So he looked at me – you know what he said to me when I said that? He said, "you probably don't want to take from me," I said, "Why?" He said, "'cause I don't believe in fingers."

Graves: That's what Joe said? Or that was the piano teacher?

Harris: That's what he said. And I just – all I could do was laugh, because I didn't believe in fingers, either, you know. But here – I caught myself preparing for him. But I

didn't believe in fingers, I learned – I learned the fingers. See, working with Max Roach taught me a long time ago, "forget that finger business, you better find a way to do something, to play five notes at once."

Graves: Because?

Harris: Because he played so fast. See, by the time I used to come around Max would be so fast, it'd be unbelievable.

Graves: The tempos would escalate?

Harris: Yes. By the time it'd come to my solo, oooh. And this teacher, it's so weird too. This teacher would say to make M's with your elbows, make O's, you know. It ends up, that's what you'll be doing most of the time. So you had to – you had to make an M, you had to learn to play five notes in one go. So you got to learn all this stuff.

Graves: You had to play the alphabet, huh?

Harris: Oh yeah, my brother. He was the hippest cat I ever met. If he had lived longer, I would be a – I would be a better pianist, you know. I kept myself going, you know. But classically I would be much better, you know, with him. Um, no but I shouldn't even say that, because I left him and went to Sophia, and she came from the same person that he came from. The both came from the same person. So she continued my thing, you know.

Graves: What was the – you left after he passed?

Harris: After he passed, yeah. I went to her, and she was a good teacher, too. And hers was about the same kind of stuff, you know. They both – of course they had different things. He was a man, she was a woman, but they both took from a woman. And so they took different things, you know. I could say I learned something from him, I learned something from her you know, about how to play this instrument, and how to play it with the ease where you never feel anything on your fingers. See most people end up with hurting, carpal tunnel and all that kind of stuff. I never had any of that. This is the first year that I ever had trouble with my thumb. Now, this might be the second year, 'cause I think it started, not this March that just passed, but the last part – the last March. The March before that one. Something happened to my left hand – oh. [Tape pauses and restarts] See – ready? I was like a sixty something, seventy-year-old cat taking piano lessons and stuff, you know. And, you know.

Graves: When did you start with Padwa?

Harris: Padwa, that – Padwa might have been…

Graves: …was it before you came to New York or right as you came to New York?

Harris: You know what, Padwa might have been in the '70s. Probably was in the '70s.

Graves: That was you in your forties, in the ‘70s.

Harris: And um, what’s his name – Prostikov was in the late ’70s. I missed a little period there. And he died in the ‘80s, in the early ‘80s. I went to Sophia. So I been taking piano for a long time, you know. When Sophia got sick, that’s what threw me off. So she got sick, and I got thrown off. I haven’t recovered yet, you know. But um, I always maintain that a cat should have a piano teacher. All of us. That’ll keep you working on something, you know. And it keeps you – keeps you occupied, ‘cause you have a lot of time to do a lot of nothing. [Police Sirens are heard outside] That’s New York, for you.

Graves: At what point in your earlier life did you realize this is how you want to make a living – how was that process for you?

Harris: I don’t know.

Graves: It didn’t happen. It’s just natural.

Harris: I don’t know. Let me tell you, man. If you had told me – I was a cat who was never gonna leave Detroit. Never. I mean seriously, I was never leaving Detroit.

Graves: Why?

Harris: I don’t know. I didn’t want to go nowhere, you know? Dizzy called me one time to come join him at Birdland. But it was paying such little money, man, that I couldn’t even take care of my money. It’d be better to stay home and be broke – be at home, broke.

Graves: Did you have a daughter by then?

Harris: Oh yeah, oh yeah. See, so you know it’s like a different ballgame altogether. But I was lucky, I got to play with Dizzy and a few other people, Coleman Hawkins. I got to play with the best. I feel quite um – it happened. See, my classes – it’s funny, the class – see I always did a little teaching all the time, see. All through my life, but when I got to New York, I wasn’t doing much teaching, but we had jazz organizations around there that would receive money and some of us would go teach. They’d get a place and we’d teach, you know. That’s the way I found out – a piano player told me about Prostikov. I was teaching for jazz – a group called Jazz in Action, I was teaching for them. See the thing about teaching, I’ve always done that all the time, see, for years. I consider myself the oldest teacher, even though – I have to admit that the first person to influence us in Detroit was Frank Foster. Frank Foster graduated from college in Ohio. I think he graduated from Wilberforce. And he came to Detroit. So he turned us onto Pepper – all of us on, you know. And, now the teaching part here, I was teaching for Jazz in Action, and the last day – the last day I forgot that I was supposed to teach. Now what it was, I just forgot that I was supposed to be somewhere at 4:00, something like that. So what happened was I remembered maybe around 6:00, or 5:30 or 6:00, something like that. I

had gone into the off-track betting office with my friends, we were playing the horses, you know, and I forgot and so I – when I remembered, I said, "oh!" and I rushed out of there, and I jumped in a cab. I said, "this is silly, why am I doing this? There ain't no sense in going there." But when I got there, everybody was still sitting there, waiting on me. Now that's about two hours they waited on me. And they waited, and I got there. So that was the last day of the class. So what I said – I said, "Okay, since you waited on me, I'm going to wait on you." I'll say this. "I'm going to have class forever. All you have to do is bring enough money to pay the rent, and pay a couple of the musicians." And that's it. And so I've had that class all these years.

