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Abe Most

Clarinetist Abe Most was born in New York on February 27, 1920. Inspired by both Benny Goodman and Artie Shaw, he began playing gigs at the age of 16. After leading a number of groups in the New York area he joined Les Brown where he played alto sax and sang in addition to playing his clarinet. Abe performed in the Los Angeles area after military service, returned to New York to work at the Hickory House, and then rejoined Les Brown on the west coast. Since the 1950s he has divided his time between studio work and jazz dates in the L.A. scene. One of his recent CD releases is "Abe Most Live."

Abe was interviewed in Los Angeles on February 13, 1999, by Monk Rowe, Director of the Fillius Jazz Archive.

MR: We are filming today for the Hamilton College Jazz Archive in Los Angeles. I'm very pleased to have Abe Most with me, who is a clarinetist who's put in quite a few years in all kinds of different musical settings. So welcome.

AM: Thank you.

MR: It's a pleasure.

AM: Thank you, Monk.

MR: I understand you're a transplanted New Yorker.

AM: Yes. I was born in Manhattan, then we vacillated back and forth from the Bronx to Atlantic City back to the Bronx. And that was about it. Last I remember we were back in the Bronx and my brother, who had taken my old instruments, clarinet, flute, etcetera, and I was out on the road, and he took over the local — whatever you take over locally.

MR: Yeah. What was your father's profession?

AM: He was a cap maker, he was a tailor. He made those little — nowadays they're specialty caps, you know, the little visor and — a cap. And occasionally he'd bring me one. And I don't really know exactly — it's funny I would like to have seen what he did, but after all these years, "What did you do?" "I made caps." But I know he made these because he'd bring them home once in a while.

MR: Well they certainly had musical children. Were they musical at all?

AM: Yes, but not professionally. My father wound up being the cantor of a small synagogue, this was years and years later. He'd always wanted to do that sort of thing. And he called himself, I call him a cantor, but it was like a congregation of about maybe twenty people. Now he was the fellow who did the liturgical work so he was the cantor for the group. But that was his pride and joy I remember. He really used to like to do that. And my mother sang a little bit, just for the kids. The other kids were musical in a way. My brother, we have three brothers and two sisters. Bernie, my youngest brother, likes to play guitar and sing a little bit. And Sam of course, that's the middle brother, he's a twin you know. But she, Ruth, his twin, wasn't into music. The other sister, which is Fran, sings a bit, she likes to sing. And that takes care of the family. So Sam and I are the only professionals let's call them. Bernie likes to do it.

MR: What led you or directed you to swing music at that time?

AM: You know, it's hard to think of one thing, but what stands out is I remember hearing Benny Goodman and that clan and the band and whole bit, and that turned me on to swing. And then I heard Artie Shaw and that really did it. And don't ask me who is best. I've got stories that I tell when I do concerts, and I say, "Well what does he do and what does he do?" But they're both excellent. You know it's like apples and oranges. They're both so terrific.

MR: Right. You were, let's see around 15 or 16 when the Swing Era, I mean they supposedly say that Benny Goodman's performance at the Palomar Ballroom kind of launched the Swing Era. It seems like I've read this a lot of times. But maybe it was going on before then?

AM: Well let me see. When I started to play, what I considered what I liked, which was swing, I was old enough to be playing these dance places with trios and — no not a quartet — a trio anyhow. We'd play in some of these not barns, but there'd be an upstairs, an actual dance hall. And we'd have a trio and these people would be doing all this great stuff that you see later as all these great dancers like the lindy hop and you name it. It was great to just play with a trio because I had heard Benny and I was playing like Benny and they were just—

MR: So you had yourself and piano and a drummer?

AM: I think so, yes, at that time. Actually I'm trying to remember the timeline there. Because for a while there I had a little group, I must have been quite a bit beyond that, where I had the trio. We have a cooperative quartet: jazz accordion, a great jazz accordion player, Pete Sacaponti, and a guitar and a bass. And there were three or four others of the same combination at the same time. As a matter of fact there's an article, I should have brought that, I only found this one but I know it's home somewhere, regarding these four outfits. And one of them turned out to be a very good friend of mine, Bob Manners, who had one of these groups, there was Joe Mooney, I don't know if you remember that name, he used to sing and play accordion. And I'm trying to think of the fourth, I don't remember. But there were at least four groups of that ilk. But before that was the basic swing.

MR: So by the time you were in your late teens, had you decided that I'm going to be a musician. This is my career.

AM: That was it. Especially when people tell you you play pretty good, so I figured none of the other kids could do that, I figured I'd better stay with this, if they think I can do it, well that's what I did.

MR: What was the average pay for a gig like that you've been describing at that time?

AM: Truthfully I don't remember the exact pay for the trio things I was talking about, but I remember getting started in the dance halls, and that was $15 for the week.

MR: 15 a week.

AM: 15 a week. And we would play, gosh, I think it was something like, it was quite a late gig. I think it was from ten to two or ten to four, one of those late things. $15 a week. But that's where I learned how to play because there were about let's say five or six people, maybe, I really can't remember the exact number, but a dance would be a chorus, maybe two choruses of a tune, and then when we stopped they'd have to get a new partner.

MR: I'm glad you brought this up, because I really want you maybe to describe that so that I'm sure that — Was there an area where they could come in to dance—

AM: Yes.

MR: And they had to either buy a ticket—

AM: There was a place where they would buy tickets see? You'd get ten tickets. Some guys would like one girl, they'd give her ten tickets and they'd do ten dances.

MR: I see.

