

Lonnie Liston Smith: An Oral History

Interview and transcription by Scott Gray Douglass

Lonnie Liston Smith is a pianist and keyboard player from Richmond, Virginia, born in 1940. He earned a Bachelor's degree in Music Education from Morgan State University and performed with Betty Carter, Art Blakey, and Miles Davis, among others. His original music with the Cosmic Echoes has influenced the genres of smooth jazz, jazz funk, acid jazz, and hip hop. Smith received an honorary doctorate from Morgan in May of 2021. His latest eponymous release is volume 17 in the *Jazz Is Dead* series produced by Adrian Younge and Ali Shaheed Muhammad (JID017, 2023).

Scott Gray Douglass is a bassist and music teacher also from Richmond, born in 1984. He is writing a book about jazz, education, and integration in Richmond based on oral history.

The two spoke by telephone in September of 2021. Douglass conducted over 40 oral histories remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic, some of which will eventually become part of a permanent archive on Richmond jazz education at Virginia Commonwealth University libraries.

Oral history is a useful methodology for filling gaps in the historical record, for historicizing narratives from socially marginalized groups, and for documenting people's lived experiences. Oral history methodology includes member checking and triangulation with historical documentation to enhance reliability and validity of oral historical data. In this case, the oral history interview also acts as a record of the type of informal, socially-rich educational interaction between musicians—from elder to novice—that is central to traditional jazz enculturation. This tradition is worth preserving as it shaped the music and the community, while contemporary institutionalized jazz education, valuable though it may be, often emphasizes theory over culture. Smith's history, depicting how accomplished touring musicians moved in and out of educational contexts both formal and informal, bespeaks art's integrative capability.

The following text reflects a narrative analysis of the oral historical data, rather than a straightforwardly verbatim transcript. You'll notice that, for the most part, Douglass's questions are omitted from this narrative. That is to allow Smith's story to

flow with as little interruption as possible. Questions are included only where a change of topic or direction was introduced. The text has been minimally edited for length and clarity, and Douglass's footnotes provide historical context to support Smith's story.

*In this narrative, Smith recounts 80 years of American music history, from swing to sampling, doo-wop to hip hop. Topics discussed include the following: Smith's family of celebrated gospel singers, the role of family and community in music education, starting piano studies and discovering Charlie Parker's music, early (segregated) school music education experiences with jazz saxophonists Jay Peters and George Ross, Richmond's famous Second Street music scene, coming of age in Baltimore and studying music education at Morgan State University, learning his trade alongside Gary Bartz at Baltimore jam sessions (a staging post for graduating to the New York scene), working on revolutionary albums like his own *Expansions with the Cosmic Echoes* and *Jazzmatazz with Guru* and Donald Byrd, the significant role played by sampling in modern music education, and the impact of COVID-19 lockdowns on touring musicians and our current state of personal and historical reflection.*

My full name is Lonnie Liston Smith. Well, my father's name was the senior, so... And [I was] born in Richmond, Virginia, on Church Hill.¹ I come from a musical family because my father was a member of the Harmonizing Four gospel group and they're famous all over the world. So, when I grew up, it was just music in the house 24/7. It was just all music. And all the gospel groups came by: the Dixie Hummingbirds, Sam Cooke – he was with the Soul Stirrers then. Because the gospel groups had festivals: Harmonizing Four had the big festivals at the Mosque Theater; Dixie Hummingbirds would have [them] in Philly.

I met all these people: James Cleveland, Sister Rosetta Tharpe – I just took all this for granted. So, we started with the gospel. I had two younger brothers, Donald Smith and Ray Smith. They had beautiful voices like my father, the tenor voice. I can only sing the bass. Ray had a big hit record, “A Little Bit of Soap,” with the Jarmels.² That's [my] middle brother. And Donald, when I started writing lyrics, I got him to sing on a lot of my first albums.³

¹ This Richmond neighborhood—where, in 1775, Delegate Patrick Henry delivered his famous “give me liberty, or give me death” speech to the Second Virginia Convention—has been listed in the National Register of Historic Places since 1970. See Virginia Department of Historic Resources, “127-0192 St. John's Church Historic District,” 2022.