Graves: So did you have master classes in Detroit?

Harris: No, I don't think you'd call them…

Graves: Or did you just get together and share…

Harris: Just got together, that's all.

Graves: So this place, Jazz Forum – Jazz at the Forum that you were connected to, that recently had that celebration at Lincoln Center, that's thirty years…

Harris: Oh that was – just to run the place, that was…

Graves: When you first came to New York, you were?

Harris: I mean, I was – I worked there, the Jazz Forum. Duo worked there, Tommy Flannigan. You know, we all worked at that place. See, Jazz Forum was one of those places where we did have a chance to work. Um, but then – after that, I opened a place. Jazz Forum closed – me and Larry Ridley, and a couple more people, Jim Harrison and Fuente, we opened a place on 8th avenue. So we opened a place on 8th avenue, so I taught there. Caught the devil, but that's where I taught.

Graves: What was devil about it?

Harris: Paying the rent. We had to pay 3,000 dollars a month to pay the rent, that ain't no joke.

Graves: Oh, 8th avenue. And what was the cross street, about?

Harris: Between 28th and 29th. So I had that place.

Graves: How long did that last?

Harris: Five years. It lasted five years. I refused to close it. I could have refused to pay the tent and just forget it, but um, I lasted for five whole years. With the help of people. I

had help from a couple of people, you know. And um, it was a good thing, 'cause people still go there asking for that place – Japanese.

Graves: So on your way, as you begin to start thinking about moving to New York…

Harris: I never thought about moving to New York.

Graves: There's a situation that's going on among certain musicians – there's drug use that's going on among certain musicians. How did that affect your life?

Harris: No kind of way. You know, I wasn't a part of that – I wasn't a part of that situation. No, never. I was a cigarette smoker. I think the only reason I smoked cigarettes, is that was my protection against the marijuana and the cocaine and the heroin. You had to do something, you know, so I would smoke cigarettes. 'Cause the minute I had the stroke, and see not a lot of people did this happen to – I had the stroke in 1993, I never smoked a cigarette since. See I never was a real smoker, I just did it to protect myself, you know. I was a scary kind of person, so I would never – I can't even tell you. I would never shoot myself up. I have watched that by accident, and I would never in life, want to go through that. I watched a cat, okay my brother, he had blood all over his body. You know, I – it wasn't my style, none of that. I was even scared of the marijuana, so, you know. But you know, sometimes one thing leads to another, and it's really true. The marijuana's gonna lead you to another thing, to another thing. You get messed up, you know, and that happened to a lot of people. Especially to – a lot of people, you know, a lot of musicians. Some it didn't happen to, some it happened to later. You know a lot of musicians – you gotta think. A lot of musicians, say my age, and maybe a little bit older. They thought that maybe if they did that, they could play like Bird, or something. Something like that, it's that simple. I never thought that. But I think that's what happened to a lot of cats, you know. Lots of them. It's weird – I won't say that, that might not be too nice to say.

Graves: So I guess your – your upbringing, your mother's love for you and your love for your mother…

Harris: Well I think more than anything than that, I think it's the church. You know, being brought up in church, you know. No matter how hard we think, we still think there's somebody up there watching us. We still have that thought. See, these young kids today, they never went to church, so they don't have a thought about no conscience. You know, we always thought – and he watches over you, you know. So we have this little scare in us. That's why these young people – these young people go and shoot somebody in the head and go eat breakfast, go eat dinner. Funniest thing I ever heard of in my life.

Graves: So now, how does your choir life, with the choirs that you've had. How – what's the history of that?

Harris: That's just – that came from the jazz culture theater. See, I had – I started singing classes. See, I had horn classes, I had singing classes. I couldn't sing, I couldn't even

hum phrases for them to be able to get them, you know. When I noticed a change was when there was a – there was a trumpet player – he's still around, too, Bobby Rogovin, he had a good ear. And so, maybe in my second year or something, in my third year or something. I started singing the phrases, and he started playing them right back at me. I said, "aha!" See, so I knew that I improved there, you know? And then dealing with the singers – learning lyrics, teaching singing, teaching phasing and stuff, you learn yourself, that's all. So I just learned myself, that's all.

