

We're talking with Dick Johnson, who-- let's see, Brockton's claims to fame would be Rocky Marciano and Dick Johnson.

[Laughs] He's way ahead of me and tougher.

Dick has been one of the most prominent horn players on the Boston scene for fifty years, and in the last twenty-five or so has been uniquely linked with Artie Shaw's music and charts and expertise as a cutting-edge player.

Well, twenty-five years would be just about right, because it would include-- actually, I got the note-- Bill got the note-- I sent a record out there. I was afraid he was going to scale it on the Pacific Ocean, because-- Bill had met him one day while he was in the service. And he said, I'm going to keep trying to get him to get a blurb for the next Concord record.

So anyway, he did. And he got it out there.

And about two weeks later-- this was 1980-- about two weeks later, I was doing a concert in Brockton at the Vets hospital for my sister. My sister had lost her husband, and the vets had been very good to him, so she said, "I'm going to put on a concert in this place with a big band." And me.

So anyway, I had no idea, she came up to me with this note that had come from Artie Shaw. And so she got up and she goes, "Dick doesn't know this yet, but it's a letter from Artie Shaw." Something [like], "As of this time"-- you know, that thing-- "He's the best I've ever heard."

"Bar none."

"Somebody is putting me on," I said. Actually, that's how that happened. But anyway, I go on to tell-- this was when I...

This is when you accepted the award for for Artie Shaw at the NEA grants this year.

I guess it's the Jazz...

NEA Masters. Let me see.

NEA Jazz Masters from 2005.

I'm trying to figure out what the NEA meant. I should know, I was there the whole time.

Kenny Burrell, Paquito D'Rivera, Slide Hampton, Shirley Horn, Jimmy Smith, George Wein, and Artie Shaw. And Artie was sick or he had passed on at that point.

That's right. He died December 30. So he was supposed to go there, so they called me in. I could tell you a couple of funny stories about that. But anyway, I won't go through the--

We love funny stories.

Hm?

We love funny stories.

Well, okay. This is the acceptance response for the late Artie Shaw. "First off, I know that Artie Shaw would thank you implicitly for this National Endowment Masters award. And no one could be prouder than I, being chosen to accept it for him. I'm deeply honored and will never forget these moments. I wrote an article you will hear.

And I call it 'Artie Shaw, A Major Link in B-flat.'" That's how he wrote things. He'd always put the-- so I got the A major in there. A major link in B-flat, because he played a B-flat instrument. "And thanks for the legacy." That's sort of an added thing, there. "So with your kind permission, I say this, I'll read it to you:

'Artie Shaw was arguably the greatest jazz clarinetist ever.

Granted, he was much heralded for his playing, his bands, his recordings. However, he was never seriously referred to as one of the major links tying the swing era to the bebop area. Early proof of that happening is the 1938 band with its thousands of radio remote stations..." He'd play the hotels and thousands of radios across the country that were in different towns.

That's why they call them remotes. "...from New York, Chicago, L.A., and so forth, et cetera, et cetera. Artie's playing was obviously years ahead of his peers. However, I am very opinionated," and I am, "and there happen to be many stalwarts of jazz that think as I do, that he should be one of those." So I guess you could call them opinionated too.

"In the following giants of jazz, I'm going to list partially some of the ones that I actually talked to. I've made it a point to have a conversation with most of these players." And these are alphabetically so it's not anybody is more important. "Cannonball Adderley," I did talk to him, "Ralph Kuhn," and I did a gig with him years ago down at the festival down in Newport.

"Dizzy Gillespie," who I talked to a lot, "Art Pepper," I talked to him one time and he said-- "Herbie Steward, Lesley Young," was a big fan, "Ray Charles, Al Cohn, Buddy DeFranco, Paquito D'Rivera," came to the Blue Note when we were playing there early on in '84. And he sought me out and said, "Could you introduce me to Artie?"

And I said, "Yeah." So I brought him upstairs while we were off and talked to him. And he was just trying-- and now, he will be the clarinet player.

Classical and jazz.

Yeah, and Charlie Parker. I've got proof of "Moonglow" and "What is This Thing Called Love," real standard Charlie Parker bebop licks, some of them, a note for note of Artie Shaw's on the lot of those records. And Charlie Parker, couldn't say enough about him. "Lee Konitz," I called him a while ago, because I heard he was going to have some bypass surgery.

And the piano player that he knew very well up here, Tony Zano, said, "Why don't you call him?" Because I idolized him when I was younger.

Lee's a gas. He was the Charlie Parker alternative.

Because I had one. I had a five-way bypass myself. So I wrote him a note. And I got a beautiful note back. And I said, "By the way," I says, "Among me being one of your big, big admirers, you are one of Artie Shaw's prime favorites. And Artie used to tell me, 'Boy, I love the way that guy plays.'" So he wrote me back.