² “A Little Bit of Soap” by Bertrand Russell Berns (Laurie Records Inc., New York, 1961). Berns also co-wrote “Twist and Shout.”

³ Donald Smith sings on his brother's albums *Cosmic Funk* (Flying Dutchman, 1974), *Expansions* (Flying Dutchman, 1975), *Visions of a New World* (Flying Dutchman, 1975), *Reflections of a Golden Dream* (Flying Dutchman, 1976), *Renaissance* (RCA, 1977), *Live!* (RCA, 1977), *Loveland* (Columbia, 1978), *Exotic Mysteries* (Columbia, 1978), *Dreams of Tomorrow* (Doctor

The people would be in your house. You know, it's just music; you take it for granted. But then, I remember years later, when I went to London, a lot of these rock groups over there were influenced by Sister Rosetta Tharpe. She moved to Richmond, VA because she was crazy about the Harmonizing Four and she was crazy about my father, because he was such a gentleman. But the way she played guitar, I said, "Wow, that's really different!" Then, when I get to London, [I] come to find out the musicians over there really would listen to what she was doing. I guess they could classify it as rock. She was ahead of her time playing the guitar, but she could also sing.

My father played four-string guitar with the Harmonizing Four. What happened was, there was a piano in the house and whoever [of the children] showed interest, we could take piano. So, I started on the piano because that was the only instrument in the house. And then my younger brother Donald, later on, he took up the piano. He sings, plays the piano, and flute. And, actually, he has perfect pitch. Ray, the middle brother, he was just a great singer.

When I was growing up, it was all gospel. Then we sang doo-wop. You know how they [sang]—that is true—up under the streetlights. But then I was in high school, I heard someone play a record—I was over at their house—by Charlie Parker, "Just Friends."⁴ And when I heard that, I said, "What in the world is that?" It was just so beautiful. And [Chappelle] said, "Well, that's Charlie Parker and he's playing jazz and improvisation." I said, "Oh, shoot! Well, then that's what I want to do." And then, eventually, you start listening to people like Art Tatum and Oscar Peterson, Erroll Garner, all the pianists. Then you discover John Coltrane, Miles Davis, all those creative people. And that's when I got into jazz, just by hearing Charlie Parker.

When I listen to recordings of you playing, I feel like I can hear a lot of history in your piano sound.

That's true. My father, he was amazing, man! We used to just listen to records. Although he was in gospel music, whenever they played at the Apollo, he would

Jazz, 1980), *Silhouettes* (Doctor Jazz, 1984), and *Transformation* (Ichiban International Loveland, 1998).

⁴ "Just Friends" was recorded in 1949 for *Charlie Parker with Strings* on Mercury 11036 (album C-101). The "someone" Smith refers to may be Leonardo Chappelle, as Smith told the Richmond Jazz Society in 1995: "I have to give a lot of credit to an old friend of ours, Leonardo Chappelle, who used to invite all of us to his house to listen to his extensive Jazz collection. He'd order these records by people like Charlie Parker and Bud Powell and we'd end up at his house for hours! He really exposed a lot of us to what was going on in the world of music" ("RJS Advisor Lonnie Liston Smith: Back Home After Successful Overseas Tour," 5).

go hear the jazz acts in New York. He'd come back and tell me about it. So, we just listened to records and I listened to all those people: Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Stan Kenton – all the big bands. My father loved great singers. He introduced me to the Halos and the Four Freshmen. It was just music 24/7. And so, I'm trying to keep that history in there.

It was just all music. It's just sound and so it's all related. Different genres—in gospel, and then marching band—they have a different feeling. Later on, after I finished college, I wasn't aware of New Orleans. The bass players were the tuba players. I never was aware of that until I got to New York. It's just all music, but each one has a different feeling.

How did you encounter the music of New Orleans?

