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LOU DONALDSON
NEA Jazz Master (2012)

Interviewee: Louis Andrew “Lou” Donaldson (November 1, 1926-)
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[June 20th, PART 1, TRACK 1]

Panken: I’m Ted Panken. It’s June 20, 2012, and it’s day one of an interview with Lou Donaldson for the Smithsonian Institution Oral History Jazz Project. I’d like to start by putting on the record, Mr. Donaldson, your full name and your parents’ names, your mother and father.

Donaldson: Yeah. Louis Andrew Donaldson, Jr. My father, Louis Andrew Donaldson, Sr. My mother was Lucy Wallace Donaldson.

Panken: You grew up in Badin, North Carolina?

Donaldson: Badin. That’s right. Badin, North Carolina.

Panken: What kind of town is it?

Donaldson: It’s a town where they had nothing but the Alcoa Aluminum plant. Everybody in that town, unless they were doctors or lawyers or teachers or something, worked in the plant.

Panken: So it was a company town.

Donaldson: Company town.

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Panken: Were you parents from there, or had they migrated there?

Donaldson: No-no. They migrated.

Panken: Where were they from?

Donaldson: My mother was from Virginia. My father was from Tennessee. But he came to North Carolina to go to college.

Panken: Which college did he go to?

Donaldson: The college he went to was the oldest black college... I'm trying to think of it now. But Oldsheimers has got me. Not Alzheimers. Oldsheimer's. It was in Salisbury, North Carolina. What was that college... Can't think of it.

Panken: We can look it up.

Donaldson: You don't have to look it up. I've got all that information in a book.

Panken: Maybe we can get at it tomorrow. But in any event, how old were your parents? When were they born?

Donaldson: They were old. What can I tell you?

Panken: You don't know the birthdates?

Donaldson: Yeah, I know the birthdates. I've got all of that. If you need that. But they moved to Badin... My mother was a teacher. She went to Cheyney University in Pennsylvania, and she came back to this town and was a first grade teacher and music teacher, and choral director, band director, everything with music. My father was an AME Zion Methodist preacher and an insurance salesman. So we had a pretty stable family.

Panken: You had two siblings, I think?

Donaldson: Me?

Panken: Yes. Did you have brothers and sisters?

Donaldson: Yes, I have two sisters and one brother.

Panken: Would you mind stating their names?

Donaldson: Yes. My brother's named William—William Donaldson. My older sister is Elouise Donaldson. My younger sister was Pauline.

Panken: Did they all play music?

Donaldson: Yup. All played music. All went into education. All are now retired and rich.

Panken: Was your mother the main teacher?

Donaldson: Not really. I mean, she started them out, but they originally went to college...all of them went to college.

Panken: Now, socially, what was Badin, North Carolina like in the 1930s when you were growing?

Donaldson: It wasn't too much...

Panken: Was it segregated? Well, it was the South.

Donaldson: You KNOW it was segregated.

Panken: But was it a bad town, were there ways...

Donaldson: No, it was segregated. It wasn't a bad town because all of them worked together. Blacks and whites worked together in the aluminum plant. 220 degrees Fahrenheit. They used to wear these suits like space suits, and sometimes that ore would pop out and get on that suit, go right through the suit and right to their arms. It was a tough job. What they did, they separated the bauxite from... They got the bauxite from South Africa, and they'd process it and get the aluminum out of there, and it would flow out into some vats. It was a tough job.

Panken: What was your entry into music? I think I've read that you started out playing clarinet.

Donaldson: Yes, I started playing clarinet. I didn't want to play piano, because when she'd give lessons she had a switch, and when you'd miss a note she'd hit you across the fingers. So I said, "No-no, not me." I was a baseball player. So that's all I did, play baseball. But I used to go around the house humming, like the Bach Etudes and Haydn and all that, because I heard it when they played it on the piano. She got me one day and said, "Louis, you've got more music talent than anybody in this family; you can remember tunes and everything." She said, "You need to start playing piano." I said, "Not me." She said, "All right, all right." So she went across town and got a clarinet from the Alcoa Aluminum bandmaster. They had a band, all-white, of course. He gave her a clarinet. I mean, he sold her a clarinet. She brought it back. She didn't know anything about a clarinet. But he had a book, and we studied the book, and I just learned how to play it.

Panken: You studied yourself out of the book?

Donaldson: Yes.

Panken: So you had a quick learning curve.

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Donaldson: Yeah.

Panken: Obviously, you were meant to play music.

Donaldson: Yeah, evidently.

Panken: As a kid... You said you graduated high school when you were 15 and were the school valedictorian.

Donaldson: Yeah, right.

Panken: So you must have had other interests besides music and sports. Or, if you weren't that interested in school, it must have come fairly easily.

Donaldson: Well, I was...what you call it...a precocious guy. I checked everything out. I could tell you right now New York Yankees in 1936.

Panken: You mean the lineup?

Donaldson: The whole lineup. I was a paper boy, and I used to deliver papers in the morning. I'd get up about 6 o'clock and deliver my papers, and about 7:30 I'd be finished with my papers, so I'd just sit on the front porch and read the sports. Way back.

Panken: I know myself, box scores were a nice window into arithmetic and mathematics.

Donaldson: Yeah.

Panken: But what were some of your other academic interests.

Donaldson: Nothing really. I just...

Panken: You just did well.

Donaldson: I did well with anything, you know.

Panken: So you graduated at 15. That's 1941-42...

Donaldson: '42.

Panken: You were playing baseball, and you went directly to college?

Donaldson: Yes.

Panken: Where did you go...

Donaldson: North Carolina A&T [North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University].

Greensboro, North Carolina.

Panken: How far away is Greensboro from Badin?

Donaldson: From my home town, 64 miles north.

Panken: What was that school like?

Donaldson: Well, it was an agricultural and technical school. They didn't have a music department. I mean, they had a music department, but they didn't have a music degree. But I got into the band, and got to play in it, so I was all right.

Panken: What sorts of things did you play in that band, and what sorts of things were you used to playing...

Donaldson: Marching bands and little semi-classical tunes.

Panken: Where I'm going with this is, were you performing at all as a kid in Badin?

Donaldson: No, no-no, no-no. Nothing in Badin. Nobody performed there but Country-and-Western. Roy Acuff. Hank Williams. People like that. They didn't have no jazz.

Panken: No black bands were coming through.

Donaldson: No, no-no. We had a big station, WBT, in Charlotte, North Carolina, and they had one guy there named Grady Cole. Grady Cole had one record by Louis Armstrong, "Bye, Bye Blackbird" on one side, "St. James Infirmary" on the other side, and he played it every... He loved it. I got to hear Louis singing and stuff. So that created my interest in jazz.

Panken: Hearing Louis Armstrong on that record.

Donaldson: That's right. On that record.

Panken: When you got to Greensboro, did jazz start to enter the picture more?

Donaldson: No, not really. Because see, back then you couldn't play jazz in college. If they caught you practicing jazz in the practice room, you couldn't practice any more. They didn't like jazz. They didn't like nothing but classical and band music—the teachers. But what happened to me, a guy came from Seattle, Washington, named Billy Tolles, and he had been around all the musicians, and he had his saxophone. He could play. Excellent player. He knew Coleman Hawkins' "Body and Soul" and he knew Lester Young's "Just You, Just Me," and used to play those things. He was way ahead of all of us country boys. We didn't know anything like that. So we kind of idolized him and started to learn him. Whenever he went back for a break, we'd give
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him \$2 or \$3 to bring us back some jazz records, and he would do it.

Panken: So you got into jazz, it sounds like, by memorizing solos...

Donaldson: Well, not exactly memorizing. I sent for the music. I got Benny Goodman's records, "Let's Dance," and Artie Shaw's record, "Summit Ridge Drive." I got the music. He'd bring the music back, and I'd practice...I'd learn them.

Panken: You learned the solos off the transcriptions.

Donaldson: Right.

Panken: When did you start to transition from clarinet to alto saxophone?

Donaldson: Well, it's a funny story. In 1945 I was drafted into the U.S. Navy. I didn't volunteer. I was drafted. And I went to Great Lakes. When you go to Great Lakes, you have a pool, say, of about 200 musicians. Anybody who says they're a musician, they put them in the pool. A lot of them wasn't that good. But I went in that pool, and I never went down to take an audition, because a lot of guys were there and they had this hair with the stuff in it...

Panken: Pomade.

Donaldson: They had the slick hair, and they'd walk with a hump in their back, and they brought their horn, their instrument. I didn't take an instrument. I'd be talking to them and they said, "Yeah, I worked with Count Basie..." So I was there with my friend, Carl Foster. We came from A&T. I said, "Carl, no need for us to try out. We can't compete with these guys. This guy has been with Lionel Hampton's band." They were lying, of course, heh-heh-heh. So we didn't even take the test.

One day I went by the band room, and I heard a clarinet squeaking in there, SQUEAK-SQUEAK-SQUEAK. So I just stuck my head in the door, like in the Navy, you know, "Who the fuck is making all that noise in there with that clarinet?" The bandmaster was in there giving somebody a lesson. He said, "Oh, you think you can do better?" I said, "Yeah, give me that thing." So he gave me the clarinet, and I ran it up. So he put up some music and I played it. I knew it anyway. Then he put up some hard music. I played that, too. He said, "You're the best clarinet player around here. Do you play saxophone, too?" I said, "Yeah." [LAUGHS] I hadn't touched the saxophone! But what he did, he gave me a clarinet, which then was like an Army issue. Everything was metal. The clarinet was metal and the saxophone was metal. He gave me and said, "Take that back to the barracks, and come back two weeks later." So I took it back to the barracks and I started practicing. By the end of the two weeks, I could play the saxophone, enough to read the music.

I woke up one morning, they had a sign up there that said, "Donaldson, report to the band." Man, these other cats were looking sad! So as I was making my bags I'd walk by where they were, and I'd say, "You jive..." Neither one of them got in the band. Neither one of them. I told my friend, Foster, and he went down there and auditioned and he got in right away, because

he could play trumpet and piano—he was an excellent musician. That’s how is started paying saxophone?

Panken: Were you drafted in 1944 or 1945?

Donaldson: 1945.

Panken: Ok. I’d read 1944 somewhere. There were a lot of musicians who were legitimate musicians at Great Lakes.

Donaldson: Oh, yeah.

Panken: Some of the names I have are Willie Smith, great alto player.

Donaldson: Yeah.

Panken: Clark Terry.

Donaldson: Yeah, right.

Panken: Ernie Wilkins.

Donaldson: Right.

Panken: Major Holley.

Donaldson: Right.

Panken: Jimmy Nottingham.

Donaldson: Right.

Panken: Wendell Culley.

Donaldson: Right.

Panken: Luther Henderson.

Donaldson: Right.

Panken: Talk a bit about how the band were set up, the types of things they played, the functions they played.

Donaldson: What they did, after they broke down the bands, they had about ten bands. Now, For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



these guys you're talking about were a little older than me. They played in a band they called the A-band. Then they had another band. The guys were a little older. The B band. I was in the C band, because I was 18, and most of the guys in the band where I was were 18 years old. We were young people. But at the end of all the rehearsals and everything during the day, they'd have jam sessions, so we'd go and sneak on in, and play with the big boys...

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[BEGINNING OF June 20th, PART 1, TRACK 2]

Donaldson: It was great. A great set-up.

Panken: What sorts of things were they playing then?

Donaldson: Whatever was happening during that day. "Take The A Train," "Satin Doll," stuff like that. "Stompin' at the Savoy." A lot of stuff.

Panken: I also read that you had some leaves in Chicago, and you saw Charlie Parker for the first time in Chicago with Billy Eckstine.

Donaldson: Yes, with Billy Eckstine.

Panken: Did you spend much time in Chicago, or did you go in every...

Donaldson: I went in there every... Well, Chicago is not but 40 miles from Waukegan.

Panken: So talk a bit about that scene, and the places you went.

Donaldson: Well, I went in Chicago every weekend. I'd go down to the Crown Propellor and see Pete Brown. Pete Brown was down there. I'd go to another place to see a Dixieland band. I can't remember the band right now, the names of them... Then I'd go down to the DeLisa Club. There was a guy named Red Saunders.

Panken: He had the big band there. A drummer.

Donaldson: That's right. It was at 55th Street and State. Black people couldn't go past there. You go past there... They'd shoot a black cat if he went past there. That was the end of the line. But they had a great show and a great band. Chicago was great.

But I went down there because the guys in the Navy had been telling me about Charlie Parker. I had never heard him, and I went down to see him in Billy Eckstine's Band. When I saw him, it was very depressing, because he looked like he hadn't had a bath in years, and his suit was hanging. I said, "Is that him?" But once he started playing, it was a different situation. I never heard anything like that. I said, "Man, what the hell is he doing?" Boy, he was PLAYING some saxophone.

Panken: I've also heard that he was an extraordinary lead alto player? That he made the section

phrase like him...

Donaldson: Oh, yeah.

Panken: Do you have any recollection of that?

Donaldson: No, I don't have any recollection of that. Because the night I went down there, he was so high, he couldn't play the lead. Budd Johnson had switched from tenor to alto, and he was playing the head in the band the night I saw him.

Panken: Was Gene Ammons in Eckstine's band then?

Donaldson: Yeah, Gene Ammons and Dexter Gordon. A lot of people were in there.

Panken: By this time, were you listening more regularly to records...

Donaldson: Well, they didn't have many records. They had but one or two records, "Jumpin' The Blues" by Jay McShann...

Panken: But in general, not just...

Donaldson: Oh, yeah. I'd listen to anything that I figured was jazz. But I wasn't a record addict, because I didn't really want to hear anything but what he was playing, and once I heard him...

Panken: So based on "The Jumpin' Blues" by Charlie Parker with McShann, it changed your...

Donaldson: Yeah, that changed everything. Not me. Everybody.

Panken: Talk about how it changed you. What did it do?

Donaldson: Well, it made me want to pursue music as a profession. Because actually, when I went to college, as I told you, I was an honor roll—I was planning to go on to probably pre law school or something. My parents wanted me to do something else. Because I was asthmatic, and they figured that playing a horn is the latest thing they'd want you to do. But they were wrong, because playing the horn actually made me survive. The diaphragm, breathing, and stuff like that; it made my lungs much stronger than weaker. That's what it made for me.

Panken: Listening to you now, it's obvious how influential Charlie Parker was, but you've also talked about listening to a lot of alto saxophonists who were active then...

Donaldson: Yeah, I heard them.

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Panken: Eddie Vinson.

Donaldson: That's right.

Panken: Tab Smith.

Donaldson: Right. Louis Jordan.

Panken: Earl Bostic.

Donaldson: Yeah, Earl Bostic.

Panken: Talk about those people, and how you assimilated...

Donaldson: Well, those people were so great. Every one of those people had a different style. See, not like it is today when everybody plays the same way. But back then, they had a different style. Earl Bostic was the greatest technician I've ever heard on a saxophone. He could play three octaves. I eventually got to talk to him, and he told me what mouthpiece I should use, and reed, and I've been using them ever 1957.

Panken: What kind of those?

Donaldson: Meyer #6 mouthpiece, #2½ reed. Now I'm down to 1½ because old age has caught up with me, so...

[END OF June 20th, PART 1, TRACK 2]

[BEGINNING OF June 20th, PART 1, TRACK 3]

Panken: We just took a short break, and Lou found a sheet of paper with information that perhaps can supplement some of the things we've spoken about. What have you got?

Donaldson: Not what you want. This is not it

Panken: Well, you know what we can do? Perhaps we can find it and go over that material tomorrow, and interpolate that later.

Donaldson: yes, this is another thing here. It's a family reunion schedule of all my people. But anyway, it was Livingstone College. That's the name of the college that my father went to.

Panken: We were just discussing alto saxophonists. You mentioned Earl Bostic. But could you talk a bit about each of the people I mentioned, and how they affected you? Let's say, Eddie "Cleanhead" Vinson.

Donaldson: Well, Eddie "Cleanhead" Vinson affected me because he was a good blues player. That's the way I play, you know. I used to see him all the time in Cootie Williams' band. He was

great in Cootie Williams' band. Then he started doing solo, and I got to see him. He sang a little bit, too, which I'm doing now.

Panken: You've been doing that for 20 years or so.

Donaldson: Yes. Eddie was a good songwriter, too. He wrote a couple of songs that Miles stole and put his name on.

Panken: "Four" was one of them, right?

Donaldson: "Four." Ha-ha. You know about it, yeah.

Panken: "Tune-Up" maybe?

Donaldson: "Tune-Up," yup. Yeah, you know about it. That's what was happening back then. It's a different world.

Panken: So you did see Cootie Williams coming through...

Donaldson: Greensboro.

Panken: This was once you got back from the Army.

Donaldson: Yeah. From the Navy.

Panken: But when you were there, were you checking Johnny Hodges and Benny Carter

Donaldson: Right. I used to play all of Johnny Hodges' solos. Benny Carter came through and wrote an arrangement for our college band. We played that. There were some nice cats. Tab Smith came through. At that time, Tab was playing with Count Basie's band. But he was from Wilson, North Carolina, so he was a North Carolinian.

Panken: When were you discharged from the Navy?

Donaldson: I don't know...it was the summer of '45.

Panken: So you were only in for a few months.

Donaldson: 11 months, yes.

Panken: So you went back to Greensboro after that?

Donaldson: Yeah, I went back to A&T. A&T College.

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Panken: At this point, were you starting to be a professional musician?

Donaldson: No, not at that point. When I went back, it was the middle of the semester, and I didn't stay on the campus. I had to get me a room out in the town. I was still making up some courses that I had lost during those 11 months. After I got the courses made up, I started actually to play a little commercial music in a club called the Mombassa Club. The guy I told you about, Billy Tolles, he had the band. Nipsey Russell was the comedian. First job Nipsey ever played. Nipsey was a Lieutenant in the Army, and he was a very smart guy, as you know, if you watch him on TV. He came to Greensboro, and settled, and started working as an emcee in this club.

Panken: The spelling?

Donaldson: M-o-m-b-a-s-s-a.

Panken: Did I read somewhere that Ellington came through?

Donaldson: Yeah, Ellington came down there. He came down to the club, and brought all the musicians. We met them, talked to them. Russell Procope...

Panken: The band played an engagement there?

Donaldson: Yeah, they played a dance.

Panken: What was it like hearing the Ellington band?

Donaldson: Oh, it was great. It was much different than the other bands. Ellington actually had a different type of band. But I had heard about all the guys and read about them, so I just wanted to see them—like Taft Jordan and Cootie Williams, then he brought Jimmy Hamilton in... He had a great band. Russell Procope. It was a great band.