Graves: So you – you know a lot of lyrics to a lot of songs?

Harris: Yeah, I know a lot of lyrics to songs. I know – it's weird. A whole lot of lyrics – they come back.

Graves: Not too many musicians know a lot of lyrics to songs, right?

Harris: I know it. We should know more. I think cats play the melodies the better, if you know the song. "In a quaint caravan there's a lady they call the gypsy." You got to know this. [sings a song] "the gypsy". You know, it's right there. She could tell at a glance," or what – I can't remember. I need somebody to prompt me. I need Connie to prompt me, you know she could prompt the hell out of me, too. You know, but um, you learn a lof of lyrics – and see from my dedication to Bird and Bud and Sonny Stitt and Coleman Hawkins, Prez, my associations with all these people, I learned something else, too. Which is probably one of the most important things I should be saying now, is that um, we are not only jazz musicians. We are the continuation of improvisation that has been going on for years – centuries. We are the continuation of classical theory, classical improvisation. We are classical musicians. They think that we aren't classical musicians. The majority of these cellists and violinists and violists – viola players, French horn players – look here man, all they can do is read. They know nothing about this kind of stuff. They know nothing about sitting here, playing a piece, improvise on it, mess up, you can't stop. Just think of that. You mess up and you can't stop. You got to go ahead with it. That – a lot of classical pianists been doing that for years. Forget a part, you gotta keep going. Better fill it in, fill it in with something, you know. We're the ones – improvisation.

See, I always said Chopin and them, Bach, Beethoven, Lizst, Skryabin, all of them. Schubert, Schuman, all of them. Where would they be – today if they were alive, where would they be? Where would they be playing? They'd be playing at the corner bar, just like me, I'm convinced of that. See, concert halls play dead people's music. If they aren't dead, they aren't going to get played in these concert halls. And now, these concert halls don't even commission anyone, like they should. They're supposed to commission somebody to write a piece for the orchestra. They don't do that. They wouldn't think, probably, of commissioning a jazz musician to write a piece for them, which is what they should do, 'cause we're the closest thing to real improvisation. Um, we are the continuation of improvisation. I didn't realize this until a theorist over in Holland told me. His name was Badweyn. He said, "when improvisation stopped in Europe, it started

in the USA." 'Cause improvisation is supposed to go on forever, so that's why – that's why jazz started, improvisation. So, that's the music.

Graves: Alright, so can we start to talk about your musical – your sixth diminished concept, and how it developed – how it began its…

Harris: I don't even know. I don't know how it began. So I can't tell you, I really don't. The improvisation part, that started years ago. That started when I was working with Yusef and Bernard McKennie. We had – we practiced every week for the gig, we were working a steady gig at some place. So we practice, and so I always had the feeling you're supposed to have something to practice. So I made up some stuff for us to practice, some rules. And those rules have lasted all through all these years, and they're still the best rules in the world, you know. I made up some rules on how to practice. That's for improvisation. Now when the piano stuff started, I don't know. I really don't either. It might have started before the jazz culture theater, I'm not sure. But it started – and all this stuff is – our teachers, none of these teachers here know, none of them. They don't know how, they don't know about jazz, as far as I'm concerned. Not too many – not too many teachers. You got some that graduate from college and they go teach. You know, I had a teacher tell one of my piano players, he played his chords too low. I asked him, "what's the name of your teacher?" The name was something like Peter Brown, I say, "and who the hell did Peter Brown ever play with?" You know? For Peter Brown to be telling you that you play your chords too low, don't listen to Peter Brown, you know.

Graves: Speaking about chords too low, how about Mr. Chris Anderson? How did he affect your life?

Harris: Oh, he affected me a lot, because he know he played the chords low, my brother. He played them low. He played them high too, but he played them low.

Graves: How did you come to know of him?

Harris: Oh, I've known about Chris for years, 'cause Chris, Chris even stayed over at the Baroness's, you know. Chris stayed over there, um. Chris has been around a long time, you know in New York. He's from Chicago. I think, probably if you interviewed Herbie Hancock, he might mention Chris Anderson's name. You interview a pianist – an older pianist from Chicago, they have to mention Chris Anderson. Mine would be, if I had to mention an older cat, would be Willie Anderson, who was a very famous name back then, you know. I've got a lot of pictures of him playing, you know.

Graves: Did you get a chance to know him?