Well, when you get to New York, it's just wide open. Then you become aware. Of course, I was aware of Louis Armstrong, but it was just later Louis Armstrong. When I got to New York, I started talking to other musicians, especially the ones from New Orleans because they're *really* into New Orleans. And then you discover early Louis Armstrong, when he had just the five pieces and you can really hear the real Louis Armstrong. Because "Hello, Dolly!" and all that stuff, I guess that's just pop. But when you discover the early Louis Armstrong, you can hear his real improvisation.⁵

I wanted to do everything. So, I was always—from middle school all the way through college—I was in the marching band, but I played tuba [as opposed to piano]. And then in the choir, I sang the bass parts. The band, the choir, then performing with different bands. I kind of just took it for granted. When I was in middle school, we had a band director and he had just come off the road playing with Lionel Hampton. But he was our *band director!* Jay Peters was a tenor player and he had been on the road with Lionel Hampton.⁶ But I guess he had decided to come back home and he started teaching school. So, that was a great influence. I guess that gave us more freedom and everything. I always

⁵ By "early Louis Armstrong," Smith is referring to the touchstone Hot Five and Hot Seven recordings Armstrong made for Okeh in Chicago from 1925 to 1928, such as Armstrong's famous trumpet solo on "West End Blues" (Okeh 8597, 1928).

⁶ Jay Peters came from Chicago where he performed on tenor saxophone with the Dukes of Swing. He joined Hampton's orchestra in March 1945 and the next month recorded the "All American Award Concert" at Carnegie Hall with Hampton, Dizzy Gillespie and Dinah Washington. He taught music in Richmond Public Schools for three and a half years, rejoining Hampton's band in December 1953 (Brown, "Lionel Hampton Electrifies NY With Dynamic New Orchestra," 1954; Hampton, "Show Biz Buzzes: Letting the 'Cat' Out of the Bag," 1954; Monroe, "Swinging the News," 1945).

played the tuba because everybody wanted to play the trumpet and saxophone. So all these band directors said, “No, we need tuba players.” I just wanted to be in band. So, it didn’t matter. But of course, back then, you know, those tubas were the real tubas, those real heavy ones. But it was fun.

George Ross and I were in the bands.⁷ We were in from middle school all the way through to Armstrong High School over there on Church Hill [in Richmond, Va.]. So, George Ross—he got his PhD and he was the head of the jazz department at Maryland University. It was George Mason and Bowler [Richmond Public] schools that we started in [for elementary school in the late 1940s].⁸ That’s where Jay Peters was the band director. Then we both ended up at Armstrong when it first opened on Church Hill, I think, 31st Street.⁹ We were in the marching band there. George, he then went on, you know, [we went our] separate ways. I went to Morgan but then I think he went to Oberlin and Eastman because he played bassoon.¹⁰ And that was amazing. Because I think the bassoon players, those types of instruments, they have to make their own reeds. So that’s really interesting. George was always performing also. He played all the instruments. Then the next thing I know, he’s the head of the jazz department at University of Maryland. He brought me down once. He used to bring different acts down, you know, different artists down to perform with the band. And we’d do a little concert. Oh! Now, he definitely had great musicianship. He definitely had it because George had really studied.

He just passed away unexpectedly years ago [January 1993]. That’s the strange thing. See, we can’t figure out what happened, because George never got married. Even when he was at the University of Maryland, I remember, he used to play all over Washington, DC. Because I remember one time, I stayed at the big Marriott right there when you first come into Washington, DC. And he used to perform there sometimes while he was teaching. But then, George was

⁷ Smith’s friend and classmate Dr. George Joseph “Poochie” Ross earned his bachelor’s degree in Music Education from Virginia State College in 1961, a Master of Music degree from the Eastman School of Music in 1966, and a Doctor of Musical Arts degree in Music Education from the Eastman School of Music in 1975. Subsequently, Ross became assistant professor of Jazz Studies at Indiana University from 1975 to 1977. He became the University of Maryland’s first full-time faculty member in Jazz Studies in 1978 and went on to institute a Jazz Studies major degree program there (Harrington, “Ross: Dedicated to Jazz,” 1983).

⁸ Richmond Public Schools was legally segregated until 1971.

⁹ Armstrong HS moved to Church Hill in September of 1952 (Richmond Public Schools, “Armstrong High School,” from *RPS: A Mini-History*, <http://web.richmond.k12.va.us/AboutRPS/RPSHistory/AE/Armstrong.aspx>).