Panken: What other bands came through Greensboro?

Donaldson: Oh, man, all of them came through there. Jay McShann. Andy Kirk. Erskine Hawkins. Lionel Hampton, of course. Illinois Jacquet, of course. Illinois Jacquet, of course. Louis Jordan. Several other bands—I can't think of all of them.

Panken: So this was all during that year or two after you were discharged from the Navy.

Donaldson: Right. From the Navy. Right.

Panken: They were all coming through Greensboro on their southern tours.

Donaldson: Yeah. They had 60 one-nighters from New York to Florida.

Panken: Who did? Each of the different bands...

Donaldson: No, it was a tour down there they called the Weinberg Tour. A guy named Weinberg used to book them. He bought all the dance halls from New York to Florida, and he'd send the bands down there, and they played. Dizzy's band came through there.

Panken: What did the Mombassa Club look like? How was it set up?

Donaldson: Ah, just a club. Kind of dark in there. It was an exotic looking club. Heh-heh. For the South.

Panken: Did you get something different from all these bands? Did you like all of them? Did you have favorites?

Donaldson: I liked all of them. I used to go to see all the bands. Because, see, we were in college, and we could go down and get in the dance hall before the customers got in there. They let us in there because they knew us, and we'd meet the musicians and talk to them. A funny story I had, I went down there, and... Luis Russell came through there. I went down there, and I saw this young kid back there setting up the drums. I said, "Oh, that must be Luis Russell's son." He set up the drums and everything, and started playing a little bit on them. I said, "Oh yeah, he can play a little drums, too." Then eventually, all the band members came. And he went and put on a coat, just like the band members. I said, "Oh, he got a coat, too." I never knew who he was. So finally, Luis Russell came in, and the kid was playing. I said, "Why is he playing? The drummer didn't come?" The guy said, "He is the drummer." I said, "What is his name?" "Roy Haynes." Roy Haynes. Roy told me he was about 17 years old then. Every time I see him, he cracks up.

Panken: Any other good anecdotes about the bands? Memorable experiences seeing them...

Donaldson: Oh, yeah. When I came back from the Navy, they had an Army base in Greensboro, the O.R.D., Overseas Replacement Depot. I was back at the cottage, and the guys from the Army band used to come over and play with the other band. They hadn't seen me. Then I came back, and I'm playing bebop. I'm not playing like the guys around Greensboro. The guy said, "Who is this guy? Is this guy from New York?" They said, "No, he's from here." They said, "Oh, no, he can't be from here playing like that." But see, I had been in the Navy. When I found out who was there—James Moody, Dave Burns, a saxophone player named Joe Gale, Linton Garner (Erroll's brother), Walter Fuller (Dizzy's arranger), all of them were right in that band. It was a great band, and then I started going, playing with them. I got to meet them, play with them. It was nice.

Panken: Talk about how for you the Ellington band was different.

Donaldson: Well, they had Harry Carney. Anybody with Harry Carney, the saxophone section is going to sound different, because he was a great, GREAT baritone player. Big sound and everything. And Johnny Hodges, the way he played. It was a special band. You couldn't... Duke
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had picked them just right. He wrote his arrangements very compatible with the guys who were playing them. Ray Nance run out with his trumpet... It was a different kind of band. It wasn't just a jazz band. See, critics got carried away hollering about a jazz band, but they played a whole lot more stuff than jazz.

Panken: You've been talking each of the alto saxophone players you liked—and I suppose on tenor and baritone, too—all having an individual sound, a stamp...

Donaldson: Yeah, they played different.

Panken: An "I.D.," you've called it before.

Donaldson: All of them played their I.D. Right. They had their I.D.

Panken: How did that start to develop for you? Was it something you were consciously striving for?

Donaldson: No, not really.

Panken: Was it something that happened as a result...

Donaldson: Not really. I wanted to play nothing but bebop. That's all I wanted to play. But after I got married and had two daughters going to college, and I'm trying to pay our house mortgage, I had to play some other type of gigs. So I had to kind of temper my music to the people I was playing for. A lot of people said, "Oh, you're not playing jazz no more." But I was playing exactly what I had to play to keep those jobs.

Panken: I want to talk about that. But what I'm trying to focus on now are these developmental years, before you get married, before you move to New York, when you're still in North Carolina.

Donaldson: Yeah, I didn't...

Panken: Were you think about that sort of individuality at the time?

Donaldson: No, nothing but bebop back then. I wasn't thinking about nothing individual.

Panken: Was learning bebop a matter of getting all the Charlie Parker records and learning the solos...

Donaldson: That's right. Learning the solos and learning the standards that they came from. Most of those tunes came from standards. They just put another figure on the chords, and that's how they played them. In fact, I wrote a thesis down there at North Carolina A&T, for my graduation thesis, and they took it and book-binded it and made it a book, and now all the students who go through the college have to study my book.

Panken: What's the name of the thesis?

Donaldson: *The Transition From Swing To Bebop.*

Panken: Is that right?

Donaldson: Yes.

Panken: Is it a musicological analysis?

Donaldson: Oh yeah. I got illustrations and chords, broke down the chords and everything. 1947.

Panken: So you were extremely analytical.

Donaldson: Oh, yeah. And critical. Analytical and critical. So I was in good shape.

Panken: I gather that you made your first visit to New York in 1948?

Donaldson: 1947. '47...or '48.

Panken: Whatever the case, let's talk about that experience.

Donaldson: Well, what happened, our band came to play halftime at the New York Giants' game.

Panken: Ah, the North Carolina A&T...

Donaldson: The North Carolina A&T band, One of our players, a guy named Stonewall Jackson [Robert 'Stonewall' Jackson], was signed by the Giants, and we came up and played the halftime ceremonies.

Panken: So he would have been one of the first African-American NFL players.

Donaldson: That's right. I got to meet all the guys. Frank Gifford. Emlen Tunnell was there. He was (?—13:17). But it was great. Then I went down to 52nd Street, of course, because I had been reading about it. We had a shortwave radio. We could pick up music from New York once in a while. It faded out, but you could pick it up. Bands from New York. Like, when they had the *Benny Goodman Hour*, the Chesterfield, and Harry James... We could pick up those bands, and we could hear that on shortwave down in North Carolina. And when we were there, I went over down to 52nd Street, and went to see Dizzy and... It was supposed to be Charlie Parker, Sid Catlett and them, but Charlie Parker wasn't there as usual, you know, and they had this little short guy playing saxophone. Ray Brown was in the band. So I asked Ray, "Ray, who is that guy? He sounds almost as good as Charlie Parker." Ray said, "He sounds better than Charlie. For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

Parker.” I said, “Oh, yeah? What’s his name?” He said, “Don Byas.” And sure enough, I went back the next night to hear the band, and the band sounded much better with Don Byas than it did with Charlie Parker. Because Charlie was all messed-up and couldn’t half-play, but Don Byas was great. He was great.

Panken: Had you known about him before? Had you heard the records he did with Dizzy?

Donaldson: Yeah, I knew about him.

Panken: I think “Anthropology” was one of them...

Donaldson: Yeah, I knew about him. And he made this record with Slam Stewart, Slam Stewart and Don Byas, just two instruments. He was great. He was a great player.

Panken: What else did you do that first visit to New York?

Donaldson: I went by the Onyx Club, too, to see my favorites. And very depressing. Heh-heh. The Onyx Club. That was on 52nd Street, too. They had J.J. and Sonny Stitt, Bud Powell, Miles, and every one of them was all messed up. It was terrible. Very depressing.

Panken: Were they playing well?

Donaldson: Oh, yeah, they played good, but I said, “Man, I can’t... I don’t think I can handle this.”

Panken: So this discouraged any ideas you might have had about coming up to New York right away...

Donaldson: I mean, and playing with them. It didn’t discourage me about coming to New York. But playing in that scene, I couldn’t do that, because it was too hazardous.

Panken: Did you check out the scene in Harlem the first time you went to New York?

Donaldson: Yeah, I came to Harlem, I went through Harlem. I saw the scenes. I saw the scenes in Harlem.

Panken: Was it overwhelming to be in New York?

Donaldson: Oh, yeah. It was overwhelming to be in New York. You got to see all the musicians. It was great. I went to the Baby Grand. By that time, Nipsey had moved to New York, and he brought me around to the Baby Grand. I got to meet all the musicians. It was great.

Panken: Who’d you meet?

Donaldson: Well, I met everybody who was playing in there. A guy named...I can’t think of his name...a bass player... It was a long time. But then I went on down the street, and I met other

people, like Percy France, and I met another guy down there... Lockjaw was in Minton's. Big Nick was over at the Paradise, and Willis Jackson was in Smalls. So I got to see all of those guys.

Panken: That was a heady visit. A great preparation.

Donaldson: A great visit. I couldn't keep myself away from New York then.

Panken: Well, it must have let you know that you belonged here, or that you'd be able to deal with the scene when you got here. It must have been a very good gauge for your own progress.

Donaldson: Yeah, because the bands used to come through North Carolina, and I used to sit in with the bands. Like Dizzy and Illinois Jacquet, all of them used to say, "Man, what you doing down here? You should be in New York." I said, "Well, I don't know about that." They'd say, "You need to be in New York, man. You're wasting time down here." So finally I just decided to come on to New York. So I came over to New York.

Panken: Before we bring you here permanently, you played semipro baseball for a couple of years.

Donaldson: Yeah, I played down there. Played baseball.

Panken: You were a third baseman?

Donaldson: Right.

Panken: What sort of player were you?

Donaldson: I was the best. Nobody better.

Panken: Nobody better at third base, or nobody better...

Donaldson: Nobody better. Nobody better. If black people had been able to get into the majors then, I'd have been somewhere. Or maybe in the minors. I don't know if I could have made the majors.

Panken: So you were the best in North Carolina...

Donaldson: Well, I was one of the best. We had some good players, but I was one of the best. I could have easily made it. I was a player sort of like Eddie Stanky. That kind of player.

Panken: Scrappy player.

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Donaldson: Scrappy. I could bunt.

Panken: Contact hitters. All the fundamentals. Intelligent.

Donaldson: I could bunt. You couldn't strike me out. They called me "Deadeye," because they couldn't strike me out. In fact, I'd be in school, and somebody would be pitching a no-hitter out on the ball-field, and they'd come and get me out of the room, to go out and break it up. I was tough! And I had a glove, man. I could wipe up a ball.

Panken: You had good hands.

Donaldson: Oh, man, I could wipe up a ball. I used to be the mascot for the senior team when I was a little kid, and after they did it, I'd take infield practice with them, and then they'd bet dollars that the guys couldn't hit a ball past me. They'd try to hit a ball past me. They couldn't get it past me. Anything I could reach, I got.

Panken: Eddie Stanky was a winning ballplayer, that's for sure. His teams won.

Donaldson: Oh, yeah. He was a nuisance.

Panken: Is that how you would describe yourself?

Donaldson: Yeah, sort of like that. Sort of like that.

Panken: So the fall of 1945, you come back to Greensboro from the Navy, and you get your degree from North Carolina AT&T. You're playing semi-pro baseball. I think I read that you broke a pinky, and that ended your career...

Donaldson: Well, it didn't end my career. I just stopped playing, because I couldn't play my clarinet once it puffed up.

Panken: You're continuing to develop your facility and artistry on your instrument, and you're getting validation from people like Dizzy Gillespie and the cats in his band...

Donaldson: Yeah.

Panken: ...and people like Illinois Jacquet...

Donaldson: Jacquet, right.

Panken: ...and they're telling you to come to New York—and you spend some time in New York. So finally, in 1950, was it...

Donaldson: Yeah.

Panken: You make the move. Talk about the circumstances. I gather that you followed your

future wife, who moved here.

Donaldson: Yes, I followed my future wife. Because she came up as like a work-in maid or whatever it was. You know, they used to get girls from the South, bring them to New York, and they'd work. She came up here, then I said, "Well, I got to go," and I came on up. I had a good set-up, because I didn't have to do any work, because I was a G.I. So I went to the Darrow Institute of Music.

Panken: On the G.I. Bill?

Donaldson: Yeah, on the G.I. Bill.

Panken: Where was Darrow Institute of Music?

Donaldson: 58th-59th and Broadway.

Panken: What sort of school was it?

Donaldson: You know, a music school. A lot of musicians. Right next to it was the Hartnett Studio, and they had big bands all day, so I could go over and sit in the section and practice.

Panken: At this point, you're playing primarily alto saxophone?

Donaldson: Alto saxophone.

Panken: Clarinet is a doubling instrument by now.

Donaldson: Yeah, doubling. I was about to throw that away.

Panken: So you're a full-fledged alto saxophonist.

Donaldson: Yes, alto saxophone.

Panken: By the way, what your late wife's name?

Donaldson: Maker. Maker Donaldson.

Panken: Talk a bit about getting settled in New York, and acclimated to New York. Where did you live when you came here?

Donaldson: I lived with my brother-in-law, ex-brother-in-law. He had an apartment up on St. Nicholas Avenue and 155th Street. So I didn't have to pay any rent.

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Panken: Near the Polo Grounds.

Donaldson: Right across from the Polo Grounds. I used to go out and stand on the bridge out there with binoculars and see the whole game. I couldn't see the catcher and the batter, but I could see the pitcher and everything. When they hit a ball, you could tell where it was going by where the outfielders went. Eventually, I got enough money to start going to the Polo Grounds. \$1.75 for the bleachers. One day I was sitting out there, and I see this big fat cat come up, weighed about 400 pounds. He sat by me and said, "Yeah, Lou, what you doing out here?" It's Bob Weinstock. I said, "Man! What you doing out here in the bleachers?" He said, "I can see the game better from here." He was right, because we were sitting out there in 1951 when Bobby Thompson hit that home run. In the Polo Grounds, seat 7... The game started about 1 p.m., so it was about 4:30, and there always was a haze over the stadium. He hit the ball, and we couldn't see where it went, but we saw all the people jump up in that Section 21, and once we saw the people jump up in Section 21, Jackie Robinson and Pee Wee Reese turned their heads down and started walking back towards the outfield, because that's where we were, sitting right out there...

Panken: The dressing rooms were in center field, by the bleachers.

Donaldson: Right by the bleachers. They started walking back. So we knew the game was over. Eddie Stanky runs down and jumps up in Leo Durocher's arms. Leo was coaching third base that day. So I got to see all of that.

Panken: By then, you'd been in New York about a year and a half.

Donaldson: Two or three years.

Panken: Well, if you got there in 1950, and his was 1951...

Donaldson: Seemed like I'd been there longer.

Panken: So you're going to music school, and I assume that you start to make the rounds and establish contacts.

Donaldson: Oh, yeah. Right.

Panken: Let's go into some detail about that. Who some of the first people were that you played with, and...

Donaldson: Well, the funniest thing about it, when I got there and I got to playing, and the guys said, "Yeah, man, you play good, but you'd better get a tenor, because alto players can't work in New York." I said, "Oh, no?" So one night I took my alto, I went around to every club on '25th Street and down on '16th Street, and I sat in with all the bands, and I came back the next day and I was laughing. They said, "Why are you laughing?" I said, "I don't know whether it's alto or tenor, but any job there I can get, because the guys there can't play anything."

Panken: Why did you say that?

Donaldson: Well, that's just the way they talked. "You've got to play tenor." Because then, see, everybody was walking the bar, playing "Flying Home" and stuff like that. But I got to working with a club where they had singers.

Panken: Which club was that?

Donaldson: The Top Club, and some gigs at the Baby Grand, and some gigs at Smalls Paradise. They used to have entertainers. I got to playing in these clubs, and eventually I got to working with Dud Bascomb's band, the trumpet player with Erskine Hawkins. He got a band, and we started working out in New Jersey, not too far from the prison out there, at a place called the Chicken Shack.

Panken: In Jersey.

Donaldson: In Jersey. That was my regular gig, I could play that, but I could take off any time I wanted to if I got another gig. I was set up pretty good.

Panken: So you were interested in bebop, but on these gigs you weren't playing bebop.

Donaldson: Yeah, I played bebop when I took a solo. I played the music, but I played bebop when I took a solo.

Panken: Who were some of the singers you played behind in those clubs?

Donaldson: Oh, man, I played with great singers. A woman named Lady Hallocue [PHONETIC] [spelling?—26:46] She could sing. She had some weird songs. You really had to be up on your p's and q's. I played with a female impersonator, a guy named Phil Black. Best-looking man I ever saw in my life! He put on his dresses... He had the best clothes. I've never seen a woman with clothes that good! Every night, somebody was hugging and kissing him, and trying to take him home with them! That was good. It was good down there.

But it was good. I played behind Johnny Hartman. And Arthur Prysock. There were a lot of good singers around.

Panken: So these clubs all had shows still at the time.

Donaldson: They had shows.

Panken: They had, like, a little chorus line maybe?

Donaldson: Well, not a chorus line. They'd have one woman who was supposed to be an interpretive dancer, but she was...

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Panken: Shake dancer?

Donaldson: ...nothing but a strip. She wasn't nothin' but a striptease dancer.

Panken: Exotic dancer, as they might say.

Donaldson: That's right. But she wasn't no interpretive... Didn't interpret nothin' but stripping off them clothes. But that was good. See, the only thing about that, you didn't get to play but one song. You'd bring on the show with the one song, and from then on you're playing background.

Panken: So there'd be a dancer, there'd be a singer, there'd be a comedian...

Donaldson: A comedian, right.

Panken: One instrumental act?

Donaldson: Or one instrumental tune. The rest of them would be backup until you played the closing song.

Panken: How big was the band?

Donaldson: Usually three or four pieces.

Panken: So who were you playing with? Were you the leader by this time?

Donaldson: Oh, no, I wasn't the leader of a lot of the bands. I played with a lot of bands. A lot of bands. I played with a guy named Charlie Singleton. He made a lot of background records for singers, and I got that, too. That was a little extra money. It was great.

Panken: So no wonder you were learning all the tunes, had so many tunes in your bag.

Donaldson: I knew all the tunes. Knew all the music, all the tunes, and I was just assimilating them and cataloguing them.

Panken: So this is what you're doing in 1950 and 1951... How long did you go to Darrow Institute?

Donaldson: I went there until I guess about '52.

Panken: '52 happens to be the year that you start your long relationship with Blue Note Records and make your first sessions with Blue Note? But before we get there, I have just a couple of other questions. Did you ever play in any territory bands?

Donaldson: Unh-uh.

Panken: Was Dud Bascomb's band a big band?

Donaldson: Oh, we went out. We played...