Harris: I didn't know him that well, but he showed me some stuff. I remember one thing he showed me, and that was very good, you know. But when he came to my – what I consider – well, teaching – see most of these teachers are still walking around talking about a diminished scale, half-step, whole-step, it's ridiculous. They should have learned what it really is. See, when they decide to put jazz in schools, they decided to teach

modes. I say that's so ridiculous, I never knew a mode in my life and I still learned to play jazz. So something's wrong with that, you know? I learned to play jazz without thinking about modes. I don't want to know a mode. They're talking about the Phrygian, the dorian, the mixolydian, and all that kind of nonsense. It's all nonsense to me. You know, it's not – it has nothing to do with jazz, particularly. But that's – when they put it in the schools, they had to have something, and that's one of the things they picked. They said, "Oh, that's what we can teach. We can teach the modes." So they teach people the modes, you know. And then they say things – and really, it's true man. I've told teachers off all over the world. Don't give me that half-step, whole-step stuff, now. You don't know what a diminished scale is. I had to stop them.

Graves: And how do you tell it – describe it to them?

Harris: Oh, it's easy. You got to know there are two diminisheds, for one thing. You got to know where the second diminished comes from. Schoenberg told us that. Schoenberg said the second diminished comes from the tonic of the dominants. But he didn't say, you know – but he didn't say, he didn't say that. What Schoenberg said was, "if you take a diminished, and lowered it one note at a time, you'll end up with four dominants." Now what I did from this – I was doing this long before I read this in Schoenberg's book. What I get from this is, the tonic of the dominants form a diminished. So you put the two together. The diminished itself, the tonic of those four dominants that come from it, you put these two together, and that's the diminished scale.

Graves: Can you play that on the piano? Can you do that?

Harris: No, no, no. I only play the piano when I'm working. [laughs] Art Tatum either died in '55 or '56. Check that out.

Graves: Alright, okay. So '55, '56, '57, '58, '59, you're going back to New York more often – the trips are beginning to be – how's that working?

Harris: Well, no. I went with Doug Watkins, what'd I tell you in '52 or '53, and then – I was mad too, 'cause I got there and Bird was out of town. And you know I wanted to hear Bird, you know. But I got to hear Art Blakey. And Art Blakey always used to let me sit in, too. And we'd always play *Night in Tunisia* fast. Fastest *Night in Tunisia* I ever played. Art Blakey, lay it on me. [sings *Night in Tunisia*] I said, "oh sh–" Oh, I can't say that. Well, anyway and then – I told you I joined Max, and I came back, then I joined Cannonball. We stayed together a few months. And then I decided – I found a place to live down by the Staten Island Ferry. I lived – where I live now is nothing but a great big building, there's a neighborhood down there. And um, let's see, what happened?

Graves: What year did you move there?

Harris: '60. In 1960, so then I hibernated until 1993 [laughs] I hibernated, what you laughing about?

Graves: I'm just listening.

Harris: Oh, thank you. Um, let's see.

Graves: How did the hibernation go?

Harris: Oh, it went pretty good, you know. You know, I had a bear skin rug, which helped in my hibernation. And then I had my – I had your love to keep me warm, or something like that. Bit then, after I hibernated – what did I do in those other years?

Graves: What about writing? Did you write much?

Harris: Yes, what I did – I started giving concerts. I started giving a big concert, great big, too. It started out with 10 singers, 10 strings and 4 guest soloists. I think the guest soloists were Slide Hamilton, Jordan – Clifford Jordan, Tommy Turrentine, who could be the fourth? Maybe Harold Vick, something like that. And I gave – the only reason I gave the concert, you know why I gave the concert? 'Cause we were sitting at a restaurant, I think it was Clifford, some others, and we got to talking, and somebody said, "I sure would like to play with strings." When they said that, I said, "Why don't you? Why don't you play with strings?" I said, "are we gonna sit back and hope somebody puts us with strings?" I said, "Let's play – okay, I'm gonna give a concert with strings," and I know nothing about strings. [laughs] But I say, "I'm gonna give a concert with strings."

So maybe right before that, we had a concert plan to go to um – we were supposed to go to Detroit. There were ten members of the Detroit Symphony waiting on us, and Charles McPherson had done this Billie Holliday album, and we were supposed to do that Billie Holliday album, and Ernie Wilkins had written all the music. So it was getting near the time, and we started talking about, "well where the heck is Ernie?" Tried to find Ernie, ended up well. Maybe about two days before the concert, three days, we found out that Ernie was in Europe, with all his music there too. Huh. And here we have ten strings waiting for us in Detroit. What are we gonna do? I said, "I know what I'm gonna do, Im gonna write me some music." I'll see how to write for some strings. So I got Paul Jeffries, he could copy good, fast. He was sitting beside me and I started writing for strings. I wrote ten arrangements, the last arrangement we finished on the plane going to Detroit, and when we got to Detroit, we played the arrangements, it didn't sound too bad.