¹⁰ Here, Smith confuses Ross a little bit with Gary Bartz, another close musician friend who is on the jazz faculty at Oberlin. See previous footnote (10) for more on George Ross, who did attend Eastman for a Masters and DMA.

always on time and everything. That's how they discovered that he had passed. Because they got there and he wasn't there [for a gig, New Year's Eve, 1992]. And what happened was, I guess, he had a home down here—I guess it's just the home where he was born and raised in Richmond, Virginia—and so someone just came by and checked, you know, because no one could find him and he had passed and had been there [a] few days. So, we never got to the bottom [of] what happened.

But I just found out yesterday because I talked to B.J. [Brown, co-founder of the Richmond Jazz Society] and, I don't know, somebody has Ross's tapes. Because Ross had tapes. He had interviewed all these, I mean, these real older musicians. The tapes disappeared, but someone has them. They've been trying [the Richmond Jazz Society], because that was the real history of jazz in Richmond, Virginia. Someone has those tapes. That's a shame.¹¹

Was there jazz on the radio in Richmond when you were growing up?

Not like Baltimore, Washington, DC. We had a lot of the clubs, though. The Market Inn and then the club on North Avenue.¹² Oh, and then—which was really big—Second Street. The clubs on Second Street and then you had the Hippodrome Theatre. All the top acts—Billy Eckstine, everybody—would all come to the Hippodrome Theatre right down Second Street and they stayed at the Eggleston Hotel.¹³ So, that was music everywhere. I remember when I was on the road doing a tour, and it was Billy Eckstine, Maynard Ferguson, sometimes Sarah [Vaughan] came on. It was like, you know, [an] all-star tour. And I wanted to talk to Billy Eckstine, but I didn't want to be bugging him. So, he heard me talking to his musical director one day in front of the dressing room and I say, "Oh yeah, man! I'm from Richmond, Virginia." Oh, man! I couldn't get rid of him. Billy Eckstine ran out, "Two Street!" They didn't call it Second Street. They called it Two Street. [Eckstine said] "Come in!" They were crazy about it. I mean, because the people treated them so well when they came down

¹¹ At the time of his death, Ross was working on a book manuscript on the history of Richmond jazz from the 1920s to the 1980s, based on dozens of audio-taped oral history interviews he conducted with elder musicians and research conducted at the Richmond Public Library.

¹² Probably the Sahara Club. The Market Inn, owned and operated by Robert Thomas Long, booked acts such as Jimmy Smith and Bill Doggett in the 1950s ("164 Taken In Raid On Swank Richmond Club," *New Journal and Guide*, April 11, 1959, C1).

¹³ Opened in 1904 and featured in the *Negro Motorist Green-Book*, the Eggleston (formerly Miller's) Hotel was located in the Jackson Ward neighborhood of Richmond—known as "The Birthplace of Black Capitalism"—and hosted such luminaries as Louis Armstrong and Count Basie (University of Virginia, "Eggleston (Miller's)," 2021).

south. And so, after that, we were great friends. But he always called me Two Street. Second Street was really big.

[In Richmond] I went to the Mosque [Theater] a lot, because the Mosque would have some of the Jazz at the Philharmonic.¹⁴ So, you know, shoot! I didn't know any better. I would go backstage and I met Oscar Peterson, Ray Brown. It was amazing. I didn't even realize Ray Brown could play piano that well – I didn't even know that was Ray Brown! I just wanted to meet them. And then, of course, I heard Count Basie when he first had that big record. He said, "One more time..." What is it? *April in Paris!*¹⁵ Years later, you find out that was a Wild Bill Davis arrangement. He used to play that on the organ. And you said, "Well, oh okay." So, you caught all the jazz acts at the Mosque.

The Hippodrome had all the acts that come through, just like they went to the Apollo. It [Jackson Ward, in Richmond] was just really, really unique – all these great restaurants and everything. I think they're still trying to revive the Hippodrome because I even performed there two years ago. [...] This pandemic, man! Everything's shut down for two years! Because I played at the Norfolk [Waterfront Jazz] Festival August 20 [2021]. I hadn't been on stage in two years. But since it was right down the road, I just [said], "Okay, I'll go ahead on do it." David Sanborn closed [the show]. We were just before him, the all-star group— [drummer, composer, and arranger] Norman Connors, myself, [vocalist] Jean Carne. So, that was kind of easy. I just went on stage and played my three numbers and everybody was happy. Walked off stage, got in the car and I was back home by 10 pm! But, the pandemic... This is an interesting situation. The young kids have never experienced anything like this before. No generation [has].