Panken: So you did play in some big bands?

Donaldson: Yes, right.

Panken: Was that a good experience, playing in big bands?

Donaldson: Oh, yeah. Good bands.

Panken: Talk about why.

Donaldson: Well, because you got to travel. You got to go to towns. You got to see people.

Panken: And they got to see you, I guess.

Donaldson: Yeah. And you got to know the grinds of music. Because there was a certain grind you have to really go through before you get indoctrinated into the music business. Because, see, the bandleaders are always... I worked with Lionel Hampton for a while. The bandleaders always drive off to the Hilton Hotel, and stop the bus. Then you had to get out, and we had to walk down the street and find a Y, because they wasn't payin' no money, so we had to get the YMCA, \$2 or \$3 a night room. We didn't make any money.

Panken: Were there boarding houses, too? Did you stay in people's private houses?

Donaldson: Yeah, boarding houses.

Panken: How did that work? Did they differ in quality, where some were nice, some weren't nice?

Donaldson: Yeah. Some were nice and some weren't nice.

Panken: They'd feed you breakfast?

Donaldson: Yeah, most of them would feed you breakfast.

Panken: If you don't mind my asking just a few other things about Harlem, circa 1950-51? Were there restaurants where musicians liked to eat after the gig?

Donaldson: Yeah.

Panken: What were some of those restaurants.

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Donaldson: Well, the only place I ate was the Sheffield Café. That was on 126th and 8th Avenue. But most of the musicians used to go up to Wells, and have chicken-and-waffles. Wells Café. That was a famous restaurant.

Panken: What sort of food did they have at the Sheffield Café?

Donaldson: Well, they had breakfast food. Bacon, eggs, grits, biscuits.

Panken: So breakfast after the gig.

Donaldson: Yeah. \$1.25. That's all you had to pay.

Panken: What was the schedule like at the clubs? 10 to 5?

Donaldson: 10 to 4 a.m. in New York and about 10 to 5 in Brooklyn.

Panken: How many sets would that be?

Donaldson: Well, what would happen was this. We'd hit at 10. We'd play 2 or 3 sets, and then we'd try to stretch it. But eventually, what would happen, about 3 or 4 o'clock, the pimps would come in with their women. They'd got the money. They'd come in and set up the bar, and the man said, "Well, they set up the bar; you've got to play a little extra." So we ended up playing til 5 o'clock.

Panken: Would they tip?

Donaldson: Joe Louis would come in there, and then everybody'd see him and then run to Joe, and Joe, you know how he was: "Give everybody a drink!" So the man said, "You've got to play a little set for Joe."

Panken: So you were playing for a full spectrum of society.

Donaldson: Oh, yeah.

Panken: Who would be there earlier in the night, and how would it...

Donaldson: Oh, they had all kind of people coming in there. It's hard to say now. I knew all of them. Adam Clayton Powell...

Panken: This is Smalls you're talking about?

Donaldson: No, this is Minton's. Malcolm X used to stick his head in the door, but he didn't come in there. The big gangsters, Bumpy Johnson, all those people, they used to come in. Another guy named Red Dillon. He was... Phew! Dangerous man. But he used to come in there. See, they had a cook in there named Adele, and everybody loved her cooking.

Panken: This was at Minton's.

Donaldson: At Minton's. So they'd come in and eat.

Panken: What were her specialties?

Donaldson: Fish and chicken. She could cook. She was a good cook.

Panken: Were meals on the house, or did you have to pay for them?

Donaldson: No, we had to pay for them! Wasn't no meals on the house.

Panken: I'm actually surprised. Don't know why, but...

Donaldson: No meals on the house then.

Panken: Another question. As a musician, you had to be sharp. You had to dress well. Were there particular tailors that the musicians went to, that you went to?

Donaldson: No. I'd be working at Minton's, and the boosters would come by.

Panken: Oh, I see. Off the rack from the...

Donaldson: They'd come by and look at you. "42-short." Every time, I'd know what they're going to say. He'd pull out a nice one. I'd say, "Oh, yeah, I like that." He said, "Yeah? Well, \$100." They always do that. But I say, "All right. I'll talk to you later." But I'd wait until the end of the night, and when I see him on the corner he's still got that suit. [LAUGHS] I said, "Man, here's \$25—give me that suit!" [LOUD LAUGH] And he gave me the suit. I saw a guy... One night, a guy had a brand-new cello. I don't know where he stole it. He must have gone down to the Philharmonic or somewhere. He was outside the door. When I came out, he said, "Hey, Lou, here's a cello." I looked at it and I said, "Man, where did you get that cello from?" He said, "Man, don't worry about that. \$700." I said, "Man, here. I got \$75. Give me that cello. Because the police are going to come down here and ask you to play it, and you're..." [DISSOLVES WITH LAUGHTER] If I'm taking it, they won't say nothing to me, because they know I'm a musician, but you walking around the street with that cello..." I took it and gave it to my daughter. My daughter played cello.

Panken: But this is probably a little later in the '50s. Earlier in the '50s, who was your contact person to bring you into Blue Note?

Donaldson: Oh, nobody. They came up... Alfred Lion came up to Minton's. He might have had Ike Quebec with him.

Panken: I thought Ike Quebec was his talent scout.

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Donaldson: Yeah, but that was later on. But then, I don't really know whether Ike was with him or not. But he came up to me and said, "Oh, do you want to record for Blue Note?" Well, you know I'm going to tell him "yeah." He said, "But you've got to play like Charlie Parker. Can you play like Charlie Parker?" I thought, "No, I can't play like Charlie Parker, but I won't tell him." I said, "Yeah, I can play like Charlie Parker." Heh-heh. And I got the date.

Panken: But before you did that date, you made a sideman date with Milt Jackson and a very interesting date with Thelonious Monk, with three horns.

Donaldson: Yes.

Panken: Do you have pretty thorough memories of those dates?

Donaldson: Yeah.

[END OF June 20th, PART 1, TRACK 1]

[BEGIN, June 20th, PART 2, TRACK 1]

Panken: Back from a quick break. We were just getting to Lou's Blue Note recording with Milt Jackson on April 7, 1952. This was shortly after Alfred Lion approached you at Minton's?

Donaldson: Yeah, shortly...

Panken: Who was your band at Minton's?

Donaldson: I don't know who I had then. I'm sorry. I can't remember the musicians. But what happened, I knew this fighter, Art Woods...

Panken: Oh, he used to work at Dayton's Records on 12th and Broadway.

Donaldson: Yeah, he worked in a record shop. We used to train all the time. He'd come to me... There was a place called Newman's Studio down there on 116th Street. After I'd practice... I'd give the guy 50 cents to practice, and I'd practice about an hour, then he'd bring his gloves and we'd work out.

Panken: So you boxed, too.

Donaldson: Oh yeah, I would box.

Panken: What was your weight?

Donaldson: Featherweight. I was a good boxer. What I wanted to do, in case somebody bothered me, I'd knock them out. But I didn't have nothing to worry about, because all those guys were junkies. You know what I mean? They couldn't fight.

He told me, “Lou, let me tell you something. You go around here, you show up to the gigs on time, and you wear your black suit with your black tie, and you don’t drink no liquor, you don’t have no tab—you ain’t gonna make it in this business.” I said, “What you talkin’ about?” He said, “Man, you got to go around and act like you’re high, and buy up some liquor. Even though you don’t drink it yourself, give it to somebody else.” Man, I took his solution, and I haven’t been out of a gig since!

Panken: Is that right?

Donaldson: I’m telling you! I meet people every day who tell me, “Lou, you sure look good since you straightened up.” I say, “Straightened up from what? I don’t even drink a small Miller beer.” [LAUGHS] “No, man, I know I used to see you down there with Bird; you’all was gettin’ high!” I said, “No, you didn’t see me down there with Bird.” I used to hang around with him, but I wasn’t doing what they were doing.

Panken: Did you hang out with Charlie Parker at all? Did you get to know him?

Donaldson: Yeah, I finally got to know him when I came to New York and stayed for a while, and I got to see him a lot.

Panken: After 1950.

Donaldson: Yeah, after 1950.

Panken: Did you talk to him? Did you spend time with him?

Donaldson: Yes, a lot of time spent...

Panken: Can you describe the relationship?

Donaldson: Well, he was a brilliant guy. We talked about politics...and a lot of things. He was a smart guy. But he had that bad habit.

Panken: Did he show that habit around you, or did he keep it from you?

Donaldson: No, he didn’t show it too much around me.

Panken: I gather that certain people he might not show it to at all. They might not even know that he got high, unless they’d know what to look for.

Donaldson: Well, he knew I knew he got high, but he didn’t really exaggerate it around me.

Panken: Do you recall the particulars of any of your conversations? Any one or two encounters that stand out?

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Donaldson: Not really. Because he was like the rest of the people who were drug addicts. They worked 24 hours a day to get money for the next hit. That was their daily procedure. A lot of times when I'd see him, I'd go to the other side of the street because...

Panken: So you wouldn't give him money.

Donaldson: I didn't have anything to give him.

Panken: So part of your interaction was he would want to get a little money.

Donaldson: Of course. Money was always... But he talked to me. We talked.

Panken: Did you ever sit in with him?

Donaldson: Mmm-hmm. What happened, one night in the Paradise I was there, and he came in, and I was sitting in with Big Nick Nicholas, and when Charlie Parker came in, there were about ten saxophone players on the stand, and all of them ran, you know, like a rattlesnake was coming in there. I was getting ready to get off the stand, too, and he said, "No, you play with me." I said, "Man, I'm not playing with you." He said, "Yeah. If you don't play, I'm not going to play." So the manager comes by and says, "Man, you've got to play now, because Bird says he's not going to play if you don't play." I said, "Ok." So we played a couple of tunes, "I Got Rhythm" or something. I played, and he leaned over to me and said, "Man, what was that you played on that thing? That was some nice stuff" It was stuff I had copied off one of his records. So I said to myself, "Is he pulling my leg, or is he really sincere?" That's when I realized the guy was a genius. He didn't really remember.

Panken: You mean, he'd invented it, but he hadn't memorized it.

Donaldson: He couldn't remember it.

Panken: But you were analytical. You'd written a thesis about the musicological transition from swing to bebop.

Donaldson: Right. The change to bebop. The change to the alternate chords.

Panken: How did that work when you were improvised? Did you have set solos, were you...

Donaldson: No, I didn't have no set solos, but I had set chord changes. I'd change up the chords a little. Not really a set solo.

Panken: Again, before Blue Note, did you ever... I think I read on a liner note for one of your recordings that you were in a session or two with Bud Powell.

Donaldson: Mmm-hmm. Yeah.

Panken: What was that like?

Donaldson: It was nice. With Bud, you know... When I came to New York, Bud was going nuts, going bananas. He was hard to deal with.

Panken: Were you on an actual gig with him?

Donaldson: I played some gigs with him, yeah.

Panken: His band?

Donaldson: Yeah.

Panken: Where?

Donaldson: Oh, all around town. A place called Bowman's up on 155th and St. Nicholas Place, and another club up in there...I can't think of it... But I played a few gigs with him.

Panken: So you played his music.

Donaldson: Some of it.

Panken: What did you think of his tunes?

Donaldson: I was crazy about them. Crazy about them. But he was bad with the money. Because he'd get the money, and by the time you got ready to get your pay, he's gone.

Panken: Let's move to these early Blue Note sessions. So Alfred Lion approaches you at Minton's, or maybe Ike Quebec, we're not quite clear... But one way or the other, you go in the studio for the first time, at least as recorded in the discographies, on April 7, 1952, with Milt Jackson, John Lewis, Kenny Clarke, and...

Donaldson: Percy Heath.

Panken: Percy Heath on bass. What was that date like?

Donaldson: It was nice. I didn't particularly like John Lewis. But it was nice.

Panken: Were you nervous to be in the studio?

Donaldson: No.

Panken: So by this time, you belong. You're part of the thing.

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Donaldson: Right. I didn't feel nervous at all.

Panken: Any specific memories of the date?

Donaldson: Not really. All I know is I liked Milt. Milt was a good friend of mine.

Panken: The date with Monk, then. I've read a quote from you that you hadn't worked with Monk before that; that you had to go in and basically read the music down...

Donaldson: Yeah, try to.

Panken: Maybe there was a rehearsal before.

Donaldson: Try to read it. He didn't write it out like he wanted it played. You had to rehearse it a couple of times. But it ended up fine.

Panken: There were a couple of tricky tunes on that session.

Donaldson: Yes, sir.

Panken: "Skippy" for one.

Donaldson: "Skippy" is tough. "Carolina Moon" is tough. Tough tune.

Panken: How did the session go? He'd present the tune, you'd run through it a few times, and then...

Donaldson: And then we recorded it.

Panken: How did he express his intentions? Would he be singing it to you?

Donaldson: He played it on the piano, you know...

Panken: Had you known Monk before that?

Donaldson: Yes, I knew him.

Panken: Because he spent a lot of time at Minton's, I would think, among other places...

Donaldson: Not at Minton's. He was at Blue Note. Every time I went down there, Monk and his wife would be down there, at the company, down there in back of Bloomingdale's. They'd be down there all the time.

Panken: What was the office like?

Donaldson: Wasn't nothing but just a little place. Wasn't really an office.

Panken: Were you a fan of Monk's compositions, of his music, his musicianship?

Donaldson: Not really. I couldn't use them on my job, because if I played them, I'd be fired. See, back then people hadn't...they wasn't compatible with Monk. It took a long time before they got compatible with Monk.

Panken: How so?

Donaldson: Well, they wouldn't buy his records.

Panken: Oh, you mean before people got used to his music and the sound of it.

Donaldson: Yes. And the big companies wouldn't record him. Like Capitol, Columbia, even Savoy—they wouldn't record him.

Panken: No, he was on Blue Note, then he went to Prestige...

Donaldson: Prestige, right.

Panken: ...and then the Riverside things brought his name out... I guess this would be pushing to the future a bit. I read in one interview that you later on worked with Monk in a club with Kenny Dorham, Oscar Pettiford maybe...

Donaldson: No, Oscar Pettiford was supposed to be there, but they brought Mingus in there. Max Roach on drums.

Panken: Where was that?

Donaldson: The Open Door. No, the Famous Door.

Panken: I think it would be the Open Door. The Famous Door was long closed...

Donaldson: Bob Reisner.

Panken: Yeah, that's the Open Door. Was it a different experience working with him for a week or two?

Donaldson: Oh yeah, much different.

Panken: Any memories of that?

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Donaldson: [LAUGHS] Only bad memories.

Panken: Any bandstand memories? Anything positive you can say about the music...

Donaldson: Well, what happened the first night, see, he was expecting Oscar Pettiford, and they brought Mingus in there, and he didn't like Mingus, and he played ensembles, but he never took a solo. And about the second set, I was asking Kenny Dorham, I said, "when is he going to play?" He said, "He's not. He don't like Mingus." I was a low guy on the totem pole. I didn't have much to say either. So finally, Wilbur Ware staggers in there, and Bob Reisner takes him around the corner and gives him some vitamins...and he comes back. He don't say nothin'; he just goes up and takes the bass from Mingus and started playing. Monk started to play.

Panken: Well, he loved Wilbur Ware, yeah.

Donaldson: Loved Wilbur Ware.

Panken: I guess you did three 10-inch recordings...or two—one in 1952, one in 1954. The first one is with Horace Silver and Art Blakey and Blue Mitchell, and Gene Ramey.

Donaldson: It wasn't Art Blakey. Art Taylor. Gene Ramey.

Panken: Were these guys you were working with?

Donaldson: Yeah, basically.

Panken: How did the session get set up?

Donaldson: I set it up myself. We just went down and played them.

Panken: These are things you'd been playing?

Donaldson: It wasn't no great stretch to play them.

Panken: Do you remember...were you working that week?

Donaldson: I don't think so.

Panken: Tell me about Blue Mitchell. That was one of his very first recordings.

Donaldson: Great trumpet player.

Panken: How did you meet him?

Donaldson: I met him...he was working with Lloyd Price's band, and I heard him, and he sounded so beautiful. I said, "Man, I got to get you a date." So he came on over to the Blue Note. See, a lot of people don't know, I brought Horace over there, too.

Panken: I was about to ask you.

Donaldson: Yeah, I brought Horace. Horace was working...was practicing down at the studio where we used to go and train for boxing, Newman's Studio down on '16th Street. I used to hear him playing piano. So one day I knocked on the door. I said, "Are you a piano player?" He said, "Yeah." I said, "You want some gigs? Can you play a blues?" He said, "Yeah." So I took him on a couple of gigs. He couldn't play no blues. I said, "Man, you're going to have to start playing blues." Then I used to call him the "old Portuguese piano player." I said, "Man, you got to go to Harlem and eat you some chitlin's, some black-eyed peas and rice, and get some feeling." [LAUGHS] So finally, he started playing kind of bluesy. And you know the rest. He made 15 hit records.

Panken: So you met him in New York.

Donaldson: Yes.

Panken: So you had Horace Silver and Blue Mitchell on the date. Had you been working with Arthur Taylor?

Donaldson: Yes. Art Taylor. Gene Ramey.

Panken: Well, that's a helluva band to be working with. Were they with you at Minton's?

Donaldson: Actually, we had a band with Kenny Dorham, but Kenny got busted or something. He couldn't make the date. We had a band with Kenny Dorham and Art Taylor and Gene Ramey.

Panken: You were pretty close to Kenny Dorham.

Donaldson: Yeah. We had a band together.

Panken: I guess you recorded a sextet thing in 1954. How did the relationship start?

Donaldson: Well, it was just a matter that I had to do a record date, and I needed some musicians I thought could make it.

Panken: Had you been playing with him before that?

Donaldson: Yeah, I'd been playing with him a little.

Panken: What kind of guy was he?

Donaldson: Nice guy. Very nice guy. Very intelligent. But he had a lip problem, you know. For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

Chops problem. But all of them did, Miles and all of them. Chops problem. I don't know what it was. Probably they didn't learn how to play correct. The best trumpet player around New York during those times was a guy named Idees Sulieman. He could play better than any of those guys. But he knew he wasn't going to get no gigs because all the promoters and all the club owners were Jewish, so he just packed up and went overseas.

Panken: They didn't want a guy with a Muslim name, an Islamic name.

Donaldson: No. Muslim was out. Back then, the Muslims was out.

Panken: I guess Sahib Shihab had that problem, too.

Donaldson: Sahib Shihab, right.

Panken: During the first part of the '50s, when you played New York, were you mostly playing in Harlem, or were you playing downtown?