I had never written for strings before. I said, "This didn't sound too bad," But one lady in the orchestra – in the symphony – she came up to us and said, "you know, I ain't never played music more beautiful than this." That's what she said. She had never played music more beautiful than this. And boy, you should have seen my hair. I said, "Oh, I can write for strings, huh?" [laughs] It was hard too, 'cause my forehead kept – bumped the table when I lean down to go to write. So – go back to the musicians, we talked about writing for strings. I said, "I'm gonna write for some strings, later. I can write for strings." So I had ten singers, ten strings and four guest soloists. I sold enough tickets by myself to make sure that concert was successful. And so it really was the most successful concert I ever had, 'cause after that I started having fifty singers, fifteen strings, a big

band, and put all that on the stage. A big band here, strings here, and fifty singers – I've had as high as eighty-four singers across there. And then, one of my singers taught in high school. He taught a singing class, half the semester was over and he had never gotten them to sing. They refused to sing, can you imagine? Having a singing class and the singers, "well we don't want to sing." Wouldn't sing, so I told him – well you know, see Skeeter and Shiela and them wrote lyrics to jazz songs, you know. I said, "why don't we give them the lyrics to some of these jazz songs and see how they take to the – how they like that." He said, "okay, we'll try." Man, them kids fell for that stuff, my brother. So I said, "well, we're gonna have to put them on the concert. If we can get them to do that, we can put them on the concert." We put the kids on the concert. They were supposed to leave after the first half. They refused – they refused to leave. The dumb parents – none of the parents came. None of the parents, it's really dumb stuff. The parents got angry, you know. The kids, they just refused to leave. You aren't going to make no teenagers, seventeen, eighteen, leave. If they say they ain't going to leave, they ain't going to leave, that's it you know.

But that's the start of it. So after that, I've had as many as – I've had as many as two-hundred children, so here's eighty chorus members, a big band, sometimes twenty strings, and across the front: two-hundred children, all singing jazz, you know. Really nice – I've resumed this now in Canada. The last concert we had was January 28th. On January 28th, we had five-hundred children singing. Five-hundred. And that was the third concert we had done. The second one was three-hundred, the first one was – no that's right – the first one was about two-hundred, cause – there a lot of – a lot of funny stuff happened in Toronto. You think of Toronto as a beautiful city. No, no, no. Toronto got a big problem. So we had five-hundred children. And you have never seen children act like this in your life, man. They come – the first day they came in, there was not a sound. There was not one sound. They sat down, they had a little booklet. It had their songs in it that they were going to sing. They had never seen it, and then they introduced me to the kids. They really took to me, you know, I can't even tell you. They took to me so much that – I looked at them, I said, "Okay, you know what we'll do? Let's run over your songs. I know you never sang them, but come on, let's– I'll sing it for you and then you come in and we'll sing it together." So, I sang them the first song, they came in and sung it with me. They were pretty good, too. I made them learn every song.

Those kids look for me every week. I couldn't be there every week, so I had to be there maybe once a month, or twice a month, or something like that. And here we had these five-hundred children, I mean really a beautiful – there's a tape of it too. Really a beautiful thing. We're working on another one, it's gonna be January 28th too. We're gonna have it again. I don't know how many children we're gonna have this time. I hope it's – we have five-hundred last time. We've had – these are different areas too – two-hundred, three-hundred and five-hundred. That's a thousand children that we've had already, from, you know, neighborhoods with problems. One school – somebody got killed in the school while we were giving the concert. But um, really nice – we really had a nice time. So I've been giving these concerts. I've given maybe twenty, close to fifteen, twenty or thirty concerts. I give them by myself, 'cause I don't like – you know, you get a grant, they want you to – "what did you do with this penny?" I used my own money, I

don't have to account nothing to myself. I'm not going to say, "What did I do with that last penny?" You know, so I'd save my money, give the concert – never make any money. I learned that a long time ago. I learned that from a friend of mine named Jim Harrison. Once he told me, he said, "Barry, you don't do everything to make money." He told me just like that, you know. You do it 'cause you want to do it. So that's what I did. I made twenty concerts, never made a penny. Only spent my money. Never made a successful concert after that first one, you know after that first one. But, so I gave the concerts, I worked, I saved the money, give another concert. I'd work, save the money, give another concert. So I was lucky, you know. I um, well we could talk a little bit about, somewhere in that – in between this period about Monk. Monk and I lived together for about ten years, and um, I don't know what happened to Monk, what made him suddenly just stop. I think it had something to do with a concert – the last concert they did. Something happened on that concert that wasn't right, and it happened to Monk when – something happened that was not right.

Graves: You have any idea what it was?