¹⁴ The Mosque's faux-Middle Eastern architectural design and name is a remnant of the Shriners, its original owners before it was purchased by the City of Richmond in 1940. The building still serves the same function for Richmond audiences today, but has been renamed the Altria Theater by its corporate sponsor (Richmond City Council Special Committee, "Mosque Study Committee Report," May 1965 (archived at the Library of Virginia). Jazz at the Philharmonic was a series of concerts organized by Norman Granz: "The series began on 2 July 1944 at the Philharmonic Auditorium in Los Angeles with a benefit concert to help support the legal defense of several men wrongly imprisoned for murder. The musicians taking part were Shorty Sherock, J. J. Johnson, Illinois Jacquet, Jack McVea, Nat "King" Cole, Joe Sullivan, Meade "Lux" Lewis, Les Paul, Barney Kessel, Johnny Miller, Red Callender, and Lee Young... Ella Fitzgerald, Oscar Peterson, Roy Eldridge, Flip Phillips, and Ray Brown took part in most of these concerts" (Owens, "Jazz at the Philharmonic (Jazz)").

¹⁵Verve 8012, 1955-1956.

Just circling back to something you said previously. Who was the music director for Billy Eckstine when you met him, when he nicknamed you Two Street?

His name was Bobby Tucker. He had a joke. He said, “Lonnie, I only had two jobs.” I said, “Two jobs?” He was the pianist for Billie Holiday [1946-1949] and then—I guess when Billie departed—Billy Eckstine called him. So, then he became Billy Eckstine’s musical director [1949-1993].¹⁶ He was with Billy all those years. Oh, yeah! When I went on Wikipedia, I even got a picture of him and Billie Holiday. So, he was with Billie Holiday and then after that, after Billie had her problems, Billy Eckstine called him.

Did you participate in jam sessions in Richmond?

No. In Richmond, we had a band [in high school] called The Metronome All-Stars. [...] I think Billy Eckstine had a band called The Metronome. So, we used to call it The Metronome All-Stars and we would play a lot of the pop tunes and everything. But, at that time, everybody came through Richmond. Even Jimmy Smith was at the Market Inn. So, you’d go and listen. You just listened. But when I got to Baltimore, that’s when you started getting these people going to the jam session and all these great musicians coming through and playing. Of course, you know, when you got to New York, I caught the tail end of Birdland, the real [one], on Broadway. Not the one now, but the original Birdland. You go downstairs, and Pee Wee was the announcer.¹⁷ So, the main jam sessions started mainly when I got to Baltimore.

You mentioned that you went to Morgan State University there.

Yeah, [for] Music Education. And this past May, I think it was, they gave me an honorary doctorate degree. So, yeah, that was fantastic. When I got to Baltimore, that was interesting because Gary Bartz is from Baltimore. We were same age, so I met him. And I was going to school and then, of course, playing downtown. Gary’s father had a club called the North End Lounge. So, then Gary, we got together and went over there and started working at the North End Lounge, just all over Baltimore. Oh, yeah! The North End Lounge—*everyone* came through there. Of course, at that time [1957-1961], Baltimore had [...] Pennsylvania Avenue. So, man, they had all those clubs. The same

¹⁶ See Rye, H., & Kernfeld, B. Tucker, Bobby. *Grove Music Online*.

¹⁷ Birdland’s master of ceremonies was Pee Wee Marquette, known for hassling musicians (Grove Music Online, “Nightclubs and other venues,” 2003).

musicians that, you know, performed in New York, they'd come to Baltimore. On Pennsylvania Avenue, you might see Max [Roach] or... I remember one time Betty Carter came through and she needed a band. So, Gary and I ended up in the band playing behind Betty Carter. Baltimore was really, back then, it was really happening.

Oh, and then years later [1995], I ended up performing in the Royal Theatre band.¹⁸ And that's like the Apollo band. Those acts would be there for a week. So, you played behind all that. Just like, they'd do week in the Apollo, they'd do a week at the Howard Theatre in Washington, DC, then they'd do a week at the Royal Theatre in Baltimore. Then there was a theater in Chicago,¹⁹ they'd do a week [there]. And that was interesting because all the Motown acts came through. So, you're playing behind everyone. The only [member of the Royal Theatre band] I can remember is John Stevenson, because we went to Morgan [State University], but he played saxophone, [including] baritone saxophone, of course, if they needed a baritone saxophone.