Donaldson: I was playing in Harlem.

Panken: Was there a circuit in Harlem? Describe it a bit.

Donaldson: Well, Harlem was a place where you had to play for the people 100% if you wanted a return engagement. You had to kind of do a little swing. So I got a chance to play at all these clubs. There was a woman around there named Hilda, and she worked... I guess she worked for the Mob—I guess. But she had the inside on all the clubs. So any time I wanted a job, I just called her. I got it right away.

Panken: How many different clubs were you...

Donaldson: About ten different clubs.

Panken: So Smalls, Minton's...

Donaldson: Small places, too.

Panken: If you don't mind my asking, what would you make for a week in one of these clubs at the time?

Donaldson: Oh, I don't know. Not much. Maybe 125 bucks, something like that.

Panken: That you'd clear, and then you'd pay the guys in your band what, \$75 or something...

Donaldson: Whatever they'd make. \$50. Some of them didn't make any money at all.

Panken: You also did a very famous session for Blue Note with Elmo Hope and Clifford Brown in 1953.

Donaldson: Mmm-hmm.

Panken: In the past, you've stated, as everyone has, the most laudatory things about Clifford Brown. Had you known him before that session?

Donaldson: No, not really. I was working with Elmo. Elmo worked in Dud Bascomb's band, and I saw him every night—you know, when he showed up. I had heard about Clifford Brown. In fact, all the musicians knew about him. But, like, you know, Max and Art, they wasn't going to bring him to New York, because they're looking out for theirself, which is I guess...it's what you do when you're a junkie. You live from day to day, trying to cop. So it's a disastrous situation, but that's the way it is. I knew he was working with Chris Powell, Chris Powell and the Blue Flames, which was a funk group. So I saw he was working in the park down in Harlem, so I went down there to see him, and he wasn't working, because he was playing piano—because he'd broken his shoulder or something. He was accident-prone. Every time I saw him, he'd had some kind of accident. I told him I wanted him to make this date with me because I'd heard he was a great trumpet player. So he took the trumpet and laid up on the fence, and held it. That's the only way he could play it. We played, you know, "Confirmation," two or three tunes. I said, "that's all right; that's good." I said, "Now, as soon as your shoulder gets better, call me." And when his shoulder got better, he called me. He made the date.

Panken: Then the following year, the *Live at Birdland* date with Art Blakey. Had you been playing with Art Blakey for a while?

Donaldson: No-no, no-no. I wouldn't trust Art Blakey around the corner.

Panken: How did... Sorry to ask so many details about so many gigs, but...

Donaldson: What happened, the company wanted to do a date. Originally, there was Kenny Dorham, Gene Ramey, Art Taylor, Horace Silver, Lou Donaldson. You can tell by the material, Horace and I got all that material together. Art was in California. He'd got busted out there. He couldn't even get back to New York. But what he did, he saw a bass player out there and told this bass player that if he drove him back to New York in his car, he was going to be his bass player. So I see him one day, and he stops on the street, and he says, "Yeah, Lou, I want you to meet my bass player." I had to hide my head to keep from laughing. I said, "What the hell are you doing with a bass player with all these bass players in New York who aren't working?"

So finally, Alfred Lion evidently... Evidently, Alfred Lion was giving him money to get him back to New York, and I go down there and Alfred said, "Well, Art is going to be on the date, and Curley Russell," which was all right with me, because they could play. The second night after we hit, after Clifford Brown was such a sensation, people were going crazy. Art gets up on the microphone, "Yeah, I want to get these guys together, these young guys..." Me and Horace was looking at each other, saying, "What the hell was he talking about?" The company
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date was gone. Art Blakey had taken over the date. Alfred Lion was afraid of him, or else he owed Alfred so much money, he made him the leader where he'd get his money back. A lot of people think that was... And then he talked about the Messengers. That wasn't no Messengers. Art Blakey had a band called the Messengers year before...

Panken: That was a big band.

Donaldson: Yeah. Out in Brooklyn. Actually, Ray Copeland was working in that band. There was Art... Idees Sulieman played trumpet in that band. Colbert Hopkins(?—23:26), Ray Abrams played saxophone... Sahib Shihab played baritone in that band, because Cecil Payne was the baritone player but he left and went on the road with Illinois Jacquet. And this guy, Howard Johnson, who played with Dizzy, played the lead, and the other boy, Ernie Henry, played the third alto. I saw the band. That was the Messengers. But the critics, see, they didn't know. They said, "Oh, Art got the Messengers." That was no Messengers band. Art was a con man.

Panken: Great drummer, though.

Donaldson: He was a great drummer—when he wanted to be. People ask me that all the time. I say, "Yeah, Art was great when he wanted to be."

Panken: What do you mean by that?

Donaldson: Well, sometimes, Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday, Art played so good you wanted to go back there and kiss him. But on the weekend, a lot of people came, especially if a woman comes up there and crosses her legs and pulls the dress up over her knees, the arrangement changed, everything changed...heh-heh. You got to know who the bandleader is, and you know(?—24:48)... were drums. You're supposed to play two choruses. You play one chorus, and you'd hear Art back there, "I got it, I got it, I got it." [LAUGHS] He'd take over the... You had to let him have it, because he'd drop the tsunami on you back there! An earthquake. A volcanic eruption! I told him one night, "Art, man, you're the greatest drummer in the world—sometimes." And he just laughed. [LAUGHED] Any time a good-looking woman comes up there, she definitely has got to know who the bandleader is. She don't have to ask no questions of nobody. She can tell right away who the leader is. Heh-heh...

Panken: So that date was a week at Birdland.

Donaldson: Yeah.

Panken: It wasn't a one-night thing.

Donaldson: It was a week, a whole week.

Panken: Was that the only time for that particular band, or did you do further engagements?

Donaldson: Yeah, that's the only time.

Panken: I read an interview in which you talked about the difference between bebop and hardbop, and presented that recording as a paradigm-setter for what hardbop was. There was a specific sense of the difference. Can you describe that?

Donaldson: Well, that was hard bop. It was hard swinging. See, when you accelerate the energy and the sound, you're playing hard bop. It's hard to do that. And the way I play, if he upped the sound, you had to up your playing, and that made you press a little more, so you're playing like hard bop.

Panken: Was it a matter of volume or a matter of where the beat was being placed?

Donaldson: Well, it's the volume and the beat. Volume and the beat.

Panken: What about the beat was different between bebop and hardbop?

Donaldson: Well, it was louder. Art probably was high. He got too high, and in his ears he couldn't hear how loud he was playing. Evidently. I don't know. What can I tell you.

Panken: Did you gigs with Max Roach much?

Donaldson: I did some gigs with him, yeah.

Panken: Was he playing hard bop or bebop?

Donaldson: He was playing more like bebop?

Panken: Again, was that a matter of volume? He wasn't playing as loud...

Donaldson: And pressing. Press down. When you bear down, it's a little different than when you just play. You can play, but then you bear down...when you bear down...

Panken: Then, between swing and bebop, is it a rhythmic different, a harmonic difference...

Donaldson: It's a harmonic difference between that, and swing is steadier, a steadier rhythm, like the Count Basie mode.

Panken: Like, say, the way Papa Jo Jones played vis-a-vis the way Max Roach played with displacements and so on.

Donaldson: Yes, of course.

Panken: So by 1954, when you're making these dates, you've been primarily a leader for a couple of years, but you're doing some sessions with other people. And you took a couple of For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

years hiatus from recording, say from mid-1954 until early 1957, when you do the first in a long series of recordings for Blue Note, plus things with Jimmy Smith.

Donaldson: Mmm-hmm.

Panken: Can you describe what you were doing during those years?

Donaldson: I really shouldn't tell you this, because I'm going to put it in my book. I got mad at Blue Note Records. Angry. Because I went out to do a session one time at Rudy's house, and we played a couple of tunes, and then some guy came by with some vitamins, and all of them went in the bathroom—Rudy, too. I'm not saying he was doing nothing, but... But he went in there with them, and when they came out, you're talking about some bad stumblin' and fumblin'. So I went to Alfred. I said, "Look, Alfred, that's it. I'm not going to record another record with a junkie. Forget it." So for two years I didn't do a record.

So he finally called me back, "You've got to do a date." I said, "I'll do it, but you're not going to pick none of the musicians. I'm going to pick them." And you can see the date, *Blues Walk*. I had Herman Foster, who was a religious singer, him and his wife—they sang religious music. But I had been going up to Connie's, a place where they'd jam, and I had been playing with him, and he sounded so good, and we were compatible with our playing.

I went and got Dave Bailey, drummer. Now, Dave was a liquor salesman up on Boston Road. But I used to work at a place called the Apollo Bar up on Boston Road, and he used to come by and sit in—and he played good. I said, "Yeah, this guy is good." Ok, so I got Herman Foster; I got Dave Bailey.

And then, I got Peck Morrison, bass player, who lived with me in the project. We were in the project. I got him on the date. Then I got Ray Barretto to steady down the rhythm...

Panken: To play congas.

Donaldson: Yes. I was working at Showman's. I was the first band to work at Showman's.

Panken: Showman's Lounge.

Donaldson: Yeah. Showman's was right down next to the Apollo Theater then, about 1956 or 1957. I'm working in there, and Ray used to come by and play. I said, "now, look, I don't want no Puerto Rican drums. I want swing." He said, "that's what I'm trying to do; I'm trying to learn how to swing." And he had his friend with him, a little alto player who had a hump in his back, a guy named Chuck Eubanks. They used to come by all the time. I used to let him sit in.

Panken: Chuck Eubanks.

Donaldson: Chuck Eubanks and Ray. So when I finally got ready to make the date, that's who I had. Herman Foster, Peck Morrison, all these guys. Alfred Lion didn't know any of them. So he comes there. "I don't know these guys." I said, "Alfred, I told you; I'm not going to record with

no more junkies.” Because Alfred by then... Now, Alfred was nice at first. But by then, Alfred had a belief ... [PAUSE AT 33:09 AS VOICEMAIL PLAYS IN THE BACKGROUND]

Anyway, Alfred Lion’s jaws puffed way out. “I don’t know...” See, at that time, Alfred Lion just didn’t believe that nobody couldn’t play unless they was high. He just got... Like the rest of the record companies. They want to see a guy nod, they go, “Oh, he’s great.” So he finally said, “All right, I’m going to take a chance on this; I know I’m going to lose money.” Man, we made that *Blues Walk*—let me tell you something. Symphony Sid started to playing it. Spider Burke started to playing it in St. Louis. Daddy-O Dailey started to playing it in Chicago. And this guy in Detroit started... That record was a hit. The first record... They don’t tell you that. The first record that Blue Note ever put out that all the distributors took it, from New York to California, and put it on the jukebox.

Panken: So the date for *Blues Walk* that I have is July 28, 1958.

Donaldson: Right.

Panken: But you had made three records before that, and Herman Foster was on two of those. The first one in the discography is *Wailing With Lou*, from January 1957. I’ve got *Swingin’ Soul*, which is from June 1957. Both are with those groups—Donald Byrd played with on *Wailing With Lou*. Then there’s a date that a lot of people like, called *Lou Takes Off*, which is a sextet with Curtis Fuller, Donald Byrd and Sonny Clark...

Donaldson: And Jamil Nasser.

Panken: Jamil Nasser and Arthur Taylor as well. Did you and Alfred Lion then reach an understanding?

Donaldson: There was no understanding. He knew that he didn’t know what was on and I did. When the records started selling. And “The Masquerade Is Over” on the other side.

Panken: Because you were traveling so much, you must have had a very good feel for what the public wanted to hear.

Donaldson: That’s the key. I tell that at all my seminars. Every seminar, when I’m talking to young musicians, I say, “Feel out the audience. You try this kind of tune, that kind of tune, the other kind of tune—whatever you like, that’s where you lay.” You lay there with your setup.

Panken: Now, in ‘55 and ‘56, even though you weren’t recording, you were working.

Donaldson: Yeah, I worked.

Panken: Were you starting to tour the country, go outside New York by that time?

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Donaldson: Right. I had my own tour.

Panken: When did that start happening?

Donaldson: I don't know exactly the date, but I got my own tour from New York to California.

Panken: Who was booking you at the time?

Donaldson: Well, I was booking a lot of the gigs, but another guy named Warren Stevens, who used to work for Ruth Bowen Booking Agency... He's a guitar player himself. He was a good friend of mine from Columbus, Ohio. He starts booking it.

Panken: Describe the circuit a bit.

Donaldson: Well, it was the greatest circuit in the world. I'm the only one that did it—first. Then McDuff and Groove Holmes and Jimmy McGriff and all of them came in later. We started in Rochester at a place called the Pythodd. Jon Hendricks' brother owned it—Stewart Hendricks. Then we'd go from there to Buffalo, to the Pine Grill. Or another place up there was the Bon Ton. We had about four clubs we could work. Then we'd go to Pittsburgh, play Crawford's Grill. Then we'd segue into Cleveland. Now, all these places were short jumps. So we didn't have no transportation problems or nothin'. We'd go to Cleveland. We'd play Leo's Casino.

Panken: You'd be a week in each town?

Donaldson: A week in each town. Sometimes two weeks. Leo's Casino. Leo's was on 55th and Central at that time, but he died, and his son took it over and put it on Euclid Avenue. His son is named Leo, too, but this was the original Leo.

Then we'd leave Cleveland, and we'd go to Columbus, Ohio. Now, Warren had a club there himself, right down in town, and he had an unsegregated club, way back then.

Panken: Were they called black-and-tan then?

Donaldson: No, this club was called the Sacred Mushroom. But it was integrated. Because somebody threw a bomb in there one night, a stink bomb.

Panken: This was in Columbus.

Donaldson: Columbus, Ohio. Then I go down to Dayton, Ohio, a place called the Lavender Lounge. I remember it like it was yesterday. We'd play down there, then we'd go to Louisville, Kentucky, and play a place called the Idle Hour. Some rich guy down there had some money, and he let us play the club. We'd go down there and play, free food and everything. We were on a budget. Then what we'd do...

Did I say Cincinnati? We played Cincinnati, too. We played Cincinnati. Babe Baker's in Cincinnati. He was like the guy at Minton's. He wanted nothing but a jazz club. In fact, one day, a disk jockey came in and put some James Brown records or something on the jukebox. He threw

them out the window. He said, “don’t bring nothing in here but jazz.”

Then we’d go...from Louisville, we’d go on Highway 50, go into St. Louis. Played the Gaslight Square, sort of like the Village—a lot of clubs down there. A lot of people hang out. Then we’d play over in East St. Louis, which is just 7 miles across the river, right by the Dome, right past the Dome. And we’d go from there to Kansas City, which ain’t but 240 miles. From Kansas City, then we’d go to Wichita, Kansas. I had this all set up. We’d go to Dallas, Texas. We’d go to Houston, Texas. Sometimes, if we could work it out, we’d play one-nighters in small towns, like Port Arthur and Belmont, Corpus Christi—we’d play one-nighters. Then we’d get set and head for California. Get Route 66, we’re gone, all the way to Los Angeles. Played the It Club.

I knew all these guys. All these guys were hustlers, so I knew them. If I didn’t know them, I’d call them two or three weeks in advance and set it up. I was a lucky guy back then. Didn’t make a whole lot of money, but we worked all the time.

Then I’d work San Francisco, and Oakland, a place called M Major’s. He’s dead now. But we worked in those clubs. Then we’d come on back. We’d bypass Utah, because we knew what was there, and we’d come on into Denver. Then we’d come on back into Omaha. We had a schedule. 500 more miles, we’re in Chicago. Joe Segal—he had two or three clubs. Then we’d leave there, we’d go to Detroit. Sure enough, before we got back, they wanted us so bad, we’d go right on back into Cleveland and Pittsburgh, and then come home.

Panken: We’re not talking about ‘55 and ‘56, now. We’re talking about the ‘60s.

Donaldson: We’re talking about the ‘60s.

Panken: But in ‘55 and ‘56, you were starting to go out of town?

Donaldson: Yes, I was starting to go out of town?

Panken: who were you taking with you? Was Herman Foster with you yet?

Donaldson: Yeah, Herman was with me.

Panken: So by the time you’d made those first records, you’d been working with him for a year or more.

Donaldson: Yeah. Herman Foster, Peck. Morrison, and Jimmy Wormworth was the drummer. We went up to Buffalo, and hit some of the same clubs. But we had it set up...

Panken: That’s when you started establishing that circuit and those relationships.

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Donaldson: Yes. Well, the reason I used an organ was because a lot of times we'd go into a place, and they didn't have a piano—and renting a piano, that's out of the question. People want a thousand dollars to rent a piano. Shit, a thousand dollars, we weren't even making that much for the gig. So we decided we'd buy an organ, and we'll get a bass player and a piano player at the same time. All we need is a U-Haul truck and a hitch. So I put a hitch on the back of my station wagon, and we'd pull it. We'd save money and made money.

Panken: But if I'm not mistaken, you didn't start touring with an organ until about 1960 or so?

Donaldson: It was in the '60s somewhere.

Panken: I'd like to stay in the '50s for now, if we can. What did you do when the piano was crap or a club didn't have a piano?

Donaldson: We couldn't play the gig!

Panken: So you wouldn't play a gig without a piano.

Donaldson: We couldn't play it, no. So what happened then... You see, the funk groups were coming out, and the funk groups had these synthesizers and electric bass. We didn't have that.

Panken: You did so many gigs with Jimmy Smith in 1957 and 1958. People still treasure those recordings and play them, they're a firm part of the history. When did you start establishing a performing relationship with Jimmy Smith?

Donaldson: '57, '58, somewhere in there...

Panken: Where I'm going is, was it set up by the record company? Was it your initiative?

Donaldson: No. Babs Gonzalez set that up. He brought Jimmy to New York and told Alfred he should record him. So Babs was in the middle of that.

Panken: So Jimmy Smith got the date, and then you got the call to do the record?

Donaldson: Yes.

Panken: Were those satisfying engagements?

Donaldson: Oh, yeah. No doubt about it. *The Sermon* is one of the greatest records ever made. It's a great record.

Panken: What do you think was the key to your simpatico with Jimmy Smith?

Donaldson: We were compatible. He liked me. The organ sound and the alto sound is beautiful. Yeah, he liked me, because I played the blues, and that's what he played.

Panken: Can you describe personally what he was like during those sessions?

Donaldson: Jimmy? Jimmy was carefree. Nice guy. In his latter years they said he was something else, but I didn't know him then. I hadn't seen him in a while. But back then, he was just a carefree guy.

Panken: Had you heard before he played organ, when he was a piano player?