AM: So they would have her for the ten tunes or whatever we played. I don't remember exactly, it was probably one chorus.

MR: And so it didn't last too long.

AM: It didn’t last too long. One chorus, but then, you know, we had to learn a lot of tunes, because on one chorus maybe it was my turn to play a chorus, next fella’s turn, and we’d try to learn all the tunes. That was the way I learned most of the tunes of that era. And they would buy their tickets, one or two or ten, go to the girl they chose and that was it.

MR: Suppose you were getting requests, or getting lots of requests for some particular tune. “Moonlight in Vermont” or something, and you didn’t know it. Like the next day, where would you go to learn it, at that time?

AM: Well hopefully one of the guys would know it and he would teach it to me. I don’t think I went to books. Nowadays they have, I have a pile of things where no matter what you say I’m pretty sure I have it covered. But then, one of the guys would probably know it because they were fairly good musicians as I remember, and I would ask the pianist or whoever, “Hey I just got a request for so-and-so, do you know the changes?” And he’d say yes or no, and I’d go to the next guy until we found somebody who knew it. That’s the way I went about it.

MR: Tell me about Kelly’s Stable in New York.

AM: Yes. That’s the first big thing we ever did. And Kelly’s Stable was that quartet I told you about. It was Pete Sacaponti, a jazz accordion player, Sid — I don’t know if it was Sid Jacobs on bass, and I can’t remember the guitarist. A very nice guitar player. It escapes me. But that was a quartet we had opposite Coleman Hawkins when he made his triumphant return, and this is after “Body and Soul.” He came to New York from wherever, in Europe, and we were the opposite band. I didn’t realize who he was until we got into the place and they said, “Would you like to play the thing?” And Coleman Hawkins was the big star. And that was our introduction to the jazz of 52nd Street. And it was great, because we were right into it all of a sudden, 52nd Street and we’re playing jazz and Coleman Hawkins—

MR: And you were how old?

AM: Well then about — between 18 and 19. By then I was experienced. Boy I was really— 18 I think, because I went with Les Brown at the end of 19, almost 20, because I made “Mexican Hat Dance,” it was my first recording with Les, a big recording. I was almost 20. I think I was 19, 19-1/2 So this must have been the year before I joined Les so it’s got to be, I must have been almost 18.

MR: 52nd Street must have been a marvelous place to be.

AM: Well they had these places very close to each other. You could go from one to the other and hear Billie Holiday or whatever, and I remember — I’m trying to tell it the correct way because then it wasn’t illegal to smoke pot. And I remember people in the audience, like some of these stars and some of the publishers, would be sitting at the bar doing their thing, and this was before I even thought about it or knew about it. Of course I never inhaled. But they didn't either. But it was amazing when I found out later what they were doing, not too much later, but I found out that that's what was going on, and it wasn't against the law, everybody was doing it. And then it became a thing.

MR: Did it affect the players, the music, the way they played, do you think?

AM: I think so. I think it effects. A lot of people say no but I don't know if there is proof that it effects you either way but a lot of people who play under the influence think they play better and then I don't know, if I listen to people who think they're playing good and you find that it's not quite as clean as they — I don't mean clean—

MR: As they'd like to be.

AM: Not what they think they're doing. So I think there is a little discrepancy. Although most of them did great. I never really thought about listening to people when they're smoking pot and trying to decide, because I've never heard them without it, so I couldn't tell the difference.

MR: Were you playing saxophone at this time also?

AM: Yes.

MR: Just before, and then you got into Les Brown as an alto and clarinet player.

AM: Yes. Alto and clarinet.

MR: You also did some singing too, didn't you?

AM: Well.

MR: Shall we use it as a loose term?

AM: It's a loose term. All I did was for instance, Doris Day was on the band, the first band I was on with Les. And they needed somebody to do a little something like, you know "The Night is Young" [scats]. I would say, "It's" and she did all the rest. Delightful. Delicious. It's d'lovely. And I'd just stand there and say, "It's." So that was the extent of my — except that when we did some things like "Alexander the Swoose" and I remember I still don't remember, I don't remember what I said on "Alexander the Swoose" but Joe DiMaggio, Joltin' Joe DiMaggio, remember he had a big streak, a hitting streak, 60 some games. So they wrote a tune. [sings] "Joltin' Joe DiMaggio/We want you on our side." So the band used to yell and I used to make up little things. And I wasn't the only one, somebody'd say hey, why don't we say so-and-so, and little things like that. So just a couple of — and, "All that meat and no potatoes" I remember yelling at the end of a record. "All that meat and no potatoes." That was my big contribution to jazz.

MR: That's a good story. Did the bands — needed to have some kind of gimmick at that time, to be competitive with one another?

AM: Yes. Well Les was — it was mainly a hard swing band I thought. And what he tried to do was take some of the classical things, like "March Slave," "Mexican Hat Dance," and things like that, which fortunately I had some clarinet solos to play in those. And he did quite well with those. And then he wrote "Sentimental Journey," which is still going, but I think the fellow who really wrote "Sentimental Journey" was Ben Homer, who was our head arranger for a while. And Les, as all leaders so, put his name on it. I don't know — if you're listening, Les, I don't know if you added anything to that or not but I know your name was on it.

MR: And Doris Day sang that, right?

AM: Yes.

MR: As a sideman in that band, what were you usually — a recording session would be done in a day, two days, for — of course you were cutting sides at the time, right? You were cutting two sides for a record?