Baltimore has so many great musicians. I played at the Red Fox behind Ethel Ennis.²⁰ She was a great singer from Baltimore. There was a vibe player named Jimmy Wells. The bass player, he played with Sonny Rollins for a minute. I can't remember his name right now. Back then, you had Baltimore Street: they had all these clubs where they had dancers, and so that was a lot of work for musicians. You played behind all these dancers and everything. That was interesting. But the thing is, they didn't have the bass. Was only tenor, drums, and piano. So, I had to play the bass with your left hand. And I was so innocent, I didn't even pay no attention to the dancers, you know, just trying to...[work] on the music.

At Morgan, they didn't have a jazz department. It was just mainly classical. But we would always play in the different auditoriums. All the students, man, they loved it. One of my frat brothers sent me a picture, [from] one of them way back when we did a show there while we were in school. Back then you had

¹⁸ As Smith told the Richmond Jazz Society in 1995: "I was the pianist for the house band at the Royal Theatre. We played for the 'chittling circuit'—all the acts that traveled the clubs and concert halls, like the Hippodrome Theatre in Richmond and the Howard in DC. I backed all the acts at the Royal, except Ethel Ennis, she sang AND played. We also played for all the Motown acts, Curtis Mayfield and the Impressions, even my brother Ray's group, The Jarmels.... Baltimore was like a little Harlem. Joe Henderson was stationed in the Army near Baltimore and we played together a lot. He got called to New York and I left Baltimore soon thereafter" (Richmond Jazz Society, "RJS Advisor Lonnie Liston Smith: Back Home After Successful Overseas Tour," 1995, 5).

¹⁹ The Regal Theater.

²⁰ Rasmussen, "Ethel Ennis, Baltimore's 'First Lady of Jazz,' Dies at 86," 2019. Ennis performed at the Red Fox from 1954 to 1963.

more outlets [to perform]. Like now the younger generation don't have all these clubs and all to have jam sessions. And radio – [there were] radio stations everywhere. But now that Sirius [XM] and all that stuff has taken over.

You've been part of a lot of bands that are recognized almost like schools, like the Jazz Messengers, or Miles Davis's group and Rahsaan Roland Kirk's.

Yeah, that's right. Because we used to always say that everybody [who] graduated from "Miles Davis University," they automatically form their bands. Because Miles, he was so creative. And he would get upset if you didn't create every night. You know, a lot of people can't take that [criticism], but Miles, he'd get upset. He wanted creativity every night and so that made you stronger.

Like you say, each [band] was a school. But Art Blakey was different because Art didn't write any songs. So, the band members, we'd bring in songs and we rehearsed. Art would never be there. Of course, I think, when I was in the band, we had Chuck Mangione and a little, young tenor player, Frank [Mitchell]. And so, we would get the songs together and then we'd call Art. But the amazing thing, which blew your mind, [was that] Art would come in and you would start playing and he could just sit there and start playing as if he was there all the while. He put the Art Blakey magic on it!

Then, when I worked with Max Roach... oh, that was very different. Max, he was more like a professor because he'd have all these different times. They said he even taught the drummer—at Newport one time—Dave Brubeck's drummer, Joe Morello. He taught him how to play the basic 5/4. Then, next thing you know, they're doing "Take Five." But Max, Max been doing all that. Playing 5/4 was just, to me, was just like 4/4. But then when he was playing some 7/4... oh, that's a little bit different. But for Max, he was always experimenting with different times. And then, when I went to work with Max, that's when him and Abbey Lincoln were together and, well, they actually were married.²¹ So, he would say, "Lonnie, I want you to go on the road—because Abbey gotta go on the road—go ahead on out there with her and be a musical director." And so that was another experience. And then one night—him and Papa Jo Jones were really tight—and so he said, "Man, Papa Jo Jones at the Village Gate. He needs someone to play piano." And I didn't want to do it because I figured I was too hip. But Max said, "No, go down there." And that was a great experience because that was like a history lesson—Papa Jo Jones telling me about all his experiences, all the way back from the beginning. People

²¹ The Newport Jazz Festival recently posted to its website a recording of Smith performing live with Roach and Lincoln at the 1964 festival (<https://newportjazz.org/max-roach>).

don't realize how important tap dancing is. Papa Jo Jones, all those people considered tap dancers drummers. They would exchange fours and eights. You know, the drummer and the tap dancers. So, I'm glad I met him and had a chance to hang out with him.