Donaldson: No, I hadn't heard him when he was piano player. The first I heard him was a record he made down in Wilmington. That's where I heard that record, and it was so dynamic. With Thornell Schwartz. That was a great record.

Panken: Had you been playing with organ players before that?

Donaldson: Not too many. I played with John Patton.

Panken: Before Jimmy Smith?

Donaldson: Oh, yeah. I played with John Patton, Baby Face Willette, a couple of guys.

Panken: The records with John Patton are around 1960, with Baby Face Willette around 1961. I wanted you to tell us about the Jimmy Smith recordings just because the records are so great...

Donaldson: Yeah, they're great.

Panken: So whatever insight you can give us into how they were set up, or how...

Donaldson: Jimmy was a musical genius. He can play. He was just like Art Tatum at the piano. It's hard to play anything that he hasn't played.

Panken: Did that give you a feeling of freedom, that you could...

Donaldson: Uh...yeah, freedom. Inspiration. Because he had good basslines. He could kick it.

Panken: I'd like to ask about some of the alto saxophonists who were roughly your contemporaries who came into prominence in the '50s. Sonny Stitt is someone you've often been compared to stylistically.

Donaldson: Mmm-hmm.

Panken: Cannonball Adderley hit the scene in 1955. I'm sure you aware of him quite quickly. Jackie McLean was a local hero in New York, and a protégé of Charlie Parker. Phil Woods was coming into his own during those years. Were those all people you were touching base with in one way or another?

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Donaldson: Yeah, in one way or another.

Panken: Can we say a few things about each of them? Sonny Stitt, for instance.

Donaldson: Well, Sonny Stitt for me was the number-two man behind Charlie Parker. I always thought that. Sonny Stitt. But Sonny Stitt was a guy who knew the saxophone so well, he could get anything out of it. But...like, Charlie Parker was the only one I know that play that way and still play the blues in all of his playing. Sonny Stitt was more technical, but he was great. Great guy.

Panken: How about Cannonball Adderley? Did you become aware...

Donaldson: Cannonball didn't even come to New York until after Charlie Parker was dead. So he was a big thing. But he'd have come while Charlie Parker was alive, he wouldn't have been anything like that. But he could play. He was nice. He was a nice guy as far as I know. He played a little Country-and-Western. Sometimes he sounded like a hillbilly, but...

Panken: How so?

Donaldson: I mean, he played corny. You know what "corny" is, don't you?

Panken: I do.

Donaldson: All right. He played corny. But he knew the saxophone. He knew it. In fact, Miles asked me to play with him two or three times when he had Coltrane there, but I wouldn't play with Miles, because Miles wasn't reliable with money, and I couldn't afford to play a week without bringing in some kind of income.

Panken: Were you tempted?

Donaldson: No. No way. Because I didn't want to do what you have to do to people like that. Because he was an icon, people liked him, and I wouldn't want nobody to see me hit him upside the head with a baseball bat or something.

Panken: Were you a fan of his music?

Donaldson: Yeah. I was a fan of his musicians. Red Garland I loved. Paul Chambers. And Philly.

Panken: Did you get to know Coltrane?

Donaldson: Yeah, I knew him. Coltrane's from North Carolina.

Panken: I was going to ask you about that. Monk as well had roots in North Carolina.

Donaldson: Yes, Monk's from Wilson, North Carolina. I knew Coltrane real well. He was a

hard-working guy. But most of his stuff was drug-related.

Panken: What do you mean?

Donaldson: He'd get high, go in a room and play eight hours, you know, without coming out. Drugs. They don't tell people that when they're talking about him.

Panken: What was your practice routine like?

Donaldson: Oh, practice...

Panken: I'm talking about then, the '40s, the '50s...

Donaldson: I was working a lot then. I didn't have no practice routine. When I started playing a lot, I never practiced, because I'd just go to work. If I got tired of playing a song, I just played it another key or something like that. Keep myself fresh. It made me think about what I'm doing.

Panken: Back to alto players, did you get to know Jackie McLean well?

Donaldson: I knew Jackie McLean well. He was like a brother.

Panken: When did you meet him? When you got to New York?

Donaldson: Yeah. I lived up there. I lived on 155th. He lived on 158th. Sonny Rollins lived around the corner. Edgcombe Avenue. I'd see all of them. But these guys were junkies. They were junkies. Sorry to say, but I had no use for no junkies. Because I thought it would just be my luck to be talking to one of them and the police run up and get us—get everybody.

Panken: You thought you'd be caught in the same net, you mean?

Donaldson: You got it. Because all they did was hustle every day to try to get money, to get high. They had some musical talent. But they're characters that I wouldn't recommend.

Panken: Now, people did change and get over their habits.

Donaldson: I don't know. I doubt it.

Panken: When did you first meet someone who was strung out on drugs?

Donaldson: When did I first MEET someone?

Panken: Yeah. In North Carolina?

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Donaldson: Oh, no. No drugs in North Carolina. They'd give you thirty years for smoking weed down there. They didn't have no junkies in North Carolina, not when I was there. When I got to New York, I saw plenty of junkies.

Panken: So your attitude towards people who were abusing drugs was more based on self-preservation, it sounds like, than anything else...

Donaldson: Well, actually, none of them played as well as they thought they was playing when they was high. I could have got somebody sober to play better. Because everybody was following Trane. But Trane jumped the track, and they jumped it right behind him. Now all of them are unemployed. I call that "unemployment music." And they still play it. Disk jockeys and record companies are so stupid. They don't even acknowledge it because they're stupid.

Panken: Elaborate.

Donaldson: Well, that's a style of music that you can't play in Atlanta. Charlotte, North Carolina. Birmingham. Big cities. St. Louis. You can't play a steady gig there playing that. Kansas City. All the big cities. You can play it in New York, maybe one joint in Chicago—although Joe Segal has now started mixing up his entertainment. Nowhere in California can you play it, not on a steady gig. And that's very counter-productive.

Panken: Back to alto players. Phil Woods was the fourth name I wrote down here. Were you and he friends in the '50s?

Donaldson: Oh, yeah. I like Phil. I like Phil very well, because Phil was one of the few white guys that, when he got famous, he didn't forget the black guys. A lot of the white guys, once they got famous, made a couple of records and ran all off with the white bands. But Phil always kept some brothers around. Well, I guess he wanted the feeling in his band.

Panken: Another alto player I can think of in the '50s who had his own sound was Lee Konitz. I recall when we did the DownBeat Blindfold Test, I gave you a track by him, and you had some interesting things to change.

Donaldson: Yeah, I know Lee Konitz. Lee Konitz is a sax-o-phon-ist. I wouldn't call him exactly a great jazz player, but he's a good saxophone player. Him and Paul Desmond, too. They sound like they're playing clarinets. They don't even have the sound.

Panken: So for you, it's very important to have...

Donaldson: I mean, a SOUND. A bluesy sound. They don't have it. They can't play the blues, unfortunately. They play what they're playing. But the blues, a different thing. And if you can't play blues, you can't play jazz, period. Now, if you can play it and don't play it, you're still not playing jazz—period. I listen to all the stuff Coltrane's playing. No blues. In fact, I did a survey... I didn't do a survey. Mark Elf, guitar player. I had him to monitor the public commercial radio stations. He got the best tune that was hot, something by 50 Cents or somebody, and he monitored that tune for a week. You know how much airplay they got?

Panken: How much?

Donaldson: 715 times. And I had to monitor Coltrane and see how much airplay he got on a commercial station. You know how many he got?

Panken: How many?

Donaldson: [RAISES HAND WITH INDEX FINGER AND THUMB IN A CIRCLE, AND THREE FINGERS OUTSTRETCHED]

Panken: That's three. Oh, it's zero.

Donaldson: That's zero! Not one. Now, that's no good. You can't even stay in business like that. Because you know, and anybody else knows, that years and years and years, we got a lot of play on commercial stations with Duke Ellington's tunes and Count Basie, "April in Paris" and all that kind of stuff. We got play on commercial stations. But now jazz...kiss it goodbye. TV? I haven't seen a jazz show since Tony Bennett was on there years ago, and brought Count Basie on there.

Panken: I'm going to move into another area. You were one of the first jazz group leaders to use a conga player, as you were describing with Ray Barretto on those Blue Note dates from 1957. I think you used the phrase just now, "straighten out the rhythm." What exactly did you mean by that, and what...

Donaldson: Actually, I meant control. Now you can see today you've got these guys like Poncho Sanchez and a couple of more Latino musicians making a lot of money, because they put that beat with jazz. Because there's no such thing as Latin Jazz. You can kiss that goodbye. That's a misnomer. It's jazz with Latin rhythm. That's all it is. And when they keep that rhythm, which is the heart of the thinking in their music, they can sell the records. We could have done it ourselves if we'd kept our rhythm, with Kenny Clarke and Max... Those guys were shooting a little cocaine...shooting a little heroin and snorting a little cocaine—they didn't want to swing any more. They wanted to take a solo. Most of the time, when somebody else is soloing. That's what the problem is. That's how they're losing out.

Panken: But what was the value for you of having the conga player?

Donaldson: To steady down the rhythm. That's all.

Panken: You had done a date in 1955 with Gene Ammons. It's the one sideman recording with you that I know of from that period. I know that he also liked to use the congas.

Donaldson: Yes.

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Panken: He used it a lot. Were you friendly with him?

Donaldson: Yes.

Panken: There's something about your records in the '50s and his records...a very similar vibration.

Donaldson: Well, yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Well, it's a groove. A groove record. It's a swing record. Groove records. It's hard to say, but that's what jazz is all about. If jazz was played the way they're playing now, there would have never been any jazz. In fact, people have played like Coltrane and... Well, I don't want to, you know, beat on a dead horse, but it sounds like he's playing a concerto! He states a theme, and then he [SINGS WILD SCALE]. That's not jazz. A lot of times, when you play the theme, you're playing the jazz. You take a guy like Louis Armstrong. He played the same way until he died. He never changed one thing. And when he was an old man, he started making hit records. "Hello, Dolly" and this other one..." [SINGS REFRAIN OF "MACK THE KNIFE"] Now, the way he's playing it, he's playing jazz in the melody. That's what makes it. Like George Shearing. You hear him play "I Got Rhythm." George played [SINGS IMPRESSION OF SHEARING PLAYING "MACK THE KNIFE"]. Louis Armstrong doesn't play it like that. He said, [SINGS IMPRESSION OF LOUIS ARMSTRONG PLAYING "MACK THE KNIFE"] Man, he's playing jazz in the melody.

A lot of people forgot that, and they go to these high-priced schools, they learn how to play music. They're great musician. I mean, a lot of young saxophone players, they can really get over a saxophone. But they couldn't play "Tea For Two." I say, "Do you know 'Tea For Two'?" "Oh, no, how does that go?" So I say, "How in the world can you play 'Giant Steps' and you can't play the melody for 'Tea For Two'?" there's something wrong somewhere. That doesn't make any sense.

Panken: I think now we should stop for today, and we'll get together tomorrow and bring this to the present.

Donaldson: I hope so. Because we're getting into some deep things about music now. I'm going to tell you why they should set Monk up in a different category. I'll tell you exactly why he should be in a different category.

[END OF June 20, 2012, PART 2, TRACK 1]

[BEGINNING OF June 21, 2012, PART 1, TRACK 1]

Panken: I'm Ted Panken at Lou Donaldson's house for day two of the Smithsonian Oral History Project interview. It's June 21, 2012. Nice to see you again, Lou.

Donaldson: Nice to see you.

Panken: I'd like to return to what we started off with yesterday, and speak a bit more about your family. You had some information you were going to think of. For one thing, I'm not sure whether we got on tape what college your father went to.

Donaldson: Livingstone College.

Panken: He was a minister. Was that a theological college? A seminary?

Donaldson: No... I don't know. It might have been. But he was one of the first black students there. It was the oldest black college. I don't know exactly what they taught there.

Panken: You said your whole family were educators.

Donaldson: Yup.

Panken: Except you.

Donaldson: Me, too. I'm the most educated. No, what I was saying was most of them had doctorates. I got a Bachelors, but they got...

Panken: I said educators, not educated.

Donaldson: Oh, educators. Oh, yeah. All of them were educators, right. All of them went into education. Schoolteachers and people like that.

Panken: Can you talk about what kind of person your father was? Was he very strict.

Donaldson: Ah, he was... It's hard for me to say. He was just a father. He wasn't that strict because I never did anything to make him angry. He was a preacher and an insurance salesman, and every Sunday I had my duties and the regular stuff I had to do. But other than that, he was ok. Heh-heh.

Panken: And your mother? You stated that he was a music teacher, and you didn't want to take piano because of the threat of the strap, but...

Donaldson: That's right.

Panken: But what else can you tell us about your mother?

Donaldson: Well, my mother had to be the greatest woman that ever lived. She was like, uh, the black mayor of Badin. Anything you had to do know once you crossed the tracks, they came to her to get the information. She was a powerful woman. Actually, she was a first grade teacher, so she knew all of the people in the town, because she taught them. She was a music teacher and she was choir director, and the church organist. So she did everything. She did everything in the town. All the social activities. She just about (?—3:27) them. She sent all of us to college. We were the first kids from the town to really go to college. First black kids really to go to college. There were four of us.

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Panken: And they all played music, too?

Donaldson: Yes, they played music.

Panken: What did they play?

Donaldson: They played piano.

Panken: So European classical music?

Donaldson: Not really. Just piano. Except my brother, he was a bandmaster. He played classics. He ended up in Louisville, Kentucky, where he was the director of the bands for years.

Panken: High school?

Donaldson: He was a high school teacher.

Panken: That's what I meant. He was director of high school bands.

Donaldson: Oh, yeah, high school bands. Right.

Panken: I can't remember if I asked you this yesterday. Coming up as a kid in Badin, did you have any instructors other than your mother? You taught yourself, I guess you said.

Donaldson: Oh, to play the clarinet?

Panken: Yes, to play the clarinet.

Donaldson: Yes, I taught myself. And my mother...

Panken: Your mother could help you a little bit.

Donaldson: With the music and the notes. Keys. Signatures on the music and all that. She didn't know much about the clarinet, but I just read the book and found out about that.

Panken: And you figured out the embouchure and all the details...

Donaldson: Oh, yes. I figured all that out.

Panken: Did you perform at all before you went to Greensboro?

Donaldson: No!

Panken: Did you play at home...

Donaldson: Oh yeah, I'd play at home, and I'd play down... I'd go down in the middle of town

and play like marches and things that I'd learned. All the kids would come around, because I was the only one playing music in the town. They'd come out, and they would listen to me. I used to tell them, "One day you're going to have to pay to see me play." And now, every time one of them comes to see me play, I act like I don't know 'em. [LAUGHS]

Panken: You don't really do that.

Donaldson: Yes, I do.

Panken: Do you?

Donaldson: Yes, I do. I was at the Club Baron one night, and this guy, Arthur Merriweather... I played with him at North Carolina A&T, in the band. He was a great trumpet player. We had a jazz orchestra and everything. What happened, they caught me playing in the band room some Benny Goodman solos, and they took away my privileges. So I didn't have anywhere to practice. So in the middle of the day, when everybody else was at class, I'd go into the shower room and practice. He used to come by and say, "Oh, you're the shithouse clarinet player." I used to tell him, "All right, one of these days you're going to have..."

When I was at the Club Barron, the guy said, "A guy is at the door from A&T that knows you who says he wants to get in." So I went out and I saw him. I said, "I don't know him." Ha-ha. "Don't let him in; I don't know him." After I finished playing a couple of tunes, I saw him sitting in there. He'd gone out to the car and got a picture of the band from A&T, and brought it back to the door and showed the guy. [LAUGHS]

Panken: That was very enterprising.

Donaldson: I was sitting right by him in the band. [LAUGHS] I cracked up.

Panken: Did you acknowledge his existence at that point?

Donaldson: Oh yeah. Of course. Of course. He was a great guy.

Panken: So playing on a bandstand for people started when you were in college.

Donaldson: Right.

Panken: First couple of years.

Donaldson: Mmm-hmm.

Panken: The implication I got from the story you told about Great Lakes, where you peeked in and the bandmaster discovered you could play clarinet well... I'm interested in how you went from being a student to the idea that you were going to be a professional musician, how that
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crystallized in you.

Donaldson: Well, once I heard the band at Great Lakes, I wanted to be a professional musician. Up until then, I hadn't really thought about it.

Panken: So that made you think "this is what I want to do."

Donaldson: Yes, that's exactly what I want to do. After I heard Charlie Parker, that really solidified.

Panken: But before that, you were talking about practicing the Benny Goodman solos.

Donaldson: Yes.

Panken: Did you practice to a lot of clarinet players when you were 14-15-16?

Donaldson: Oh, no-no, no-no. It was just me. I'd send to New York and get his music...

Panken: The transcribed solos.

Donaldson: Transcribed. And Artie Shaw. People like that.

Panken: But had you listened to Benny Goodman or Artie Shaw by that time?

Donaldson: Oh, yeah. I listened to them. I listened to them on radio. I told you we had a short-wave radio. We could pick it up late at night down in the South. We'd pick them up. When they got to 12 o'clock, we couldn't...

Panken: I wasn't sure of the timeline, whether that was before the war or after the war that you were able to do that.

Donaldson: that was during the war.

Panken: Of course. You were 15 when the war started. But what I meant to say was, before you were drafted.

Donaldson: No, that wasn't before then.

Panken: Are you more like one of your parents than the other?

Donaldson: Yeah, I'm more like my mother.

Panken: How so?

Donaldson: Well, because she was a very passionate person, and she helped a lot of people. I tried to pattern myself after her. Actually, she just about controlled the black neighborhood in

our town. Because many times, people would get into trouble, and she'd go over and talk to the sheriff—he'd let them go.

Panken: So she knew how to approach the powers that be.

Donaldson: She knew everything. Because she worked as a schoolteacher from September to June, and then she worked in the country club in the white section of town, which was a lot of big officials from the Alcoa Aluminum plant who lived in the country club. She was almost like an assistant to the woman that owned the club. She used to make me real angry. Because I told you she was just a passionate, nice person. Because somebody wouldn't make up a room, like, she'd go in there and make it up herself. "Now, you're not supposed to be doing that!" [LAUGHS] But she would, and had no thoughts about it. And you couldn't say anything about race at the table, or else she'd pull out that switch.

Panken: You mean say anything about race as far as saying anything about white people?

Donaldson: As far as about white people. You couldn't say nothing about white people. She loved white people. [LAUGHS] She loved the white people. Because we used to be mumbling stuff under the table, you know... Sometimes the sheriff would come over and, you know, shoot somebody or something. You know how it is down...