He says, "Well, thanks." He said, "You really relaxed me." Because I told him, "It's no big deal, you'll go in, and you feel there's not a lot of pain, you'll have plenty of stuff to cover it," and all that kind of thing. And so he says, "I was really uptight about it." And he said thank you. And he said, "By the way, say hello to Artie for me." He says, "I felt the same way about him."

So here's another one. "Naturally, Buddy Rich, Zoot Sims, Mel Tormé, Phil Woods." Phil Woods flips over him.

Well, Phil was one of the cats who could play clarinet.

Yeah, that's right, they were all good. "In 1940 was Shaw added strings. He got put down by Tommy Dorsey, Benny Goodman, Glenn Miller. But when the strings proved accepted, Tommy Dorsey had them for Sinatra. Harry James had them for Helen Forrest. Glenn Miller and the Air Force Band had them. Even Gene Krupa," I don't know if you remember that, one little tour he had strings.

"Back to Artie. His biggest selling records had strings-- recording of 'Stardust Moonglow,' 'Dancing in the Dark,' 'St James Infirmary,'" is *unbelievable*, because I think the trumpet player that played the mutes there would play it, sang it. And Artie's solo is one of the best, he goes one of these [*sings rhythm*].

And he's going to C-sharp and glistening it up, I mean C into C-sharp. And it sounds so clear. So there was nobody that did that. Still isn't. "'Concerto for Clarinet...'" Every one of those tunes had unsurpassable clarinet solos. Speaking of 'Stardust,' I get many requests for a copy of Artie's solo, which I comply. If one can play it, bully for him." So I made a whole mess of them, because I get it, I'll just send them.

"The string band and Artie went back to seven brass...." Oh--when he got back from... "Seven brass, five saxes, four rhythm, another great band. But then World War II came along. Artie enlisted in the Navy and brought the band out to the hectic Pacific Islands.

Some of those band members were Conrad Gozzo, Dale Pearce, Sam Donahue, Max Kaminsky, and two trombone players from here, Dick Lefave and Tak Takvorian," they were both on that band, "and drummer Davy Tough."

And it's a funny story how he got in. Davy Tough walked in the line to go into the service. And the doctor says, "I can't get this guy in here. He doesn't look alive." He weight about 100 pounds. And Artie said, "Yeah, but you can't believe how he plays, please let him." So the guy let him in.

"So after two years, Artie was medically discharged from the Navy and came back here for a great band again featuring Roy Eldridge. He made some beautiful jazz recordings, such as 'S'Wonderful,' 'The Glider,' 'The Hornet,' 'Let's Walk,' 'Little Jazz,' featuring Roy Eldridge. His bands kept growing musically and harmonically. Artie's last big band was the 1949-50 bebop band. Musicians flipped over." I was one of them. I saw them down in Providence. I said, "I don't believe this band."

It was a cutting edge but, big band style.

That's right.

Right up there with Dizzy.

That's right. Every good writer wrote charts for them. "But the masses were screaming for 'Beguine' from the old book. You can't play on."

They're still doing it.

"Artie then threw in the towel on his big band career. He went on to play with an updated Gramercy 5 with Tal Farlow and Hank Jones and vibes, bass, and drums up until 1954. He also did some studio standards with a large orchestra-- Mel Tormé and the Mel Tones for Musicraft-- great record, delved into some very different classical records, and then stopped playing. Everyone thought, how could you, Artie?

Going back to the '49 band, Artie made a recording of a blues tune called 'Innuendo,' written by Johnny Mandel. He made two takes of that medium bright blues and C concert. He took four choruses on each take. Try to find those, and you will hear the best bebop-jazz-playing clarinet of all time, guaranteed." And right, he's all over the horn. It's just so soothing with that kind of...

"So the following is my," this was just my personal list of the great trailblazers, guys that really brought music along. Naturally, "Louis Armstrong starts, Art Tatum, Coleman Hawkins, Artie Shaw, Lester Young, Nat King Cole," I put on there because he changed the piano completely, "Charlie Christian," changed the guitar, "Roy Eldridge, Buddy Rich, Don Byas." Don Byas was, to me, one of the most underrated. You can hear Coltrane. "Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Bud Powell, Fats Navarro," ridiculous, "Sonny Stitt, Sonny Rollins, Miles Davis, and James Moody," was one of the most-- "Bill Evans." And actually, who told me this to put this one in was George Masso. He says, "Jimmy Nipper, man, that guy was completely different and way ahead of everything." "Scott LaFaro," and this is up to, "and John Coltrane."

And that was it. That was it. So that's my that's just my personal thing of the guys that were all big contributors to the bebop era.

Quite a list.

And I got quite a hand. And the people afterwards told me that everybody thought it was quite a thing, because the opinionated thing that I definitely am-- because they'll naturally argue, why didn't I put Benny Goodman in there? Well, I loved Benny Goodman as much as I did Artie Shaw. They were two apples and oranges.

And he played great. And he was, in a way, a trailblazer, but stayed right there where he was.

He didn't grow in the role.