Have you had any involvement with contemporary jazz education?

No, not yet. I talk to Gary [Bartz] sometimes, because I think he was teaching [at], is it Oberlin? Gary's teaching out there in Ohio. But, like you said, we had... the musicians back then had those jam sessions. And for the young musician, that was something else because the older musicians, you learned a lot because they would mess with you, change keys on you. So, all that made you grow. Or they played a song in a strange key. Or you would be sitting in and the bass player would be telling you the changes while you're playing. So, all that makes you grow. And I remember when, okay, I'd be in school during the daytime and—what is it?—I, I⁶, I₄⁶ [chord inversions] and all that old stuff. Augmented fifth or diminished fifth. Well, see, when you were on the bandstand, they don't have time for that. So, they got a different language: C-minor-flat-five, C-minor-plus-five, you know. Because everything is moving. So, it was two different languages. And with the jam session, you learned a lot, and you had more opportunity to play. And so that was it. I don't think they have that many outlets now, the younger generation.

When I was working with Art Blakey, one night Monk came down because him and Art, they grew up together in the jazz scene. Monk came there just to hang out. They were going out—the baroness was with him—and so they all going out and Monk said, “Come on!” And I said, “Oh, okay.”²² Monk was saying, “Everyone has to find their own sound.” I think the younger musician, you know.... You got to learn the notes. You got to learn the scales and all that. But you got to go inside and find you. And that's a little bit different. I think that's kind of hard to teach unless you're around the right people.

And so [the younger generation], they got the scales and everything but they... especially if you listen to smooth jazz, everyone sounds the same. You say, “Wow!” So, you got to discover who you are, or your own sound. Wait a minute—let me go downstairs to the piano. [After going downstairs, Smith freely plays through the changes to Joseph Kosma's “Autumn Leaves” on the

²² Pannonica de Koenigswarter, of the Rothschild family, was a friend and patron of Thelonious Monk and numerous jazz musicians in New York City from the 1950s through the 1980s (Solis, “de Koenigswarter [née Rothschild], Baroness [Kathleen Annie] Pannonica,” *Grove Music Online*).

piano, remembering the tune as he goes.] See, now, when we're playing—I know what you're saying, all those scales—but that don't *mean* nothing. That's where the problem comes in. I mean, okay, it means *something*; but it doesn't mean something when you start playing and creating, because you can't think that way. That's interesting. So, if you think in that way [chord scales], that's.... [Smith tries a few more ideas on "Autumn Leaves" at the piano.] Ooo! That's gonna really mess with you. Wow! [Talking to himself:] "Play the Dorian mode and then you go to another." Yeah, I see what you're saying. Wow, that's interesting.

When you're hearing Charlie Parker records for the first time and you're trying to play bebop, that's not what you're dealing with, is it? Chord scales?

No! I mean, it was just so beautiful. You just... it's the sound and music is.... Oh, man! It just sounded like [Parker] was flying all over the universe, I guess, like someone singing. Of course, when you're singing, you're not thinking about no scales and Dorian mode and all that. It's good to know that but.... So, that's interesting. Wow! No, we just... because, like, even now, I just sit down at the piano and you play something. I'm just trying to think of how we do it. But then, you got to have something inside that makes you want to just... in other words, music becomes your life. That's the only thing that makes sense to you.

Music is sacred. Music is spiritual. That's one of the reasons I started studying all the different religions and all the different philosophies all over the world. Because you're around people that never been to college, but they can just get together, start singing, and everything is perfect. So, you say, "Well, how in the world can you do that?" And with the gospel, you know, we got it. But then, when I did *Expansions*,²³ I just expanded on the gospel, just took it into studying all these different religions and philosophies. Everyone is saying the same thing. Every religion wants peace, love, and harmony. You got different languages, but it still seemed to say the same thing. So, the first time I wrote lyrics I had "Expansions"—expand your mind. Then the next one, so we can have a "Visions of a New World" where everyone would live in peace and harmony. So, it's definitely there. Shoot! Just listen to John Coltrane! And, for some reason, they all came out of the church. Because most, for some reason, they did. John Coltrane, everyone. Someone in their family—the father, the grandfather—was a preacher or they sang in the church. The kids learn all the different scales but, when you really playing, you're not thinking about scales. You're just trying to play some beautiful music.