AM: Yes. Truthfully, I know what they do now, and I know what we did when I was at the studios for Twentieth Century Fox. But at that time, I truthfully don't remember what the time, the lapsed time was, whether it was two hours, three hours, or wait until we do two sides and we'll quit. That's funny, I don't remember that part. But I know we did quite a few tunes and I really can't — that evades me. I can't remember how long we recorded each session. But it became, the standard became three hours. Because that's what the scale is based on, as of the last twenty-five, thirty years.

MR: Well by the time you were with Les Brown and they'd had that "Mexican Hat Dance" and so forth, did your parents, were they proud of you?

AM: Oh yes.

MR: And what you were doing?

AM: Oh yes. I brought them along, even before that I brought them along to hear, I used to go after school to hear Benny Goodman at the Hotel Pennsylvania. That was of the places to go to hear the bands. And I used to listen at the door outside the door when Benny was playing. So I don't know how this came about but we wound up, Benny joining us at a table at the Hotel Pennsylvania, I'm pretty sure that's what it was. I have a picture to that effect, I should have brought that. But the whole family, all my sisters and brother, Mom and Dad, and there we were at the table. Benny and I and the whole family. So that was, I mean we weren't that close. The only thing he ever would ask me is what kind of reed are you using, and that's it. Because he was into music and that's all.

MR: Yeah. Always searching for the perfect reed.

AM: Yes. There are funny stories about him, having reeds all around him, and every one of the fellows would come by and pick up one of them and blowing it, and if it sounded pretty good he'd say, "Hey, give me that." And he had just discarded it. There are a lot of little stories like that.

MR: There are a multitude about Benny.

AM: Yeah. Funny.

MR: What was the military stint like for you?

AM: It was one of the most gratifying, and I'm sorry to say nicest, supposed to be — in the military and I just had a ball because I learned how to write, how to arrange, and I learned how to play flute from one of the fellows in the band and it was great. There were great musicians from the west coast. That's what enabled me to come out and go to Twentieth Century Fox. After the service, which was about three and a half years from '42 to the middle of '45, I went back. Nothing much was happening, we did a little something and then I came back here and pretty soon — oh I went back with Tommy in '46 — not back with Tommy, back with Les. Tommy was first. In '46 my wife Gussie and I decided to get married and we were on the road for a year with Tommy Dorsey and then that would have been '47, and then a little kidding around, I think we went back to New York for a while, then I went back with Les from about '48 to '50. And in '50 these fellows that I had met in the war at Santa Ana, as a matter of fact that's where we were stationed, they asked us, there were three of us, and they asked us to see if we wanted to come to Fox. And it was Frank Beach, the first trumpet—. this is what they needed. First trombone was Ray Cline, and a jazz clarinet player. So they asked three of us from the Les Brown band, they came to the Palladium one night and the upshot was, "Would you like to come to Fox?" So that was my entre to Fox Studios.

MR: What was it like traveling on the road with a big band in those days?

AM: In those days, each band was a little bit different. The two that I can talk about, Les Brown and Tommy, Les Brown used to go from place to place using individual cars. We'd have two or three or four people in a car. With Tommy as I remember it was bus, because it was a larger group. He had a string ensemble as well as the jazz group which was very nice. And that was really the highlight for me up to that point. And then I went back with Les which was a whole new, different thing. There is different feelings, but always with Les it was by car, traveling by car. And then the camaraderie of course was always great in that if you latched on to people that you liked, and usually I like everybody, so hopefully it was reversed as well.

MR: Did the musicians in the swing bands have any resentment towards the vocalists, because was it necessary to have a vocalist to sell the music?

AM: I think the feeling against vocalists has always been widespread ever since the beginning of bands. They always say well they're taking up my time, which is really what —

they're not against the vocalist. I think if the vocalist sings then we don't get a chance to play, because mostly the people who are in the dance bands are — not frustrated — but they're jazz players who want to play their horn. And that cuts out a whole chorus when somebody could have played. So that's the only reason I think — they didn't dislike vocalists. I think that's the reason. Thinking about it now I'm just coming up with that; in that I think that was the main reason, that they didn't get a chance to play. Of course some of the vocalists weren't that great, maybe that helped too. Because some of the people, Doris Day you know was very nice, but most of the others were band vocalists. And I don't want to say anything derogatory about band vocalists, but they were — their job was the sing a chorus and most of them were very good as I remember.

MR: 1946, a whole slew of big bands called it quits.

AM: Yes.

MR: Did you see that coming as a sideman, and did it affect what you wanted to do, your choice of career at that point?

AM: No. Because that's when I joined Tommy Dorsey. 1945. I was out of the Army, I was in New York with a quartet like I described earlier, with the accordion, bass and drums. We tried to knock around Long Island, New York doing casuals. I wasn't making any money and I paid the guys what I could, and it wasn't happening. And then we had a little — the Hickory House. We had a chance to go in the Hickory House which I did. And then we did some more casuals. Now I had another chance to go in the Hickory House, but I was already practically packed and on my way to the coast and I figured to go through what I had already gone through just to stay at the Hickory House, which was — if that's as far as I can go, I'd better go somewhere. So I came to the coast and wound up going with Tommy Dorsey. So that was the time I decided to make the move out and stay here. We stayed, I went with Tommy Dorsey and then back with Les and then into the studios.

MR: What was it like to work for Dorsey? Was he a pretty demanding leader? A nice guy?