Panken: The South, yeah.

Donaldson: You couldn't say anything about it. She wouldn't let you do it. I never heard her say a bad word about anybody. Now, of course, that's different from me. That's one characteristic I didn't pick up. Heh-heh...

Panken: Was she a very religious woman?

Donaldson: Of course. Religious. Very religious. She went to church four times every Sunday.

Panken: Did you have to go to church?

Donaldson: Yeah, I had to go to church. And once I got away from there, I haven't been to another one.

Panken: Is that right?

Donaldson: That's right. I told my father, once I get away from here, that's it.

Panken: How much music was there in the church apart from your father's playing organ?

Donaldson: All kind of music. My mother knew more music than anybody I ever met in my life. When I was a little kid, I was singing a lot of stuff that people started singing later on.

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[BRIEF PAUSE AT 13:05 FOR PHONE]

Panken: We were talking about church. Let's start from the top. She was an organist, you went to church with her, and she knew all kinds of music.

Donaldson: Yes. All kinds of music. When I was a little kid, I was singing songs like "Lift Every Voice and Sing," and I knew James Weldon Johnson—I knew about him. FMI(?—13:37), and all that stuff. "Precious Lord" and all those songs that the black composers wrote. I knew all about it. I knew all about Sojourner Truth and Highland Rebels, and all of them...black people after reconstruction. She taught us all of that.

Panken: So you learned about black history.

Donaldson: She told us all about black history before I was 5 or 6 years old. We knew all about it.

Panken: So her attitude about what you could talk about and couldn't talk about at the table didn't correspond to not giving you information about heritage.

Donaldson: Oh, no. I got the information. She gave me information about everything.

Panken: Do you feel that those experiences... This is kind of an obvious question; I'm sure I know the answer. But do you feel that your musical experiences in church as a boy and a teenager have an impact on who you are now as a musician?

Donaldson: Of course.

Panken: Talk about that.

Donaldson: Well, what it is, we used to have these things down there they called sanctified meetings, where all the people would go to the church, and they'd start a beat [CLAPS THE BEAT], and they wouldn't stop that beat for two or three hours. They'd be singing the spirituals. And after about two or three hours, the most dramatic stuff you ever saw in your life. People that had canes and had walkers and had wheelchairs would be up in the floor shouting. It was amazing. [LAUGHS] They used to have the sanctified meetings. It was amazing.

Panken: And your father was leading the sermon?

Donaldson: Well, not in that. That was something separate. He would preach on Sunday. But that was like in a special service in the middle of the week or something. And there would be a lot of preachers there. A lot of preachers would come in from everywhere for that meeting, and everybody would have to testify and do all that kind of stuff.

Panken: What was your father's style of preaching?

Donaldson: My father was a kind of in-between.

Panken: In between what?

Donaldson: In between intellect and... He would moderate his preaching to where the people could understand what he was talking about. But he was a real educated man. And back then, they didn't like educated preachers. They liked preachers that used to yell and scream and... A lot of those preachers couldn't even read the Bible. They'd have like a kid, a young kid reading the script, and they'd quote it after... It's amazing. It's a lot of stuff.

Panken: So all those things factor into the voice you have on your instrument.

Donaldson: Of course. The time, the tempo, the rhythm, the building up of like a solo—all of that goes into it. And such wonderful singers. You never heard such wonderful singers in all of your life.

Panken: Do you try to emulate that singing quality when you play the saxophone in any way?

Donaldson: Actually, I was trying to emulate Johnny Hodges and those kind of people. I wasn't really trying to emulate the church. Because I knew all of the... Like, Pete Brown, and another saxophone player I was very...I'd go to see him all the time...a cat who worked with Red Allen named Don Stovall. He had a beautiful sound. And he played like a ROUGH saxophone, and I tried to play stuff like him sometimes.

Panken: Just stepping back again, was there any blues in town as a kid?

Donaldson: In my town? Yeah, people would sing blues.

Panken: Were you checking that out as a kid, or were you sheltered from it?

Donaldson: Not really. Not really, because they'd be drunk when they started doing it, and I'd get away from there quick, because I'd know eventually what was going to happen. There would be some fracas. So I'd get away. Because they lived a tough life. They was working in this Alcoa Aluminum factory at 222 degrees Fahrenheit, and on the weekend everybody was drunk. And now that I'm old and I look back, I can see exactly why. That was tough work. Tough work. Because you worked ten years breathing those fumes and things, you had to be well messed up.

Panken: You described the extraction process yesterday.

Donaldson: Yes.

Panken: And there was no EPA at that time.

Donaldson: No-no.

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Panken: Just a little bit more about when you made the transition from clarinet to alto saxophone. Johnny Hodges was the prime first influence, and then Bird came into the picture? Is that kind of...

Donaldson: Well, not really. All of them came into the picture about the same time. I heard Johnny Hodges with Duke Ellington. In fact, he was the first saxophone player I got to see. Somebody had a video... We went to a town, I think it was Winston-Salem, North Carolina, which was a much larger town than mine, and I put a nickel... I saw Duke Ellington, so I put a nickel in the nickelodeon, because that's all it cost to play a record, and they had a video of the band that came up while they were playing, and I got to see Johnny Hodges and Harry Carney, all of those type guys.

Panken: So he made a quick impression.

Donaldson: A big impression. I wanted to play like that.

Panken: I've asked a few people from your generation how they felt and what the experience was like when they listened to Charlie Parker for the first time. You've told me that you heard "The Jumpin' Blues" by Jay McShann...

Donaldson: Yeah, "Jumpin' the Blues."

Panken: ...and you saw Bird in Chicago...it had to be 1944, because that's when he was with Eckstine. Can you describe for me the impact he had on you at the time?

Donaldson: Well, he was different. He was just different. The sound was different. The way he played was different, the way he would drive when he played, the power behind his phrases. Just different. And everything was swinging. Just different from anybody else. You actually would have to live back during that era to understand it. Nobody else was playing that way, but him.

Panken: So it made you want to find out what he was doing...

Donaldson: Find out what he was doing and play the same way. Play it the same way, if possible.

Panken: How did you measure yourself in that regard? Did you just listen to the records over and over and over, and wear them out until you...

Donaldson: That's what I did. Listened to the record. I'd wind the record down to the aluminum base. They had an aluminum base. I'd cut it down. And when I couldn't get the phrases, I'd put it down to 33-1/3 speed. It would be in another key, but you could still get the phrases. If you cut it down, he sounded like Lester Young—if you cut down the speed.

Panken: How did you get the records?

Donaldson: I got them from the guys in Chicago. See, some guys in my band came from Chicago, and they brought the records out to the base, and they'd be playing them?

Panken: Which records at the time? The Guild records with Dizzy Gillespie and Sid Catlett?

Donaldson: Oh, no-no.

Panken: "Red Cross"? Or before that.

Donaldson: No. Way before that. Wasn't nothing like that out.

Panken: Well, he made those dates in 1945, but I don't know if they were out at the time.

Donaldson: No, I didn't hear that until later.

Panken: But apart from "Jumpin' Blues," what other Charlie Parker solos did you learn...

Donaldson: "Jumpin' the Blues" and "Sepian Bounce" with McShann. A couple of more tunes. But all of them were with McShann.

Panken: Everything with McShann. So your experience with Charlie Parker...

Donaldson: Was with McShann.

Panken: After you got out of the Army, did you stay up on all of Charlie Parker's records, the Dials and the Savoys?

Donaldson: Of course. Stayed on everything.

Panken: Did you do the same thing with those?

Donaldson: Yeah. Copied everything. Played everything. Played the solos.

Panken: How did you learn what to do with that information as a performer?

Donaldson: Well, what happened, the tunes that he did then were just variations of other tunes. So I'd learn the original tune, and compare that with what he was playing, and that gave you something to work on. It was nice.

Panken: So you could use your imagination and creativity that way, by finding out the connections.

Donaldson: Of course. Once I learned to resolve chords, go from one chord to another, I'd just For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



buy the sheet music and I could see where the chords went.

Panken: Now, I'm unclear from our conversation yesterday whether this was a solitary activity or whether you had people in Greensboro who were similarly interested in bebop and the new music.

Donaldson: Yeah, of course. Everybody in Greensboro was interested in it. My good friend, Carl Foster. This other guy I told you about, Billy Tolles, who was a great saxophonist.

Panken: Billy Tolles was from Seattle, right?

Donaldson: Seattle, Washington. He was a great saxophone player. He could play all that kind of stuff when he came down to North Carolina.

Panken: Now, the people you played with in Greensboro... Were you moonlighting outside of school? Did you ever do three-four days out on the road with a blues singer, or go to a dance...

Donaldson: No, we played in clubs. And we played bebop. We played a regular show, then we'd play bebop. You had to play a regular show first. Then we'd play some bebop tunes.

Panken: You mean at the end of the show.

Donaldson: At the end of the show.

Panken: Now, you said that's been your m.o. ever since.

Donaldson: Yes.

Panken: You play during the regular show things that will communicate to the average man and woman, and then you...

Donaldson: Once you get them in your corner, then you play whatever you want to play. One of the most amazing things that ever happened to me (I don't know whether I told you this before) is that when I came back from the Service, I didn't have a saxophone...

Panken: You didn't tell me that.

Donaldson: I had to go to the music shop to buy a saxophone. I didn't tell you that?

Panken: No.

Donaldson: I was in there, so I started to play the... [SINGS REFRAIN OF "GROOVIN' HIGH"] All of a sudden, I hear this guitar player over there playing the same thing I was playing. I looked around the corner at him, and it's a white boy. He had all this paint over his clothes and paint on his face. He looked like a painted Indian. He was a sign painter. And I said, "Man, how you know that?" He said, "Well, I'm trying to learn all the bebop I can learn." I said, "I'm glad I

saw you. So there's one person in this town..." He said, "Can I come down to the Cottage?" I said, "yeah, you can come down every time." So he started coming down there every weekend, and we'd play. And you'd never guess who it was.

Panken: I think I might know. Let me try one guess.

Donaldson: Yeah.

Panken: Tal Farlow?

Donaldson: Yeah. Tal Farlow. Tal Farlow. He was from Greensboro. He'd come right down, and we played. We was integrating everything. Nobody said a word. They loved it. That was great.

Panken: I got so involved in talking about your musical path, but I wanted to pick up on a couple of things you were mentioning just before we sat down and the tape went on about your extended family. I think you mentioned your grandfather, or was it an uncle, who was a stone-mason and built...

Donaldson: Oh, my great-grandfather. He built St. Paul University. He built the buildings. He was a mason and a carpenter.

Panken: Was that during Reconstruction times?

Donaldson: It had to be in the 1920s.

Panken: Your great-grandfather?

Donaldson: Yes.

Panken: He would have been elderly at the time...

Donaldson: well, maybe my grandfather. My mother's father. That's who it was. My grandfather. A lot of my mother's sisters taught in the college.

Panken: If you don't mind my asking, and tell me if you do, how far back can you trace your lineage?

Donaldson: Way back.

Panken: Talk about that a bit.

Donaldson: Well, I had the paper to show you, but my sister-in-law absconded with it, so... I For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

didn't know these people myself. My mother told me all this. I never saw these people. I saw her sisters. See, my grandfather had three wives, three sets of children, and she was in the first set. There were some younger ones.

Panken: At the same time, or serially?

Donaldson: Yeah, at the same time. He was... I guess he was a playboy, whatever he was. Bigamist. Whatever he was. He had three sets of children.

Panken: Hard-working man. Where was he from?

Donaldson: I guess he's from Virginia. St. Paul, Virginia. I guess.

Panken: Perhaps if you do find that sheet of paper, the Smithsonian can get a copy, and it can be entered into the record of the transcript later.

Donaldson: Yes. Maybe I can find it.

Panken: Let's jump, then. Our conversation yesterday took us to about 1960, give or take, around the time when you make the transition from carrying a pianist in your band to starting to carry organ players, and when, apart from Jimmy Smith, you record with Big John Patton, you record with Baby Face Willette, projects like this. But first, I'd like to talk a bit more about the bands you recorded with in the late '50s. Some had Bill Hardman on the front line with you; some didn't. Herman Foster or Horace Parlan were the pianists...

Donaldson: George Tucker and Al Harewood.

Panken: Also Peck Morrison and Dave Bailey.

Donaldson: Right.

Panken: In general, what qualities did those musicians have in common?

Donaldson: Well, for me, they weren't junkies. That's why I used them. Because like I told you, I told Alfred Lion junkies had to go.

Panken: But how about as far as what they did musically?

Donaldson: Well, we played around New York together. I'd see them all the time. We had two or three places we played, and then we had one place we'd play every night called Connie's. That was at 134th and 7th Avenue. We played in Connie's... After the rest of the clubs was closed, we'd go up there and play from about 5 til about 10 in the morning.

Panken: You mean the breakfast session.

Donaldson: Yes.

Panken: Was that all week, or just Monday?

Donaldson: Every night. Right across the street was Roy Campanella's liquor store. Any time some famous ballplayer would come over there, they'd run across the street and tell us, and we'd go over there and meet them. Don Newcombe, Hank Thompson... In fact, Leo Durocher was over there one time. We got to meet all the ballplayers.

Panken: I guess the New York Giants were Harlem's team.

Donaldson: Of course. The New York Giants. And the Brooklyn Dodgers. They loved the Dodgers, too. I was there the night Campanella got hurt. [January 27, 1958] What happened... This is an amazing story. I was in Small's Paradise. Wilt Chamberlain owned it at that time. I was over there talking to Wilt, and Campanella came in there because once... He closed up about 1 o'clock, and Wilt stayed open til about 4. There was a girl, a barmaid that Roy liked, so he came over, but it was snowing a little bit, not much... He sat there until about 4 o'clock. By that time, the snow was getting deep, real deep, and I started talking to him. I said, "Roy, I know you're not trying to go home in this snow." He said, "No, I think I'm going to go down the street to the motel and stay there the rest of the night," because there were some bad curves getting back to Brooklyn. I said, "Ok." I never will forget it, because when I got in my car, I came up Bruckner Boulevard, which was a two-lane street then but they were making it a four-lane, and they had dug these trenches, and if you slid in one of those trenches you never could get your car out. So I drove my car in low gear from Harlem all the way right to this house in the Bronx. When I got in, I was so late... My wife said, "What in the world are you doing coming in so late?" I told her I couldn't drive fast, because if the car got stuck I had no way to get it out. I drove right in the middle of the road because there was no other traffic out there."

I got into bed, and she came in at about 12 o'clock and said, "Roy Campanella had an accident." I said, "What you mean, accident?" He told me was going to the hotel. He wasn't even going to try to go home." She said, "Well, he did, and when he went around some curve, he got injured, and he's paralyzed." I couldn't believe it. I couldn't believe it. When I finally saw him 3 or 4 months later, he told me, "I didn't listen to what you told me. You told me not to do that." I said, "Because it was too dangerous." I went up Bruckner because that's a straight line. Wasn't no hills or nothin' up there, just straight up the street. If I had to go down some curves, I wouldn't have any gone anywhere either. That's amazing. Amazing story.

Panken: So you were really around and in direct contact with the elite of a lot of different worlds.

Donaldson: Oh, yeah. Everybody.

Panken: In the black community mostly, but some in the white community, too.

Donaldson: Yeah, of course. I could be called an historian. I met everybody, and I was out every night.

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Panken: Working.

Donaldson: Working or looking. When I wasn't working, I was looking. I met everybody. Everybody you probably can name, I met them.

Panken: Wilt Chamberlain bought his interest in Smalls when? 1961? 1962?

Donaldson: Something like that. I don't know exactly. He had a lot of money.

Panken: So you were working for him.

Donaldson: Sometimes. Not all the time.

Panken: You worked at Smalls. You worked the breakfast thing at Connie's. Where else did you work in Harlem?

Donaldson: I worked at the Club Barron. I worked at Count Basie's. He had a club. I worked down at the Baby Grand sometimes. Another place called the Top Club.

Panken: About how many days a week would you say you were working from 1955 to the late '60s? 300 days a year?

Donaldson: No, not that much. I wouldn't work that much. There was three or four clubs out in Long Island I worked, too. Bop City and two more clubs out there I used to work.

Panken: Brooklyn, too, I would think.

Donaldson: Yeah, Brooklyn... I used to work the Baby Grand over there, and I used to work Scotty's Club over there, and that other club on Fulton and Nostrand.

Panken: Oh, not the Blue Coronet...

Donaldson: The Blue Coronet. That was a tough club.

Panken: Tough in terms of the clientele?

Donaldson: That's right. You had a few fights now and then.

Panken: Again, talking about the band, do the Blue Note recordings from 1957-1958-1959, like *Blues Walk* or *Sunny Side Up* reflect what your band was playing in those clubs?

Donaldson: No. Because I used all that on those things... I wasn't even playing organ in those clubs.

Panken: On *Sunny Side Up* you used piano. Horace Parlan.

Donaldson: Oh, ok. Maybe I did. I went on the road with that group, Horace Parlan, George Tucker and Al Harewood, and I had Tommy Turrentine on trumpet.

Panken: So the records were not a direct reflection of what you would do in the club.

Donaldson: Unh-uh.

Panken: How would it be different?

Donaldson: Well, when they wanted a date, I'd just figure out something to do to make it. I'd change the personnel according to what I was playing at that time. What I used to do, I used to play... If I was going to make a date, two weeks before I made it, I'd play the tunes in the club to see what kind of response I got, and the ones I didn't get a response to, I didn't record, and I was home free. Because everything I made during that time, sold.

Panken: Probably a lot of '78s also at that time.

Donaldson: Many '78s.

Panken: For the jukebox trade.

Donaldson: Yeah, many '78s.

Panken: When you started carrying an organ, it's about 1960...

Donaldson: Yeah, something like that.

Panken: The first organist you traveled with extensively was John Patton, although you'd been doing some gigs with Jimmy Smith before that.

Donaldson: Yeah, John Patton was the first one I took on the road.

Panken: How did you meet?

Donaldson: I don't know how I met John. It was in New York. I met John Patton, Ben Dixon and Grant Green. We had a nice group. Nice group. I met Grant in East St. Louis, Illinois. In fact, I'm the one who brought him to New York.

Panken: What was he like?

Donaldson: He was a junkie.

Panken: Can you separate your assessment of his personality from that, or does that define it
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for you?

Donaldson: Yeah, he had no personality. A junkie got no personality. Junkie works 24 hours a day trying to get money to get a fix. That's that personality.

Panken: But you must have really liked his playing...