Harris: Probably had something to do with the musicians who were on the concert. Something was wrong, I ain't going to mention any names about that concert, but something was wrong. So he came, he laid in my bed for ten years, and um I had to sleep in another bed. He stayed there – one day we did go to the piano, he made me play *My Ideal*. He played *My Ideal* over and over and over and over and over. It'd be fifty choruses apiece. Unfortunately it wasn't recorded, it should have been recorded. Then – then there was one concert, it was a Monk concert going on at Carnegie Hall, with strings and stuff, and I was rehearsing with the band, and with the strings and stuff. And the day of the concert, I happened to ask Monk, I said, "Monk, why don't you get up and play this concert?" See the funny thing about Monk – generally he's gonna let you know if he's not gonna do something. But he didn't say anything. So when he didn't say anything, I said, "huh, that's funny." I went downstairs, I had to leave for rehearsal, and I told the people downstairs, I said, "ask him if he wants to play for this concert, 'cause he didn't say no." So I go to rehearsal, and the concert is on, we get there, Carnegie Hall, tuning up and stuff, about ready to hit it, about eight o'clock – hit time. Getting ready to hit – go out on the stage and in the door walked Monk. He got up out of bed and came and played the concert. So he played that whole concert, I don't think I can say I got paid for free.

So, then after Monk – what else. I gave some more – right after Monk died, that's when I went to jazz culture theater. 'Cause one of the first concerts I gave is – was dedicated to Monk, 1982. There's one restaurant right now on 45th street between 8th and 9th avenue named Kodama, they have a picture of this concert that was dedicated to Monk. The poster, a big beautiful poster, they have it hanging up in that restaurant. It's been hanging there for twenty years. Over – no it's been hanging there longer than that. It's been hanging in that restaurant – 'cause I think that restaurant opened up about 1982 or something. So it's been hanging in that restaurant – no, that's 24, 26 years. No, it's 28 years. It's still there. And let's see, what other things are interest – I travel. I travel the world, I teach all over the world. Every place – every place I teach is like home. They cry

when I leave home. I teach in most of the European countries. I teach – right now I teach in Japan, I've taught in Australia, I teach in Canada, I teach in London, I teach – I've taught in Paris, most of the cities. I've taught in Holland.

Graves: Italy?

Harris: Italy. I've taught in the Hague in Holland, in Amsterdam. I've taught in Rome, I've taught in Verona. I'm an international teacher and perform. I believe that every teacher should perform. I um – in my last – my last teaching in Rome, which was in March, I had 112 people come from thirteen countries. They came from everywhere man. They came from Russia, Serbia, Portugal, France, Italy, England, Spain. Thirteen places, I wouldn't think, I don't know if that has ever happened anyplace. I thought really the Italian government should have played that up, that should have been something that should have been talked about, thirteen nations.

Graves: You mentioned that these places you go, they feel like home to you.

Harris: Oh yeah.

Graves: When you moved from Detroit to New York, how was that transition? Was it like home, did New York feel like home right away?

Harris: No, of course not right away. But New York became my home, you know. My people at home should have, my people at home in Detroit should have threatened me.

Graves: In what way.

Harris: You see, if they had threatened me I might have gone back to Detroit. So then come this thing about what is home. Where I live I've been living for forty-some years, I think you would consider that home, you know. Even though I go home to Detroit, so I have a couple of homes, that kind of thing. I leave for London to teach, after London I go back to Detroit to teach, and no, not to teach, to perform in a festival dedicated to Pepper Adams. Then I come back and I got to Rome to teach again. See I teach in Rome twice a year. After Rome I got to go to Leroy Williams, great drummer, and myself are going to Japan. We'll be in Japan most of, well part of November, and then in January I teach again in Japan. So I'm an international teacher, that's all I can say. Do you have any more questions. What else do you have in mind? Think now…

Graves: Well, I have questions but it's…

Harris: Yeah, yeah.

Graves: But we can, we can…

Harris: Yes, yes. We could mention that Monk and myself, Sonny Clark, a lot of musicians were very thankful to a lady, I should mention her, we were very thankful to

this lady who loved jazz and became a benefactress for all of us, you know, Art Blakey, all of us. See, she was…

Graves: What's her name?

Harris: Her name was Pannonica Koenigswarter nee Rothschild, Rothschild. She was the benefactress who helped us all get out of being poor and starving, you know, so that we can mention.

Graves: Can you just mention about your NEA Jazz Masters Award?

Harris: Oh, yeah, my NEA Jazz Masters Award…

Graves: Talk about that a little bit.

Harris: Mine came a long time ago, I was surprised at the ones that came after me. I say, "What [inaudible] should have gotten his before me, you know."

Graves: When did you get it?

Harris: 1989. Yeah, 1989, I got mine a long way, I even saw the names somewhere. Might have been Hank Jones, I don't know, something like that. The studio was, I got mine in 1989 and it was a good time too because, oh yeah, check '89 in there.

Graves: Hank Jones, Sarah Vaughan.

Harris: Yeah, ain't that something? Look at that, me with Hank Jones. Look who got the next year.

Graves: George Russell, Cecil Taylor, Gerald Wilson.