AM: Well he was very demanding before I got there. From what I understood he was on all kinds of terpin hydrate and codeine, which was anything to get him high I'm certain. I don't know truthfully what that does to you but he had been on that, which was bad. But when we got there, Gussie and I, he was calm, he was off all that stuff, very nice, he was married to Pat Dane, who is a showgirl, and we used to play cards and everybody was happy. It was one of the happiest times of my life. There I was with a big band and I found out later that the only drag was I was making less money than Buddy DeFranco, who I replaced. And when I found that out I said what the hey— you know. But it worked out okay.

MR: Well you got out here, and gee, things have changed dramatically.

AM: Boy. You’re talking about now, what time period are you talking about?

MR: You’re talking about, you came out here in ’49 or—

AM: Oh the very first time with Les was ’38. I mean just before I did those recordings with him back east, this was one of the stops we made. I guess we played the Palladium, stuff like that. So that was the earliest. Then we came out the second time, that was also a Palladium stop and that’s when they asked us to join Fox Studios. But quite a change, yes. And there were studio orchestras which I was now part of. The Twentieth Century Fox band, which was a complete orchestra, like 50 or 60 or 70 or even more people, and each independent studio — I don’t mean independent, MGM had it’s own orchestra, Twentieth Century Fox, Universal, Warner Brothers, you name it. Every— Columbia. Each studio had its own orchestra and they were all great. And each orchestra was under contract, and everybody in the orchestra had a weekly salary. It was the best of all worlds at that time, and I fortunately fell into it after I had been with Les Brown for a while. So I lucked out. I was in the right place at the right time.

MR: Your reading skills have to be pretty sharp for that kind of gig. Is that right?

AM: Yes. Well we, being with Les and with Tommy, I had studied of course in the interim and the reading thing came along with playing all the new charts in both bands, Les and Tommy. And fortunately I guess it stayed with me. A lot of people, when they get into jazz, forget about the reading, and it did me in good stead because I could read fairly quickly and acclimate to what was happening. So I lucked out that way too, I just happened to remember what the notes were.

MR: So a typical day at Twentieth Century Fox, you’re talking working days now instead of late nights.

AM: Yes. Oh some nights, not late nights. For instance if you do a picture, let’s say they call you in at nine, so you’d work from nine to twelve, go out and have lunch, come back at let’s say two, two to five. That usually, that’s about it. Sometimes you’d have to finish a picture, and you’d come back at seven. Everybody got loaded and nobody could see the music but it was okay and we had some fun at night. But that was occasionally. Most of the time during the day, well we had at least five clarinets and we had two or three oboes, you know it was a large orchestra. So if I couldn’t come one day, as a matter of fact during one of my wife’s pregnancies I went to work and they said they happened to have a call for a clarinet and maybe three woodwinds. They said, “What are you doing here, your wife is in the hospital, isn’t she?” I said, “Yes but I got a call.” They said, “Get out of here, call Chuck, have him come in, you go to the hospital.” So I remember that one because I didn’t know enough to ask them could I go to the hospital to see what’s happening, what’s coming out.

MR: What came out by the way?

AM: That time it might have been my first because that's why I didn't ask. I didn't know any better. Cameo Barbara her name is. That is my oldest daughter. This was now '50 something.

MR: Did you ever witness any arrangers coming in with music that the producers just didn't care for?

AM: Oh yes. There were lots of scores thrown out. One that I personally remember, Earle Hagen is a buddy of mine. He's a great writer and he did —

MR: "Harlem Nocturne?"

AM: "Harlem Nocturne" was his first, he wrote it when he was like 15 years old. I just worked for him in Palm Springs as a matter of fact. He belongs to a club called Morningside and he gets little quartets. He invited me with my quartet to play, that was last month. But he brought an arrangement in for Barbra Streisand once and Earle was at the top of his form. Barbra Streisand just didn't like it and threw the whole thing out, and he was about the second or third that she had discarded. And that to me was strange because I thought Earle could do anything for anybody, and never got a chart discarded. But it happened with her, she was very, very meticulous and she would pick what she wanted and very successfully. You can't say that she's wrong because she knows evidently what she's doing. But there were others I remember pictures that we would finish and I'd hear the next day or two days later that the producer said forget it, let's get somebody else, re-do that. So there were lots of things like that. I don't know about lots, but there were a few while I was at Fox where that happened.

MR: When they did a movie score with the conductor watching the picture on a screen?

AM: Yes.

MR: And did you all have earphones on.

AM: We all had earphones, yeah, click track. One of the first people to do the click track thing and the — I forgot what they call it — they scratch the screen.

MR: Oh they stripe it?

AM: They stripe it, yes. I'm glad you said that. So that when the conductor looks at it, it goes from the left side of the screen to the right, and when it goes from here to there this is all a stripe, so that when it hits this that's when somebody got hit or the car does something, so he knows when that's happening. Al Newman was one of the first ones to do that. And the click tracks were developed while I was at the studios, so that no matter where you are as far as the rhythm type thing throughout the piece, let's say — I should say this a different way. The click tracks were so that you could tell exactly what was happening all thorough the scene. It might be 64 seconds. The click track could be broken up so that at

15 seconds you could think this happens, then this happens, and these conductors got very, very good at it. One of the best was Hank Mancini, who used to write within these click tracks and write jazz so that [scats] and then something would happen there, and he would do it musically. That was one of the greatest of all. Hank Mancini was one of the greatest as far as writing jazz to the screen with the click tracks. It was really terrific. I always enjoyed his scores.

MR: I'll bet. I would think that that is a pretty high pressure situation for the conductor and the musicians. Did you ever have occasion where you really did a clinker and they had to do it over?