Donaldson: I loved his playing.

Panken: You had with him for several years.

Donaldson: But I didn't take him on the road.

Panken: Oh, you didn't.

Donaldson: Oh, no. I never took him once on the road. Because they got the ten-year Mann Act. You cross the line with some drugs, goodbye—you're gone. I never took him with him me. I didn't take that change.

Panken: Who did you take on guitar with you at that time?

Donaldson: I didn't have a guitar. I took Bill Hardman on trumpet. Then I took Tommy Turrentine on trumpet.

Panken: How did you meet Bill Hardman?

Donaldson: I met him in Cleveland.

Panken: Where he was from, where he grew up.

Donaldson: That's where he was from, yeah. He came by to sit in, and I liked him, so I hired him.

Panken: I'd like to ask you a general question about balancing your creative impulses with the function of doing the gig, and how you satisfy your creativity within the dictates of making a living?

Donaldson: What we did, we had one set we would play in a new place where we worked, called a "feel 'em out set." We played blues, then we'd play a little fast one, then we'd do some swing, then we'd play some other stuff, and whichever way the people went, that's where we stayed. Stayed. That's the secret. Most musicians who have work, they know it. They know how to do that. That's still... Like I told you, we'd play exactly what they wanted to hear for the first set. Second set, they're getting drunk. Third set, they're real drunk. So we would play "Cherokee" or anything then. They didn't know what it was. Because they're drunk!

Panken: One thing I've noticed seeing you in person however many times it's been, is that you play everything as though you were playing it the first time, which is what Illinois Jacquet and

what I'm sure most of the saxophonists who were your role models did. How do you do that? Do you play tricks with yourself? Is it a natural thing...

Donaldson: Yeah, that's what it is. You try to make yourself play different. It's hard to do, but you try to do that while you're playing the same songs all the time. Hard to do it, but you have to do it.

Panken: What tricks do you play on yourself? If you're not giving away trade secrets...

Donaldson: No, ain't no trade secrets. No tricks. We just play different phrases, different things on the same changes. We play on what we call chords and resolutions. Now, sometimes when I used to play on the road, we'd play the song so much because the people were requesting it, so I'd just start playing it in another key. It made me think about what I was playing. Because I played them in one key so long, I didn't even think about it. I just went up there and played it. But if I had to play it in another key, I'd have to think. So that kept my mind sharp.

Panken: For instance, every time I hear you go into whatever blues you're presenting at that time, singing it, or other things you play that I can't think of right now, there's a certain conviction to it, a freshness. It's the way James Moody would do his signature tune, or Jacquet would play "Flying Home."

Donaldson: Yeah.

Panken: That's difficult to do?

Donaldson: No, not really. You build up to it. You play a variety of tunes, and when you get to that one, you're ready. You're ready to play it.

Panken: You moved into the house we're conducting this interview in, in 1963, was it?

Donaldson: Mmm-hmm.

Panken: In 1964, you start a couple of years recording for the Cadet label. What precipitated that, and what was it like functioning on Cadet?

Donaldson: Well, what happened, Esmond Edwards, who was the A&R man at Prestige, went over to Argo, and he went over there and they gave him a lot of money, so he paid us 3 or 4 times what we were making at Blue Note. So I went over and made a couple of tunes. That's the only reason.

Panken: It sounds like you were functioning mostly as your own producer for Blue Note after you came back in 1957. Was that the case at Cadet, or were those more produced?

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Donaldson: I produced them. Just about everything you see on a record is produced by me.

Panken: One of the records on Cadet, if I'm remembering correctly, is the first one I can think of where you're working in a larger ensemble, like maybe 8 pieces, with arrangements behind you... Did you approach the Cadet dates any differently than Blue Note?

Donaldson: No, not really. Same thing.

Panken: The date I mentioned is *Roughhouse Blues*. Oliver Nelson did the arrangements.

Donaldson: Oliver Nelson, yeah.

Panken: That's the first one I can think of (I may be wrong) where you functioned with an arranger. Everything before that was a combo date.

Donaldson: Yeah.

Panken: Why didn't you do more larger dates before? Why was everything a combo?

Donaldson: Because the other stuff was selling. We didn't want to rock the boat. Next thing I did was the one with Duke Pearson, *Lush Life*.

Panken: That was in 1967. Which I have to say, personally, is one of my 2 or 3 favorites of yours.

Donaldson: That's a beautiful record. A couple of records I made myself, and then George Butler added two or three pieces on it, but it wasn't really me.

Panken: Would those be the early '70s things on Blue Note...

Donaldson: Yeah. They overdubbed them. Messed them up actually. But it doesn't matter.

Panken: I want to ask about the way you developed your group sound in the '60s. *Alligator Boogaloo* or *Midnight Creeper* are a very different sound and approach than, well, *Lush Life*, but also the records with Big John Patton four-five years before.

Donaldson: Mmm-hmm.

Panken: Can you speak about evolving towards that way of thinking about making records and your sound, and how it reflected the audiences you were playing for and what was going on around in the music, which was changing in the '60s...

Donaldson: I met Earl Bostic in '57, and he told me... I was playing a Brillhart mouthpiece, and he told me, "Get rid of that and get a Meyer." He said a Meyer is better for the Selmer saxophone. He was right, and I got a different sound. Much clearer. I got the new sound, so I started playing slightly different. Not much. Slightly different.

Panken: How so?

Donaldson: Well, I started making a lot of groove records. The groove records depend on the groove. You don't have to worry about anything else really but the groove. Because if you've got the right tempo, and everything is hitting where it's supposed to hit, you're in business. You can play variations on it, do anything on it, but if the groove is there, you're in business.

Panken: Are you saying you started to do that in '57-'58, after you got...

Donaldson: That's right.

Panken: Those earlier records seem to be a mixture of those sorts of tunes, and bebop tunes and popular tunes and blueses...

Donaldson: Yeah. It was a mixture of bebop and swing. That was the formula we used. And all those records were selling, too.

Panken: But in the '60s, after you'd been touring with an organ for a while, and you pick up Lonnie Smith and George Benson and Leo Morris, also known as Idris Muhammad...the sound of those records is very different than the sound of the records by the previous bands.

Donaldson: Yeah, but that's Rudy. Rudy got some new equipment, some new Telefunken equipment. Plus, that's a great band you're talking about.

Panken: I'd like to know how the band came together.

Donaldson: Well, what happened, John Hammond fired George.

Panken: In 1966.

Donaldson: George was with Columbia. John Hammond fired him, and George... I knew it. I used to see George all the time. So I said, "Well, you ought to come and make a record with me if he fired you." And he did. Lonnie was in his band so I got both of them at the same time.

Panken: Anything else you'd care to say about how you addressed things with this band?

Donaldson: Well, no. See, he had a great band. He had Ronnie Cuber... He had a great band himself. That told me right there that John Hammond didn't know the first thing about talent. Because he wouldn't know it, and the people listening to this or reading this are going to be surprised, because John Hammond fired George Benson (I mean, not fired him—let him go), Aretha Franklin, and Eddie Harris, and the next record each one of them made, you know what happened? A hit record. The next record they made, a hit record. Eddie Harris made *Exodus*. For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

Aretha Franklin, I don't know what she made, but you know what happened with her— everything she made was a hit. And George, the next record he made with me, which was a hit, and then he went on to CTI, started singing, and that was a hit. John Hammond missed all three of those people. They were right on the label.

Panken: You were touring with them in '67, '68, '69...

Donaldson: Right.

Panken: What was band like live? Were you following the same format or stretching out more?

Donaldson: We stretched out a little more on the “Impressions”(?—53:36) stuff.

Panken: Now, your relationship with Lonnie Smith has been ongoing ever since...

Donaldson: Yes.

Panken: ...and it's one of the great partnerships in this music. Can you talk about your interplay?

Donaldson: We were so compatible, we just made records for years—15-20 years.

Panken: Thirty.

Donaldson: All of them were selling. That's another thing. A lot of people say, “Well, you made all those records.” I say, “Yeah, but you got to understand; if you make a record for a company and it doesn't sell, that's your last record.” What we did, we're going to sell some records, even if it's not a hit. It's going to sell some records, enough to keep us on the label. It worked that way.

Panken: Working with Idris Muhammad put a completely different framework on what you were doing.

Donaldson: He's a great drummer. Great drummer.

Panken: Did he come as kind of a package deal with George Benson and Lonnie Smith?

Donaldson: No-no. I saw him down in New Orleans, and I got him from there. He was down there. I got him from down there. He's a great drummer. Great beat.

Panken: it was a somewhat different beat than you'd been working with.

Donaldson: Of course.

Panken: Can you talk about that a bit?

Donaldson: I don't know what to talk about. It was just a different beat. He used to, like, ruffle on the drums, RRRPPP, DUH-DUHT-DUH-DUHT, RRRPPP. He had a different thing, that he was sliding on the drums. Other drummers hadn't picked that up, and that was a big hit.

Panken: Those beats in still in common parlance. They're being sampled...

Donaldson: Yeah, but they don't sound like him. Unfortunately.

Panken: I'm asking about these sides because they're still resonating with deejays, samples, in popular music... As you were describing earlier, though perhaps not this piece, Madonna had sampled a beat from one your sides, and you got a big check; Mary J. Blige has used these beats; and so on... Which is why I'm interested in what you were thinking about then in modifying your group sound in the latter part of the '60s?

Donaldson: It wasn't no special effect. It was just that we were playing, and everybody played well together. That's what made it sound like that.

Panken: So it had to do with everyone expressing their personalities on their instruments...

Donaldson: Right.

Panken: How would you say the audiences changed in the late '60s, or did the circuit change...

Donaldson: Maybe a little, but not much. Maybe a little, but not much. See, at that time you had a lot of organ groups going around. Groove Holmes. McDuff. Don Patterson. Jimmy McGriff. A lot of organ players going around. We had a little circuit that we played, which I told you about, and we just went around it. We kept going around and around.

Panken: So the slump that of jazz musicians encountered at this time didn't really affect you...

Donaldson: No.

Panken: ...because you were able to stay on your circuit.

Donaldson: That's right.

Panken: How long did that last? Did things ever slow down, or did it stick...

Donaldson: It didn't really slow down. I just stopped making it when I got to making a little bit of money. A lot of places we played couldn't pay. Because we played some of those places at a bare minimum. But it didn't matter because we played consecutively. Sometimes I'd be at a club, and I knew I was going to be there for two weeks. So I'd just call around to the next down, and make a deal with somebody there, and we'd go over there and play. I was booking myself.

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Panken: You were traveling so much... I'd like to move onto a completely different tack. You were married for 56 years.

Donaldson: Right.

Panken: And you were traveling half the time.

Donaldson: Right.

Panken: It sounds like a very strong marriage.

Donaldson: Oh, yeah. My wife was from close to my hometown. I knew her many years before we got married. She saved every penny, heh-heh...

Panken: So you sent it home.

Donaldson: Oh, yeah. I sent money orders. Every week I'd send money orders. She raised the kids and put both of them through college. Both of them went on to get doctorates.

Panken: What are your kids' names?

Donaldson: One of them, this one up here [POINTS TO PHOTOGRAPH BEHIND HIM] died. Lydia.

Panken: With the violin?

Donaldson: No, that's Tracy. That's my granddaughter. See, they moved...they changed the house around, so I don't even know what's up there any more.

Panken: How many kids did you have?

Donaldson: I had two.

Panken: Lydia was one.

Donaldson: And Carol.

Panken: They both got doctorates.

Donaldson: In what, if I may ask?

Panken: Carol's is in psychology, and Lydia's was in education. Some kind of... I don't remember exactly what it was. In other words, she was a procurer for teachers down in Broward County.

Donaldson: Oh, in Florida.

Panken: Yes. She traveled all over the United States to the Black colleges, and tests the students and see if they were qualified to come back down there and teach.

Donaldson: Was your wife working during those years?

Panken: No.

Donaldson: So you were able to support a family of four and send them to college as a constantly working musician, playing live, recordings... Did you ever do other sorts of sessions? New York had a huge studio scene in the '50s and '60s...

Panken: All I did was background. I did background sometimes with Charlie Singleton's band. Background for singers. We did backgrounds. But they always stole the material, so it didn't matter.

Donaldson: With your skill sets, reading and technique, it sounds like you would have done very well in the studios. For example, Phil Woods nailed a lot of those kind of gigs. I don't know how much racial politics entered the equation... But was it ever a temptation for you to try to do the studio thing?

Panken: Too confining. Too confining, and I wanted to be, not free, but have flexibility.

[END OF June 21, 2012, PART 1, TRACK 1]

[BEGINNING OF June 21, 2012, PART 2, TRACK 1]

Panken: Before we paused, I was asking about the New York studio scene in the late '50s-early '60s, and whether that had tempted you at all. You stated it was too confining. Where I want to go from that is, when did you know you wanted to be the leader of a group? You haven't done a whole of sideman things for 55 years or so.

Donaldson: I knew I wanted to be a leader when I started working for guys that were junkies. Because they wouldn't pay you. Rather than to beat them up, guys that I liked, I just said, "Well, I'll get my own stuff." Because I was tempted many times to go to work, heh-heh...

Panken: Take matters into your own hands, so to speak?

Donaldson: Go to work. One time Buhaina didn't pay me. I said, "Buhaina, you're a big rough guy, but you're a junkie and I'm sober. All I got to do is wait for you to start nodding, and I'll pull out my baseball bat...." heh-heh-heh...

Panken: To which he responded?

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Donaldson: “I bet you would do that.” I said, “Yeah, I would. I’m not gonna fight you fair!” [LAUGHS] But actually, it was so sad... But I’m not telling you anything you don’t know. And most people who are interested in jazz...

One time I played down in Washington, in the park, sort of like a Jazzmobile. It was on a Saturday. It was from 5 to 8. So I’m playing, and at the end, it was still light and everything, and I said, “Man, let’s drive back through Baltimore and catch Miles,” because Miles was at a place called the Wagon Wheel, down on Pennsylvania Avenue. So we drove, we went from about 30 miles from Washington to Baltimore, and when we get to the club, Philly Joe, Red, and Paul are sitting out on the curb, the drums out there and the bass out there. I said, “What you all doing out here?” They said, “the guy wouldn’t give us any money.” I said, “What you mean he wouldn’t give you your money? You’re working, aren’t you?” They said, “Yeah, but Miles drew out the money last night. He said he was going to New York and he was coming back—and he didn’t come back.” Heh-heh-heh... The guy was angry. It was a wonder the guy hadn’t beat ‘em up.

I said, “Well, I can’t take you to New York.” But I had my station wagon and I had my organ back in the U-Haul, and I didn’t really have any luggage or anything in the station wagon because I hadn’t intended to stay over at night. So all of them crammed back in there, put the bass and everything back in my wagon, and I drove over to Philadelphia, which wasn’t but about 50 miles. When I get to the outskirts of town, I pull into the gas station. They thought I was going to get some gas. But I said, “This is it.” They said, “What do you mean, man? We’re not in Philly yet. We can’t...” I said, “You don’t think I’m going to drive into Philadelphia with you guys, and all you guys are junkies.” Because they had a guy over there named Rizzo.

Panken: Yes. Frank Rizzo.

Donaldson: Frank Rizzo. I knew you’ve heard of him! Every time somebody would come over there, he’d pick them up, especially Chet Baker and Gerry Mulligan. That was his favorite duo. I said, “No way. I’m not driving into town.” So they had to call, they had to call and call. So they finally got somebody to come out there and get them. I said, “Ok, I’ll see you.”

So I came home to New York. When I was here for a week, Red called me. He said, “Man, we quit Miles, we quit Miles. Miles would never come up with...” I said, “Red, I’ll tell you what I’m going to do.” I said, “You guys are the greatest; you’ve the greatest rhythm section in the world.” I said, “I’m going to rent the Audubon Ballroom,” the place up there where Malcolm X got shot. So I went up and rented it for a month, and I played it every Sunday from 5 to 9, Lou Donaldson and the Red Garland Trio. Now, every week, Miles came up—about three times. So they’re hugging, and I know where they’re going to get some vitamins once they got that money...

The business got so good, we hired Betty Carter as a vocalist. I was raking in money! Philly Joe didn’t like Betty Carter, because Betty Carter was young then, and beautiful, singing straight-ahead, you know. She wasn’t doing her crazy stuff. Every time she’d sing “Perdido,” she’d put her hips up in the air, and the people would go crazy. So he’d drop a bomb or do something. She came to me and said, “Hey, Lou, you got to stop that. Every time I start doing

my song, Philly Joe messes it up.” So I went and I said, “Joe, listen. You can’t do that. The girl is trying to get over. Give her a break.” “All right, all right, all right.” But then, when the crowd started really screaming again, he said, “YAAAHHH.” He couldn’t stand it. Put another bomb in there. Finally, Jack Whittemore came up there and had a couple of gigs for Miles, and Miles guaranteed he was going to pay them, so they went back with Miles. But see, a lot of people don’t know that. [LAUGHS] I said to myself, “Man, I might as well get me a group and go out on the road,” and that’s what I did. I got me a group and went out on the road. And it worked out fine. Wonderful.

Panken: You were able to be friendly with people whose personal behavior you disapproved or you felt would damage you.

Donaldson: Oh, yeah.

Panken: You could separate your feelings in that regard.

Donaldson: Oh, yeah. I’m an amazing guy, because I’m the only guy... Say, like, a guy like Miles... Miles did some bad things to people. He never did it to me. Any time I talked to him, he’d come up and we’d talk.

Monk. Monk would hardly talk to people. People asked Monk, said, “How you doing, Monk?” He’d just look at them. He wouldn’t say a word. Every time I saw him, we’d talk. We’d talk a long time. We were very friendly. In fact, I used to really feel sorry for Monk, because back then, his music wasn’t compatible. I started to say I’d take Monk on a couple of gigs, but I knew I’d get fired, not because of the way he played, but the way he acted. Because he’d sit up there and smoke a cigarette, wouldn’t say anything to anybody. You can’t do that in a ghetto club. You’ve got to be friendly with the people, or somebody will start bothering you.

I used to work with Elmo Hope. He used to work in the band with me with Dud Bascomb. We worked over in Jersey. I used to pick him up every night. What happened, the reason I stopped picking him up is that Ron Jefferson, the drummer, went down to a Cadillac place down there on 10th Street and bought him a Cadillac, and he was coming back home, and just before he got to Central Park, he picked up Freddie Redd, and they started home. People were standing out there waiting for him to come with the car. They had a party going on in there... Shit, he never even got through the park. The police got him. And Freddie Redd had some drugs. They took the car, put him in jail, and he never even reached home with his car. I said, “My God!” So I told Elmo, “Look, Elmo, what I want you to do is to go down to the Holland Tunnel...there’s a subway stop right there, just before you go in the tunnel.” I said, “I’ll pick you up there every night.” So I’d pick him up right there, go through the tunnel, we’d work in Jersey, and come back, and I’d put him out right back there. I said, “I’m not driving through town with you in my car.”