Harris: Who? Gerald Wilson?

Graves: Gerald Wilson.

Harris: All them before me. And who the next year?

Graves: Danny Barker, Buck Clayton, Andy Kirk, Clark Terry.

Harris: You see, I don't know how I got mine so quick in 1989 with all those people, but I'm glad I got it though.

Graves: Tommy Flanagan got his in 1996.

Harris: Ain't that something, think about that.

Graves: Yeah.

Harris: 1996. I got mine, well, I think it's probably because of my teaching mostly, you know. I think that's what it was because I've taught so many people, so many, you know, so many, you know.

Graves: How does it make you feel when you hear people talk about Motown? I mean how does that…

Harris: Oh, it doesn't bother me. You know Berry Gordy, he's, we grew up together. Berry Gordy founded it, we were boogie-woogie piano players in Northeastern High School and he founded it. And I can't say anything, I can tell you a story about it. Berry Gordy went into this restaurant to order a hamburger or something, you know, and some cats sitting in the restaurant they sitting eating, you know. So Berry gets his hamburger and walks out and one cat look at the other cat and say, "Man, you know what that fool is looking to do?" The other cat say, "What?" "Man, he fixing to quit his factory job and go form a record company." [laughs] And they laughed. [laughs] The fools, if they only knew. You know, if those fools only knew, it would have been something if they only knew.

Graves: Yeah, yeah.

Harris: You can imagine that. So I have a good relationship with Berry Gordy, you know, he's come to see me play concerts in California, you know. We had him to dinner at a Japanese restaurant when he came to town, he came to my big concert, he came to one of my big concerts. I've even had Clint Eastwood at one of my big concerts. Clint Eastwood had us all, that's another story, Clint Eastwood had us all, a lot of jazz musicians, come to California while he was making this movie about Bird. See, what we did, we augmented the orchestras and things, we augmented the strings. I'm on, what am I on? Oh, I'm on a few of the string things. Walter Davis is one some. Monty Alexander, a whole bunch of people, all of us, a whole bunch. I tried to find that recording, I've got a copy of it somewhere, I don't know where. They, he recorded us, he was very nice too, he came to my concert. He saw Jimmy Slyde dance, Jimmy Slyde was one of the greatest tap dancers in the world, he died a couple of years ago. And he saw Jimmy Slyde tap dance, he had never seen Jimmy Slyde before, you know. It's funny about those cats, he had never seen Jimmy Slyde. Berry Gordy acted like he had never eaten Japanese food [laughs] because he really loved it. He loved the food, he ordered more and more and more, he really had a nice time, Japanese restaurant, yeah. So he made it, I made it. Not quite the same [laughs]. I think probably, you know, not that much, maybe seventy million difference, something like that, something slight like that.

Graves: Small, slight difference.

Harris: Oh, a slight difference.

Graves: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Harris: You know, but a very, very dear friend though. One day he asked me, you know what he said? I played a tune, he came up to me and said, "You know what, you touched my heart when you played that song." He said, "What can I do for you?" You know what I said, ah man, I said, I should have been smarter, I should have said the right thing, I don't know. I said, "Oh, man." Just like that, you know.

Graves: Well, it's not too late.

Harris: Might be.

Graves: You can call him back and say, "Listen, remember you asked me what more you can do?"

Harris: No, no, no, he gave a party for us when we went for the Grammys.

Graves: Right.

Harris: Who was it? Hank Jones, Oscar Peterson, and myself. We were for the Grammys, of course they wouldn't put us on the big Grammys show. The put us in this little theatre where I happen to go by and see the theatre ahead of time and they said, "Boxing every Thursday." [laughs] I said, "Shit." Really interesting too because when we got to the performance, Hank Jones and I, we went, we're getting ready. Some cat said, "Well, look, one of you can dress in the men's room, one can dress in the ladies room." [laughs] This is funny stuff man. I'll never forgive them, because see, I'll never forgive them, not so much for myself, as for Oscar Peterson and Hank Jones. They been around a long time and they should have been shown more respect than that. It didn't matter to me, you know. The theatre was a raggedy thing, they finally, we finally, the kid, the band, the children, they were taking the dressing rooms that were downstairs somewhere. But we finally ended up in one of the dressing rooms until we were able to change our clothes. But Berry gave, threw a party for us, big affair too. So big, came to sit between me and Hank Jones all the time. In the theatre, he's right there, in the middle. [laughs] You know, he was something. And he gave this story, Berry Gordy told this story about, yeah, "I get to the gig and they say you're the wrong Barry." [laughs] You know, he kept talking, finally I jumped up, I say, "If that is true, than that means I am partly responsible for Motown and I think you should give me one percent." I needed a more for him, but when he drove me home that evening to the hotel, when got out of the car he say, "Oh, wait a minute, I just wanted to tell you this, you can forget about that one percent." [laughs]

Graves: [laughs]

Harris: And so I'm still hoping for the one percent, so we shall see.