AM: Well, not a clinker, of course now a clinker can be cleared up so quickly with the digital and all that, there's no problem. But then it did happen so you'd probably do it over but it wasn't like oh my gosh I hit a clinker. You'd just admit it, unless he didn't hear it. Sometimes they didn't hear it and maybe you could say I got away with that one.

MR: There for posterity.

AM: Yeah but most of the people, most of the guys could read well and if they did goof something the thing would just stop and then start all over again. So there was no problem that way. But nowadays they just, "You missed bar four? Okay, let's do bar four." And the guy goes chi-chi-chi with the digital, start at bar three — and then you cut the correct note in there. You can have a perfect performance every time.

MR: That's wild.

AM: It is. Terrific nowadays.

MR: Do you like it? Do you like the — I'm not sure how to ask this. The change in the technology, has it improved the music?

AM: Yes and no. It might not be as — what would it be — when you improvise something, the first time it could be sensational or it could be lousy. Those first time sensational takes, that could be once in a lifetime. It might not happen because if somebody is — then again it could be that the fellow playing could be relaxed so much knowing that you could fix it, that he wouldn't be — he'd just cool it. I don't know. See I'm trying to say it could or could not. In other words if I knew I could fix something, so I'd go ahead and do it, but without the intensity of trying to make a good take the first time, but knowing that I could fix it—

MR: You've kind of got that back door there, so maybe you're not playing with the same intensity.

AM: Yeah, that's what I'm feeling. It might or might not work.

MR: I read this strangest little anecdote in the — I have the Leonard Feather book from the 60s. I've never seen a little piece like this. In one sentence it said about you, it said, "Uses plastic reeds when playing jazz." I said what a funny thing to put in there.

AM: Well you know, Artie Shaw used plastic for a long time. And I didn't — at one stage I didn't care who knew it. As a matter of face since about twenty years ago, Arnold Brillhart made a reed for me which was made out of synthetic. I don't like to call it plastic because it's a little kinder. So I use it. And everybody since has asked me where they can get them. Because I get my own clarinet sound and it's clarinet, but I hate to look for cane reeds.

MR: I'm with you.

AM: So what I do is, these reeds will last anywhere from — gosh this latest one is four years at least, and it goes on for — I've heard of some — Arnold didn't make these but people blow them for twenty years.

MR: Well I use them myself.

AM: Really?

MR: Yeah.

AM: I wouldn't use anything else because I like the sound on the clarinet for me, and I can pick it up and blow. And I can get the high notes, I have to do Artie Shaw, I need the high B for "Stardust" or whatever, it pops out. If I had a cane read I'd go — and nothing would happen. So why knock my brains out? It's hard enough to do when you've got all the tools. But these things, as a matter of fact I remember, just to give you an example about the strength of these reeds. I had these reeds and it was starting to — the edge was starting to get a little frail. I spoke to Arnold, who was a very good friend of mine who was a saint for me, he just saved my life. I call him my doctor, Arnold Brillhart. You remember the name?

MR: Yes.

AM: And so he had made me a few reeds. Now this one was, I liked this one. And it was starting to fray. He said, "Just cut the tip off and start shaving. And don't worry about left side, right side, like you do with cane." He says, "Forget about it. Just start doing this." So one day I had a recording to do in two days, so I decided okay I'm going to clip it. And I clipped it and my clipper was kind of, well I had to use a vice to clip this thing. Now I had a thick end, right? So I put the reed down on something, I don't know, and I started doing this. I was going fffff — you know, nothing. So all day I would do this. Finally I just got a little bit of a sound. One day later I was still doing this, and eventually I got a ooooh, I got a little sound, and at the end of the second day, I had to record the next day, I kept doing this and the reed came back. Arnold was right. He said, "Just keep doing that and you'll get a reed."

MR: What were you shaving with?

AM: Oh a 400 wet-dry black sandpaper. And just do that.

MR: Man, how could he make any money selling reeds that last five years?

AM: I had a deal with, it was funny of course, the owner fellow who at the time was the CEO of Rico, which was his company, I had a deal with him, a dollar a year. It was like one of those, "I'll pay you a dollar a year for these reeds that Arnold made," and I used to go in once a year and pay him a dollar so I could use Arnold's reeds. And everybody now wants them, but I only have enough for, if I last to age 120 I have just enough.

MR: Well you should hold on to them, because you're looking pretty good. Oh gosh. Could we talk about the *Time-Life* swing series?

AM: That was — a funny start to that. Gus Bivona, a very dear friend of mine, an excellent clarinet player, started that. He did "Begin the Beguine" and a couple of others. And a funny thing happened. He brought a friend in who had done the great John L. I forgot what his name is, do you remember? There was an actor who played the great John L. Anyhow he was a friend of Gus. He brought him in and somehow the fellow started talking during the recording, and the fellow in the booth, who started this whole thing — oh my gosh I can't remember — Cavanaugh.

MR: Oh Dave Cavanaugh.