²³ Flying Dutchman, 1975.

I know that you've had some collaborations over the years with hip hop producers and musicians.

Oh, yeah. We did this thing called *Jazzmatazz* [in 1993] with Guru.²⁴ And so, you know, you sitting around at home and then you get this call from...I think it was EMI records. They said, "Man, we put this project together and we're going to call it *Jazzmatazz* with Guru, and we use a different artist on each song." Donald Byrd, Roy Ayers, different ones. Even Branford Marsalis. Everyone. So, they said, "We'll fly you to New York, put you up in a hotel." The money was decent and things like that. The business was okay. I think my song was "Down the Backstreets." Donald Byrd and I even went on tour with Guru for a minute.

That's another thing. See, they had real record stores back then. They don't have 'em now. So, [on tour] during the daytime, Donald Byrd and I, we'd be in Japan or somewhere in a record store in the jazz department and then you'd look up and here come all the rappers! They in the jazz department and they're looking for something to sample. They would tell the two of us, "Oh man! My uncle... (Or father, or older brothers.) Man! They made us sit down, listen to all these jazz records." Which worked, I mean, because they heard all that music. And so that was a good experience.

The thing about *Jazzmatazz*, it took off worldwide. And that was amazing because I was just doing something to be doing something. And now, 25 years later or more, I'm still doing interviews because now they consider that a big-time classic. So, I said, "Wow! You never know."

But with the rappers, they'd be buying up all the jazz records. And the young kids are learning jazz through the samples. Because they'll hear the song in the background and they say, "Aw, man. We love this song." So, then they got to do research and find out what is the original. Then they're discovering us through the samples. So that's how they're discovering jazz. It's amazing.

That Internet! You can really find it now. I think they got this sample app and everything.²⁵ It's amazing. I wrote a song—I was just in the studio—and, you know, the record companies, they always, "Okay, so we got to have a hit record." So, I was just sitting at the piano in the studio and I said, "Aw, man! I just wanna play something that I want to play"—you know, real pretty and beautiful—and wrote a song called "A Garden of Peace." I played acoustic grand piano and then I overdubbed the Fender Rhodes electric piano for color. Years

²⁴ Chrysalis Records, 1993.

²⁵ The app is called WhoSampled, also a website.

later, everyone is sampling it.²⁶ I mean, it's amazing. [Smith plays opening to "A Garden of Peace" on the piano.] So, I asked the younger kids and I said, "Well, what do y'all like about it?" They say, "Aw, man, it's just so peaceful." I said, "Oh, okay." So, you never know.

Have you done a lot of teaching and had the opportunity to pass these things on to other musicians and young people?

No, I haven't. No, I was just always on the road, always performing. And so, who knows, one day I might just go ahead and sit down, try to figure out a book. Because a lot of people ask me, even in Europe. A lot of people are gone, so....

Do you think that there's more conversations like ours happening right now because everything's kind of standing still and people are reflecting?

That is a good point. ["Reflecting"] is the key word. Because that's what happened. When this thing [COVID-19] hit, I started reflecting like crazy. I said, "Wait a minute!" Because then you realize, you say, "Why am I doing this?" Some of the things you had been doing.... Because everyone was just moving. And you were kind of moving without even thinking. And then all of a sudden you say, "Oh, wait a minute! I don't need to do this anymore. This is not necessary. I don't want to be involved in this situation." Reflecting is the key word. Because we've been doing a lot of Zooms. But people should definitely use it as a... reflecting because the whole world.... You talk to people, musicians over in London, or in Australia, whatever. You need to reflect and just see what you really want to do, or what's really meaningful to you.

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²⁶ For example, Jay-Z's "Dead Presidents" from 1996 or Meek Mill's "Respect the Game" from 2018.

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