Because junkies are hazardous people. Real hazardous. I remember one night I was
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coming up to 110th Street, Central Park, and I stopped at a light. They said, “Wait a minute. I got to get out, I got to get out.” So I thought he was going out there to take a leak or something. So he comes back and opens the back door, and I hear this noise back there, CLING-A-LING-A-LING-A-LING. So I took back there. Four hubcaps. [LAUGHS] I said, “Man, are you crazy?! Not only... You weren’t out there but a few seconds. Where did you get four hubcaps?” You know what he had? He had a can opener.

Panken: That was a resourceful way to do that.

Donaldson: I said, “Man, you ought to be... You could get away from the FBI.” [LAUGHS] They were some crazy people. Crazy people.

See, I got away from all of that by getting me a band with no junkies. Didn’t make much money, but we had a nice time.

Panken: You mentioned yesterday that you hired Cecil Taylor to do some gigs. That must have been the middle ‘50s.

Donaldson: I didn’t actually hire him. I had Freddie Redd. And when I came to work, Cecil was sitting...you know, bifocals. I said, “Who is that?” Didn’t nobody really know his name. So I started to playing, and he started playing. And he club-owner... Now, this guy...

Panken: Which club was this, by the way?

Donaldson: Showman’s Bar. Right next to the Apollo Theater. That’s where it was located then. This guy was a Jewish guy named Willie. Willie knew everything about music, at least he thought he did, but he didn’t know anything about it... But what happened, he came by there and he said, “Lou, who is this guy?” I said, “I don’t know.” He said, “Well, if you want this job, he better not play any more. See, if he plays any more, that’s the end of it.” I said, “What?” So I went over there and I told Cecil. I said, “Cecil, you’ll have to stroll a little bit,” you know, lay out this chorus. He said, “How many choruses?” I said, “For the rest of the night.” [LAUGHS] For the rest of the night! And he did it. He did it, too.

Panken: Let me ask you this. As objectively as you can, talk to me about how you were responding to some of the ideas that percolating in 1959 and 1960, when Coltrane was moving towards what he went to, and Ornette Coleman at the Five Spot. Without invective... Because when we did the Blindfold Test a few years ago, you said some very interesting things about Ornette Coleman. I’m interested in how you processed that when it was coming out.

Donaldson: Well, I’m telling you. The first time I heard Ornette Coleman, we were... I was working in the Five Spot before he came there. Before Monk came there, too. It was groups like mine that kept the place open, because we didn’t make any money—\$15-\$20. First time I heard him, I said, “Man, they say this guy is a genius...” I said, “I didn’t know I was a genius; that’s the way I sounded the first day I got my horn before I learned where the notes were. That’s the way I played. So if he’s a genius, I’m a genius and I don’t know it.”

And Coltrane... See, Coltrane used to come down and play with Monk, and he'd run down in the basement after every set, rehearsing his songs and things that he had to play with Monk. Then he'd come back up and play them. It was strange music. Real strange music. It's like overplaying music. Because you can give a person so much, but then you got to stop. Because if you overplay the music, that's it. It's all over.

Panken: Did you listen to Coltrane's records later in the '60s?

Donaldson: I listen to everything. I keep up with all music.

Panken: Talk about that some.

Donaldson: Well, he started to get worse and worse, when he started making his stuff like "Ascension" and all that kind of stuff. It's really some out music.

Panken: Did you like records like "Ballads" or the record he did with Duke Ellington or things like that?

Donaldson: No. I like nothing he did. To me he's an amateur saxophone player. He plays the tenor like an alto. He never gets the pure tone out of a tenor, like a tenor saxophone player. In fact, they played a record by him the other day. I was listening to Sirius. And right behind that they played a record by Ike Quebec. Such a difference. Such a difference, I'm telling you. For me, I don't understand why the critics don't see that, but they don't.

Panken: That brings me to a whole other question, which is the way you're received by writers, critics, the broad discourse about the music? Do you feel you're properly understood? Insufficiently understood? Misinterpreted? Overlooked?

Donaldson: Well, I don't know. I'm a different kind of... See, I'm a guy that tries to play the traditional stuff, and I'll stretch out a little—sometimes, but not much. They wanted to say I wasn't playing jazz when I went to play on these funk records. But actually they're not funk records. They're swing records. The records are swinging more than... Because I changed the beat of the drums. See, my records, you don't hear the same drum-beat. Like Eddie Harris. You don't hear the same beat. Different kind of records, and they sell like mad. That's why I did it, because I knew they would sell. See, because Coltrane with Elvin in there, he was never going in there.

Panken: Well, he did sell a lot of records. You don't agree?

Donaldson: Ah...I don't know about a lot of records. I mean, you hear them on the jazz station. He didn't sell no records.

Panken: we don't have enough time to debate it, but *A Love Supreme* sold a lot of records. For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



Donaldson: I don't think so.

Panken: Oh, you think that's exaggerated?

Donaldson: Yeah. That's just a lot of BS. Herb Alpert had ten straight one-million-dollar record-sellers. Did he do that?

Panken: Now, is that the criteria?

Donaldson: If you're talking about selling records. Selling records is selling records.

Panken: In your opinion, why do you think Coltrane struck such a chord with a lot of people in the jazz public, younger people particularly, during the '60s?

Donaldson: Well, he's a junkie. Any time you see a junkie, and people like that. They like that. He used to play one chorus for an hour. That's not no... And he played a lot of harmonics and technical things. Got nothing to do with jazz. Jazz, you can play one or two notes on a tune. You don't think so, you listen to Gene Ammons. I used to see Gene and Sonny. Sonny used to eat Gene up playing stuff. Sonny was a technician. Gene played two or three notes. People didn't even want to hear Sonny any more.

Panken: You did both, kind of.

Donaldson: Mmm-hmm.

Panken: You're kind of a cross between Gene Ammons and Sonny Stitt.

Donaldson: Well, that's what I said. I'm one of the in-between musicians. I try both sides. See, Trane... I listened to Trane... I took one of the old saxophone players, Wild Bill Moore. Now, he used to rock-and-roll, walking the bar, all that kind of saxophone playing. I let him hear "Ascension." So he listened to it. I said, "What you think?" He said, "He sounds like a wounded rhinoceros that somebody shot and left out in the woods and died."

Panken: How did you feel about Sonny Rollins' playing in the '50s and '60s?

Donaldson: Not much. '50s good. '60s not-good. Sonny Rollins was a great saxophone player in the '50s. But once he went onto that bridge... It was reported that a cross-tie fell on his head while he was on...

Panken: That's not nice...

Donaldson: That's what they tell me. A cross-tie fell on his head. Just to see him now, it's sad. Very sad. He looks like Santa Claus.

Panken: Do you feel that you've been somewhat overlooked by people who write about the

music? Not the public.

Donaldson: Not really... Oh yeah. By the people who write. Yeah, of course. Of course. Of course. I told you I just went to Europe, and every place was sold out.

Panken: Now, when did you start going to Europe regularly?

Donaldson: The '70s and '80s.

Panken: Is it different playing for a European audience than let's say an inner city...

Donaldson: Of course.

Panken: Do you do the same thing, or do you take a different presentation?

Donaldson: I play the same thing. Same thing. Same thing. This guy Wim Wigt started booking me.

Panken: Hence, you started recording for Timeless and other...

Donaldson: Timeless, yeah. He even made an album called *The Forgotten Man*. He said, "People forgot about you." I said, "they didn't really forget about me, because I started working, and I wasn't in town." I was working like on the road. And the jazz critics, people, they don't get around that much.

Cut that off for a minute.

[PAUSE AT 22:42]

Panken: [22:49] We were talking about critics, the press you received, and being perhaps misunderstood or improperly evaluated.

Donaldson: Well, what it is, evidently, there are some people that are not too knowledgeable about what jazz really is, and when they see somebody trying to play straight-ahead, they probably say they're not keeping up with the trends, you know. Because you take people like Jackie McLean and Tina Brooks, or this other guy who used to work with Bill Doggett... All these young saxophone players around New York...

Panken: In the '50s and '60s.

Donaldson: ...when they would get stuck, they'd come to me and learn the changes to the songs. I read a book about hardbop in the '60s, and the guy didn't say a thing about me. I was talking about Percy France, was another one.

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Panken: You have that book in your bookshelf. [*Hard Bop: Jazz and Black Music 1955-1965*, by David Rosenthal]

Donaldson: Yeah. Percy France. Percy France and all of these people. I read it. I said, "I don't know how he could have figured that out." Hard for me to say. At one time, I used to work down at the place down there on...not the 5-Spot, what's the other place down there...

Panken: Sweet Basil?

Donaldson: Sweet Basil. I was the house band there. I played all the time. The place was full of people every night. Never got a writeup.

Panken: When was that? In the '80s?

Donaldson: The '80s.

Panken: Mostly with Herman Foster.

Donaldson: Herman Foster most of the time.

Panken: You linked up with him again for a long time in the '80s before you went back to the organ format.

Donaldson: They never said a thing about Herman, and Herman was a genius. Herman was a guy... Sometimes we'd play a year and never have a rehearsal. He knew everything. He was a genius. We played a concert once in Belgium. The guy had Dave Brubeck on there. I went and told the promoter, "You'd better let us play last, because if we play before Dave Brubeck, people are going to leave." He said, "No-no-no, this is Dave Brubeck." So Herman got to doing his stuff. Shee... Dave Brubeck came on, and everybody was outside trying to get Herman's autograph.

Panken: Now, in the '80s, it seems like the climate changed somewhat because of the infusion of young musicians who were interested in playing the music...who paid attention to the hardcore jazz tradition. It got more acoustic in some ways. Wynton Marsalis had something to do with it, but also Art Blakey brought all these guys into the Jazz Messengers. And you've kept track of the young alto players who emerged during that time, like Donald Harrison, Kenny Garrett, Vincent Herring...

Donaldson: Right.

Panken: What's your impression of that... Well, they're not young any more; they're middle-aged, in their forties and fifties. But your impression of that particular period and how things played out with that group of alto players. Your sense of the state of the alto saxophone these days.

Donaldson: Well, back in those days, see, Art Blakey had those Messengers... That was like a scam band. He did that so he could keep his habit going. He wasn't interested in promoting no

musicians. He talked it all the time, but he wasn't. Because the reason all of them quit was as soon as one of them would ask him about the money, he'd get another one. [LAUGHS] See, I know that, but the critics don't know that.

Panken: Nonetheless, it did wind up being probably beneficial in the long run for these guys to have the chance to do that.

Donaldson: For some of those musicians. Yeah, Wynton got famous with that. Wynton got famous with that, and he's still famous.

Panken: But apart from that band, just your sense of this group of musicians who started to emerge then? Was it a healthy thing for the music? Did it change the climate?

Donaldson: Well, it's always healthy when somebody new comes in. Because it's like new blood. It's always healthy. But what happens is that you get so many people... Lee Morgan was one of them, too. You get so many people until you can't...you got a whole lot of chiefs and no Indians. Because when they leave Art, they want to get a band. So what you got is a lot of bands, but no musicians, and no real definite sound. Now, you notice that nobody, even now, is dominant. What's the alto saxophone player that's dominant? I mean, other than Kenny G. David Sanborn. No jazz alto saxophone player is dominant.

Panken: What do you make of that? Too many chiefs, no Indians, or...

Donaldson: Well, not necessarily that. It's because all of them come through the same thing, and they're not playing anything, because all of them are playing the same.

Panken: Is that because of the way jazz education is now? Coming up in conservatories and not bands?

Donaldson: Well, partly. Partly. Partly. But anybody who comes through school and learns all the basics, they got to know that everybody is not supposed to sound the same. If you go through the school and learn the basics, you know that.

Panken: Well, they have to sound a little different. When we did the Blindfold Test, you told them all apart. You could pinpoint who Donald Harrison was, and who Kenny Garrett was, and who Vincent Herring was...

Donaldson: Yeah. Well, still you got to... Right now, I don't know. Nobody is dominant. We did a survey, which the critics don't know about. A cat bet me \$100 that... I bet him \$100 to \$500 that I could stand down at the Apollo Theater and pool the people when they came by, and it would be ten times more people that knew Kenny G than knew Sonny Rollins. You know how it came up? We didn't even have to stay there but about a half-hour. Everybody he asked about Sonny Rollins said, "Oh, yeah, I know him; he plays with the Boston Celtics. He's with the Giants." Not a living ass knew who Sonny Rollins was. Then he started asking people about
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Kenny G. Everybody he asked knew Kenny G. In fact, a lot of the people who came by there knew me. "Hey, Lou, what you doing out here?" But I told him, "I'm famous in Harlem; I used to live right on 127th and 8th Avenue. I know all about Harlem."

But that's just the way it is. It's a sad situation. Sad situation.

Panken: I'm going to ask one final question. I asked you about feeling...whether you've been overlooked, underrated somewhat. And you're now in receipt of an NEA Jazz Masters Award. It hasn't been announced yet, but it will be by the time this comes out. Does that mean something to you? How are you reacting to it?

Donaldson: It's a prestigious award. It doesn't mean anything to me. I'm 86 years old...85 years old. It doesn't mean a thing to me. Because I figure I should have had an award 25-30 years ago.

Panken: I wouldn't disagree.

Donaldson: In fact, I could have had it if I'd wanted to. They invited me to the first or second or third time they gave out the award, but I was on the road and I couldn't get back to New York to go to the meeting. I'm pretty sure I would have got it then. But it doesn't bother me, because I'm very fortunate. I'm one of the horses who got out the stall. A lot of these guys get blocked in, and they're down for years. Not me. I was lucky.

Panken: Well, you know what Branch Rickey said.

Donaldson: Yes.

Panken: "Luck is the residue of design."

Donaldson: Yup. Yup. But, see, music... Let me tell you something about music before you cut this off. You talk about Wynton. Now, Wynton did something that is very hard to do. He brought this music back and got back the dignity, the stuff that people used to have in the music before the junkie era. Because I remember when I was a kid, musicians used to come through Greensboro and get stranded, and people would let them come to their house and stay, and they'd feed them and everything, until they got another job. But not during the junkie era. But he brought this back, and he does a wonderful job. Wonderful job. I wish all the best for him. He's a nice guy.

Not my favorite trumpet player, you know... Because you can see that I worked with Clifford Brown, Blue Mitchell, Kenny Dorham... I worked with guys who really knew how to play a trumpet. Idees Sulieman, a great trumpet player. Great trumpet player. Donald Byrd. I worked with these guys. Tommy Turrentine. But he did what he did, what he had to do, and he did it. More power to him. Only thing now...that he does now, he just tries for more of his type of artist than other artists, which is... Maybe he's just doing it because he's got a chance to do it. But you've got to spread it around.

Panken: It's complicated, because he's trying to function as a composer also...

Donaldson: Yes, and a musician.

Panken: So he brings in people who play his sound, what he hears.

Donaldson: And a musician. I just heard a record the night. It shook me up. I was listening to Sirius, and they played his concert, and he played "Blues Walk," featuring Sherman.

Panken: Sherman Irby.

Donaldson: Yeah, he's a good saxophone player. I didn't know that. So I called him and left a message. He didn't call me back. I told him thanks. But he did a good job. And his father before him. I used to travel down through the South, way back in the '70s and '80s, and his father had a progressive group then, down in New Orleans, which is almost unheard-of. Because you got too much competition here—all that Dixieland. Al Hirt, Pete Fountain, all those guys, they had everything sewed up. But Ellis also had his band.

Panken: I think Ellis was working with Al Hirt for a while, too.

Donaldson: Yes. He worked hard. He worked hard. He kept it going.

Panken: Any final comments, wrap-up comments?

Donaldson: I don't know what to say. The NEA is doing a good job. A good job. It's very rewarding to receive this reward. And... What can I tell you? I started to send it back, but then I thought about it. I said, "I'll take it."

Panken: You mean because it had been so long coming, and it should have been before.

Donaldson: So long coming. Plus, I don't need the money. I'm not rich, but I'm comfortable. So just one of my... I'm a Scorpion, so sometimes I think first... But now, since I got to be old, I think before I act. [LAUGHS] But I'm not...

It doesn't bother me that I was not recognized. You know, they haven't had my name in the alto poll for over twenty years. My name has not even been listed. And I was working over in Europe every day, and they have people in the poll that don't even work any more, or couldn't work. That bugged me for a while, because Eddie Harris used to come in... It bugged him, too. Because he had... Well, Eddie had a lot of hit records, so Eddie made a lot of money. He said, "Why we can't get in the poll?" But we figured it out. We figured it out. And you'd be surprised what we figured out. If you don't play with Miles, you don't get in there.

Panken: Critically...

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Donaldson: If you don't play with Miles. Look at all these people that are in there. They played with Miles. Except Norman Granz's people, but that's years ago. Because you know, with Norman Granz, he had Jazz at the Philharmonic, all his people always won the polls. Oscar Paterson. Ray Brown. Jo Jones. Roy Eldridge. Dizzy. Charlie Parker. Illinois Jacquet and Flip Phillips. Who was the trombone player with Woody Herman?

Panken: Bill Harris.

Donaldson: Bill Harris. J.J. I saw that for years. Because I'm up on it. I watch it.

Panken: So you haven't stopped working since you were 20 years old.

Donaldson: No, not really. But I was lucky, because I got a circuit to work. It was a tough one, because most of the guys that owned the clubs, the ghetto clubs, were like hustlers.

Panken: Tough guys. Hustlers.

Donaldson: Number writers, dope sellers, and whatever else they did. I didn't never get really tight with any of them because I couldn't afford to go to jail—you know, my family and stuff. But I even worked a club for Don King.

Panken: Cleveland, must have been.

Donaldson: Yeah. Corner Tavern. He had a club called the Corner Tavern. He won't admit it, but I worked there. [LAUGHS]

Panken: Mr. Donaldson, thank you very, very much for this very candid two days of interviewing.

Donaldson: All right. I hope you got a little material to interest the people.

Panken: Can't imagine how they wouldn't be interested.

Donaldson: I can't tell you my ending, because it's X-rated, so I wouldn't put it on there.

[Transcribed by Ted Panken from a .wma file of the conversation.]