AM: Dave Cavanaugh, who had started it, took exception to what the guy was saying, and he fired Gus and told this guy to leave and don't come back. So they called me. Otherwise I never would have been — I have to mention that because I know he did it because he was closer to the people involved than I was. And the people who recommended me were Manny Klein, they happened to know me, and I was in the Army with Manny Klein. So that was one good thing from the Army. And I started doing all those. And what they did was send me, they would decide which tunes they would do for the week. We would do two or three. And if it was all clarinet stuff they would send me little 45s with the particular tune on it, in which the clarinet solo happened. And then I would study that and then on Monday maybe we'd do this record, on Wednesday we'd do this one, and Friday, or whatever. And I got through all those things by listening to those and marking the phrasings, and I got very, very close to Goodman and Shaw, or whoever else I was doing, by really paying attention. And I thought I really studied and made sure I marked the breath marks, strength and speed of vibrato, everything. I just marked everything on the part and I think they came out pretty well. A lot of people think it's very good, but you can't beat the original, let's face it. It was just what it was for — we had monaural records and they wanted stereo. So what we did was get as close as we could to the original so that people could hear what it might have been had they recorded in stereo. And I had a lot of fun because it was a learning experience for me in that I found out what made them tick. Because in studying the solos, you find out what fingerings they might have used, because some of the things just didn't lay there. They had to use — ooh, I've got to use this. [scats]. The only way you can do that is to lift this finger you know. So I learned a lot.

MR: Yeah, those little discoveries are quite interesting. After listening to it for so many years and then all of a sudden you finally say, oh, that's how that's done. That's why it sounds the way it does.

AM: Yeah. Going through it the first time, how the heck did he do that, because it came out so clear, clean, but I can't get it that clean. Then I found out by kidding around and finally finding, oh, this one. So it came out very well. Yeah that was quite an undertaking for those people, and my only regret is that they never released them commercially here. You could get them in Europe and you can get them — wait a minute I'll take that back, not Europe, it was, what do you call that when you order—

MR: Mail order?

AM: Mail order. They had it that way.

MR: Tell me about — I have to ask about "Northern Exposure."

AM: That was a lot of fun. David Schwartz, who was the writer, that was the first time I had — not the first time, I had been with some people who had used synths. Now David is a bass player and used synth for whatever sounds he wanted, and he used that as when he did his work he would work on the synth and then he'd say, "Oh this ought to be a clarinet, and this ought to be a" so and so. And he would play me, when I came in he would play what he wanted on the clarinet sound, he'd say, "Play something like this" but use your own style, use your own thing. So as a matter of fact he let me, on one of these Northern things he said, "Well I need some time so why don't you start off with a minute of noodling." So he put my name down. I don't know if I ever got any money for that but—

MR: Writing credit.

AM: No credit, I never got any credit. But that was — it was usually one or two instruments at a time added to what he already had. For instance, if he had a piano, a synth or a drummer would come in and play the actual thing, a lot of times the drummer came later, or a guitarist, or he'd have just three or four people in the whole thing. By the time he got through he had a whole orchestral sound but he didn't use large orchestras. It was four or five maybe, unless he had I remember a couple of times maybe he had — I don't know if he had a string quartet ever, he might have a couple of times. But mostly he'd call me and say I need some clarinet stuff for this guy. Usually, the clarinet was the doctor, remember, the main character initially was the Jewish doctor who gave up life in New York to now spend some time out here. So I was that character. So whenever the doctor — I forgot his name, I don't know why.

MR: Joel.

AM: Joel, right. So whenever he did something, the clarinet would be playing a little something. So that's usually, in the old days — the old days, 20 or 30 years back, usually they would assign an instrument to a character. Al Newman, all the big composers would do that. In the big pictures they would have a trumpet above the orchestra signifying a big field with a lot of dead bodies — you know. That would be his theme for that—

MR: The signature.

AM: The signature for that particular type of scene. But in this case, each character had an instrument that he would use — I'm talking about David — to play that particular character. So a lot of composers did that sort of thing. But in this case, I used to enjoy that show. They had great actors, actresses — I don't know if they want to be called actresses — actors. But it was a great show.

MR: Yeah. Very quirky and— Now it's in syndication. Do you get any—

AM: The composer gets cue time. I mean every time a cue is played the composer gets a credit. For instance like Mike Post, who does — there's some lawyer picture I forgot, we watch it once in a while.

MR: "L.A. Law."

AM: "L.A. Law," one of those. [scats] Now every time there's a chance [scats] I'm sure he makes a fortune — and it gripes me because I could have done [scats] if I had a chance. It doesn't gripe me that he's making money, but he is, he's one of those.

MR: What a racket. Yeah. He's written quite a few.

AM: Yeah.

MR: It's very interesting.

AM: Yeah, but David is a bright guy and he does some nice things, David Schwartz I'm talking about, "Northern Exposure."

MR: Now this, you mentioned that he used a lot less people than the standard orchestra. Where is the status of the orchestra these days now in the film studios?

AM: There are still, let me say it this way. In the union there are about, I used to think there was 10,000 but I think it's about half, it's about 5,000 let's say. Of that there's a group called RMA, Recording Musician's Association, which I am not a member of 'cause I don't do that much work anymore. If I did I'd probably belong to it. Because those people, and there are only about, let me back up. The RMA has about 1,100 members within the union, Local 47, and that's 1,100 out of 5,000, even 6,000. That's a very small group. The 5,000 on the outside do all the casuals, placed like this hotel, private parties, and like that. But in the RMA they have the motion pictures, T.V., recordings and theater, all the high profile jobs. And only about 300 I would say of the RMA make a good living. All the others are peripheral, like maybe once in a while they'll get a call. So it's boiled down to if you're in that select group, and if you're called by Sandy DeCrescent, who is the top contractor in town, or Patty, well she used to be DeCarrol, Patti Zimmitti, another contractor, and there are two or three other lesser weights. But those two are the main contractors and if you get a call from them, you're in, if they start calling you. Well they stopped calling me a while back, maybe it's my gray hair, I don't know. You know when your contractors and leaders don't ask for you then — so I'm just facing reality in that nobody knows Abe Most within the theater realm of things, and I'm now doing like a Tribute to Benny Goodman and Tribute to Artie Shaw, and whatever. So I keep busy that way. And occasional calls. I have a call, I do some commercials and a few pictures, and once in a while, I don't know what this one is coming up, I have something in a couple of weeks. In the meantime I do some jazz gigs or something. Luckily, busy enough.