Graves: Keep hope alive.

Harris: Yeah, but lets see.

Graves: I've got one more question.

Harris: Yes?

Graves: Dexter Gordon.

Harris: Yes.

Graves: How was that relationship, and how was…

Harris: Oh, really good relationship.

Graves: And how did you like his harmonic sense of movement and things, how was…

Harris: Well, his is slightly different, it's not Bird, but it's slightly different. He was around a long time, you know, Dexter was around at the beginning of Bird.

Graves: Right.

Harris: You know. Dexter is a little slightly different than Bird. Well, see Bird was like the new era. I call him the, I was part of the renaissance, I call it the renaissance period. The most musical period in the music was Bird and Bud and Dizzy Gillespie and Fats Navarro, you know they the masters.

Graves: So Dexter was between now and sometime…

Harris: He was during that period but he wasn't quite what I would call bebopper, it was good though, you know. These cats was different, you know.

Graves: And Webster, so you're saying, would you say Ben Webster…

Harris: Ben Webster, that's different too.

Graves: Did Dexter Gordon ever say…

Harris: Coleman Hawkins.

Graves:…did he ever say ilk…

Harris: Yeah, Coleman Hawkins. Well, well, no, no, Dexter might be a little in between. Here's Coleman Hawkins, Ben Webster and…other people. They're sort of here, Dexter might have been a little notch on his own the way he played. There were, we had Wardell Gray, we had Gene Ammons, we had Yusef Lateef, all these guys, these cats, they played too.

Graves: You mentioned Sonny Criss.

Harris: Sonny Criss, I recorded with him. He committed suicide. The funny thing about him was, you know what, he wouldn't make two takes. He made one take of everything and refused to make any other takes. The album that I did with him I had to finish that album by myself, I had to finish with some tracks and repeal stuff, I've never even heard the album. That's the one I'd like to hear, with Sonny Criss. Write that down, if you ever run into that man, let me know. You know, Sonny Criss, he wouldn't make two takes.

Graves: Did he say why?

Harris: Well, you know, I know why. You know, they thought they were taking advantage of you when you do that and he could see what would happen. After the person died they'd bring out all these takes. You know, they'd bring out all that stuff. They brought out, look how much of Bird they've brought out. Look how much of all those cats they've brought out, you know. All of them, they've brought out lots of stuff. And I'm sure most of the family is not getting the money, you know. They brought out a lot of stuff, you know.

Graves: Okay.

Harris: Okay. You have another question?

Graves: Yeah, I'm wondering how your arm is doing?

Harris: [laughs] My arm is doing pretty good today, the bubble on my elbow has left, is leaving. So it's just about gone.

Graves: Is that what causes your arm to go up like that and it seem like you had drawn into a fist, is that what causes?

Harris: Unless, you thought that was what caused it [laughs]. No, your remark caused it.

Graves: Oh, okay. [laughs]

Harris: Caused that. [laughs] This cat here, I should mention, there was a young pianist who would come to the Jazz Culture Theatre. I didn't know him, I didn't know where he came from. One day I found out his name was Aaron Graves and I found out that he was coming from Washington and going back at night. I said, "You mean to say, you come all the way from Washington, DC and been going back every night?" He said, "Yes." I say, "Well, do not go back like that again." So from then on he would stay at my house and he might go back in the morning, and he, sometime. But I didn't just like the idea, I thought it was beautiful for a pianist to do that, you know.

Graves: And I'm…

Harris: I had a, you know, I've got one other like that, Rich Clements is like that, you know. He's with me all the way, he'll be at choir rehearsal, you know, he'll be in the class. You know, so I've been fortunate. You know, at least I have a few people who can play come to class, that's the beauty. See, I want, I should really be teaching, I shouldn't be teaching the students, I should be teaching the teachers, you know. That's the way it should be. I have so many secrets to tell them about the music, stuff that Chopin and them didn't say, they should have said. Stuff that Schoenberg should have said, he should have said. He can't just tell me that a diminished seventh you do so and so, and you get so and so, but you didn't tell me where that diminished seven came from. He should have told me that, see, I've gone back farther than him, Schoenberg. See, I can tell where it all came from. It's all religious, see everything is from religion. There was a writer, black writer named James Weldon Johnson, he wrote the Negro national anthem, *Lift Every Voice and Sing*. And he, let me tell you this, he wrote a thing called *The Creation,* and that turned me onto how the music started and how everything does this. Everything is in order, everything is order. I'll tell you that in private one day, yeah. Okay?

Graves: Thank you.

Harris: Thank you.

[END OF TRANSCRIPT]

(Transcribed and edited by Matt Buttermann)