MR: You made a statement about your own playing that you try to play linearly.

AM: Linearly. Yes, lines.

MR: Instead of running the changes—

AM: Yeah. Most of the jazz players get into this, all the G 7th to C flat 9 and the flat 5 and all of that, doing it that way. But I've always thought, ever since I've studied, and I studied extensively with three or four fine teachers, different styles and I found that all of them think of the linear way to go, the lines are the strongest force in music. In that if you have a line and it's strong enough it doesn't matter what happens below. If you have two lines going here and you try to analyze what's happening at any particular eighth note or quarter note, it doesn't matter if these two lines are strong enough. That's Ernst Connitt's or Ernst Toch — Toch was before Ernst Connitt. Connitt is the one I studied with with Earle Hagen. Hagen recommended him for me, and I studied that for a while. As a matter of fact I tried to write for a while and it was just too hectic for me, staying up to five AM to get a score out is not my idea of something to do. So I just — not that I could ever have been that good at it but I thought I could, but not having my own time to do it, and having these deadlines, I figured let me play clarinet and saxophone and flute and I won't have as much money as some of these guys. But did I answer your question?

MR: Yeah.

AM: The linear. Yeah. The force.

MR: Absolutely. Now you get to play with Sam on occasion.

AM: Yes.

MR: That's great.

AM: As a matter of fact we're doing — every time I do the big band thing I have fifteen men, I have six brass, five saxes and three rhythm, four rhythm sometimes when I add a guitar, and Sam comes out and does a scat thing that he and I play flute and clarinet.

MR: I'm curious if you two were always good buddies?

AM: Well we were always good buddies but we weren't close enough to find out. I don't mean close enough, I mean miles. The distance between us. Because for a long time he was out of New York and I came out here and he wound up going to Europe and he was a bigger name than I ever was, which is great. And then we got together out here because he moved out, and I tried to do what I could with him and we became buddies here. He's eleven years my junior and you've got to take care of your brother. So and vice versa. So we have fun. He's a fine player. There are a lot of things he can do that I wish I can do — play piano and his ears are just phenomenal. He just has some fantastic things, so I'm in a little different era. So when we both play a lot of people think it might not fit. Both styles. But they do. We interweave and we each do our thing and it works. Because we're both on this one as a matter of fact.

MR: I look forward to that.

AM: I think you'll like that, yeah.

MR: Can you tell me about the pictures you brought.

AM: Oh yes. You want me to hold this up? You want to do it later?

MR: Yeah, well we've already taken a shot of them, so.

AM: Oh good. This is the very first album I decided to start recording after all this, my playing at Fox and stuff. so this is myself of course and Monty Budwig, Jake Hanna, Sam was only on the one date, and Hank Jones. And Hank just fell right in. He says, "Oh, that's what you want to do." Because what I did, the first tune was — and that's what set the whole thing up – "These Foolish Things" I think. He says — I just played the melody. And he says, "Oh that's what you want." He thought it was going to be bebop and all that stuff. Just play and let's play for the people. So after that he knew exactly what we should do. So this is that.

When I had the big band I decided to go after the best which was Martha Tilton and unfortunately the mic is in her face but that's me on the side playing with the big band when she was singing "Angel Sing" or something like that.

These are, a friend of mine put these together for me, it shows, like a little background of my, everything that I've done. This one is I went to a Staples and they did this picture from something I had on the wall and this is Tommy Dorsey and I'm fixing my plastic reed there. I say plastic things. People say, "Why do you tell them you play plastic?" I don't care. I used to when I first got with them, the new reeds, I heard somebody when I left the stand, "He sounds just like an oboe." I said oh, I don't think I sound like an oboe. But anyway those are all I brought. If you want me to send any more, I mean if I can find some.

MR: Yeah, I'd love to have some.

AM: I'll see what I've got. And that's just a thing we did, this one — Zan Stewart is one of the local writers who loves music and this is just an article about — well this is Frank Morocco. See I'm back to accordion. This is a great accordionist and Jake Hanna and even Sam Most. When we get around to doing it, this is what we work with.

MR: So you had an Abe Most Day in Los Angeles, did you?

AM: You know something? The Abe Most day is, I forgot what day it is, but they've already made a day for me. Did you know that?

MR: Yeah.

AM: Oh you did. Yeah. I don't remember what day it was but I had a City Hall, Abe Most day, yeah it was something.

MR: Nice.

AM: Well when you get old enough I guess, these things start coming and you don't really — by then, I wouldn't say who cares but, you know, they're nice to have. And any of these other honors, which I appreciate you know. But I just like to play and hopefully the people like it.

MR: Well you just said something, it was almost an aside, when you were describing, okay we're going to play "These Foolish Things" just about here, and, we're just going to play it for the people, we're not going to bop it. Now there's a lot in that statement actually I think. Was bop music, when you're playing bop, is it more for the musicians than it is for your audience?

AM: Truthfully I never thought of playing, that I was playing bop. I was always a swing player. Sam, coming from this era when he was into the bop era, which was Charlie Parker etcetera, it was a different feeling entirely. I used to play a few figures and say I felt like I was playing bebop there. And he would say, "Yeah there are a couple of things there," like okay big brother, you almost made it that time. But once in a while I would hear myself back and I'd say two of those bars I thought were a little boppy you know. But in this, I decided well let me just play the melody the way that I like to play it, which was I always thought I wouldn't try to improve on what Benny or Artie were doing, I would just try to move up ten or fifteen years and play my style, hoping that it would, time-wise, as far as style, would evolve to what I was doing. Because I like the swing and I like the feel of Artie Shaw's music and Benny Goodman's music. They were both different and I wanted to incorporate both of them. As a matter of fact I thought I had died and gone to heaven when they asked me to do Artie Shaw and Benny Goodman on *Time Life* because those were my two idols. Now how much better can I do? Somebody asked me to play Artie and Benny. So as far as I was concerned I had achieved one of the main goals in my life. Now I just do what I can.

MR: Sounds good to me. These particular records, I like that title by the way.

AM: "The Most, Abe That Is." That was the first one we did. And that was the fellow's name is Ray Lawrence, who fixed this record up for me. And what I did on this was we had done an earlier date with an octet. When I left Tommy this octet, which had Alvin Stoller and people like that in it, Paul Smith, very good people in that octet. I didn't quite have enough music with "The Most, Abe That is," because they were short tunes. They were my tunes so I decided to add them — so now we have what, 60 minutes, I don't know — so that it's a decent—

MR: For CD's, yeah.

AM: For a CD, you've got to have something.

MR: You've got to have a lot.

AM: And that was the first one. Then the second one was this Hank Jones thing, which is called "Abe Most Live," I'm sorry, that's the second one. "Abe Most Swing Low, Sweet Clarinet." And then this one, we were at Maddaleone's with this particular group which was Ray Sherman and Senator Eugene Wright and Jack Sperling. And somebody came in with a nice stereo, small recorder, and it came out fine. I asked Willie Schwartz's son, do you remember Willie Schwartz?

MR: Sure.

AM: He used to play the lead with Glenn Miller? And we were close buddies. And his son went into recording. So I spoke to his son and said, "Can you fix up this thing? It's been recorded" this one "it was recorded on a homestyle thing, a very good recorder. Can you do something with the recording to clear it up, and maybe take out a couple of bass choruses?" And he has one of these digital things. It's a very, it's like his office, let's say his table, is just about this big. It's not too big. But all he does was look at this and say I would you like you to get rid of the second bass chorus. And he goes, you know this looks like the heartbeat you know. He goes buum, buum. And he'd play it for me, and I said my gosh.

MR: You’d never know.

AM: That’s it. I said wait a minute, can you take another quarter, eighth note off of the first part, because the bass note, it’s like an extra added note. He says, “Oh sure” chi-chi-chi. Gone. Boy, talk about scary. So that’s digital. And he did this and it came out almost live.

MR: Great. Well I’m looking forward to it.

AM: Yeah.

MR: And I’ve really enjoyed talking to you.

AM: Oh great.

MR: Anything you want to add that I—

AM: You said something about bebop. My introduction to that was eye-opening as well as astounding. We had just finished, after the Army we had a little group called The Swing Wing which came out of the Santa Ana group led by Milt DeLugg, an accordion player, I gravitate to accordions somehow, he was like a commercial cat. And we were partners, 70/30. We were partners 70/30, right? Because I was a soloist and he was — so we played this thing and the people coming in were supposed to be Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie, after us. And I wasn’t listening to the bebop stuff, I mean Charlie Parker then. And this fellow comes up to me the last night before closing night, he came up and said, “I dig your playing.” And so I said, “Thank you very much,” and I usually enjoy it when people come up and say I like your playing. I went in the next night and there was Charlie Parker, who had said, “I dig your playing, man.” So that was my introduction, and I fell on the floor when I heard them play. Because that was, I said, that’s the new thing and I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to play that because what I heard was, it just blew my mind. I said I’d better stick with Benny Goodman. I’ll never be able to make that. Because he was in, you know what Charlie Parker was, God it was so sensational. He used all the extensions of the chords and I was still going one-three-five-seven. And he was into nine-eleven-thirteen, plus all the additions. And it was just mind boggling. So that was my introduction to Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie.

MR: Great story. Wow.

AM: It was something, it really was something.

MR: Well the clarinet didn’t transfer to that music as much.

AM: Not quite.

MR: Buddy DeFranco was about the only one.

AM: Buddy is the only one, and then now Eddie Daniels, who is sensational. You know he’s just — it’s nice talking about him because he’s so fantastic. But I still like to try to swing the way Benny, Artie, both of them, had that pulse which very few people do nowadays. So I’m hoping as long as I last I’m going to try to swing.

MR: Yeah. Well there's a certain amount of swing revival going on right now.

AM: Oh yeah. Yeah I hear Big Bad Voodoo Daddy. We had a little concert out here two years ago, and they were on the bill as one of the featured acts. I was on one side with all the swing stuff and they were in the, let's call it the wave section, where they were playing all the more modern stuff.

MR: Well this has been absolutely fascinating. I really appreciate it.

AM: I hope I've covered enough, if I think of anything else I'll yell.

MR: All right. And best of luck to you. I have a feeling that the gigs won't run out on you.

AM: No they won't.

MR: All right.

AM: As a matter of fact, if I can make it I've got a gig, I won't say anything about bad luck or good luck, but in 2000 I have a gig, I'll be 80 years old, and I'd better make it.

MR: You signed a contract, right?

AM: I signed the contract. That's set. I've got to be there.

MR: All right. Well thanks so much. I appreciate it.

AM: Thank you, Monk.