That's right. When Benny got a bebop band, he had some nice players and everything, but he couldn't cut it. He played, and he turned back to Buddy. And he even, a couple of times, it sounded like Woody playing clarinet, because he was trying to do something. Artie invented part of it. So he was a parallel player, I call him.

And Benny was more of a vertical player. But after you've gone with the quintet with Benny Goodman, I don't think there's anything of that style any better. That's probably one of the best records in the world of, like I say, an era. So it breaks my heart not to have put him in there. But I can't put him beside Artie Shaw, because there was such a different thing in going forward on the instrument.

And Artie had that kind of a personality where he was always one step ahead of the people he was talking with.

That's right, he was.

He couldn't suffer fools. That's why he got out of the business. He didn't want to put up with the bullshit.

That's right, exactly. And even on those records-- one like, say, "Innuendo." But there's a mess of records there. Mostly Al Cohn was on it, because Zoot told me about it. He says, "I don't think Artie like it." I said, "Are you kidding me? He talks about you, he loves you." He says, "No kidding?" He says, "Well, I can't read changes.

A new tune would come on, I'd give it to Al. I'd say, 'I don't know what the hell those things are.'" And so Artie would say, "Zoot, why don't you take-- well, I'll take it easy." I said, "But he loved you." But Al Cohn's solos, he'd play after Artie a lot of times and Artie would take it. And as much as I love Al Cohn, and probably Al knows it, they weren't anywhere near as great as the-- even though one's tenor and one's-- Artie Shaw's things were completely like... nobody threatened him!

Marty DeFranco played great. But to me, and I love him, he plays the top of the.... he plays into the horn. He plays great, but he's on one level. One level. And he goes to the end of that level. And then, he plays all these things beautiful, but I don't hear a lot of soul there. The whole sound that Artie got was soul, because a lot of clarinet players are on the Benny Goodman School.

He said, "It doesn't make it sound like a clarinet." He says, "It doesn't sound like a legitimate clarinet." And Artie would tell me, "What's the sound? I sound like that, that's the way I want to play. Does it have to sound like that?"

Right. And you've done the same thing yourself. You haven't wanted to be typecast or put into a role.

That's right.

You don't want to be Artie Shaw copycat.

Well, he told me that himself. He says, --people would ask him, he says, "Well he doesn't play as good as you, Artie." And he says, "I don't want him to. I mean, not good as you, but I don't want him play like me." Naturally, a few things like "Stardust" he said, he has to do. But he was marvelous to me at that point.

He respects the creativity and that cutting-edge mentality, because that's the kind of guy he was. So you guys were definitely parallel on that score.

Well, naturally, it made me very happy to be the one. I didn't expect when he died that-- I kind of expected some kind of a thing. But the whole way they called me out to accept those things, this is unbelievable. I've never done this in my life. And I made some calls, but I'm the kind of guy, I don't like to go, "Here I am."

So I asked everybody that called me out there-- I said, "So I bring my clarinet." I said, "I usually do anyway, I throw it in." So he says, "Oh, no, there's no need of that. There's not going to be any-- it's going to be a very small funeral." And so I said okay, but I threw a mouthpiece in. Thank God.

Anyway, I get out there and-- Marian McPartland got very friendly with him, because she did a lot of interviewing.

I get out there, I'm not in the hotel in Long Beach. And the phone rings. And it's Marian McPartland. She says, "Dick?" She says, "You know that you're going to play the clarinet?" I said, "No." I said, "You're not going to believe this." She says, "You didn't bring?" I said, "I brought a mouthpiece." And I won't repeat what she said. That's street language.

Mary's a tough bird.

Anyway, I said, "I have a mouthpiece." And that afternoon, I went to a store and I got a Selma USA clarinet. This is weird, because it's-- naturally, all the good Selmas are made in France. But this is a USA model, where they take granadillo wood, and they make a paste out of it. They get it down to a paste. And then, they make the clarinet. And it turns out, and it's wood!

And the thing played pretty good. It was the only one I could get at this particular-- like, they didn't have any professional buffets or anything really. But they had this thing. I saw it up on the wall. I said, "Can I take that, try that?" The guy had no idea who I was. Nobody in any music store knows who anybody. So anyway, the guy was there. I said, "I'll give you my card. If I go off with it, you got list price for it."

So anyway, I took the thing, brought it back to the room. It played really nice. So I got a reed. And then, I played. I got there, and they said, "You will play after the--"

This is the funeral.

This is the funeral.

Where did they hold it?

They held it right near his home, Newbury Park. It's a place called... Westlake Gardenside. And there was a beautiful, little sort of a small, little church right on the cemetery grounds. But they had problems out there. They couldn't bury him because there was so much water. You remember all the mudslides and water? Well, this was a couple of weeks before the bad mudslides in the first of the year, there.

And it rained every day I was out there. So they were supposed to bury him on a Wednesday. They had to wait till a Sunday. And I don't know whether they still did it or not. But it was great. Red Buttons was there. That's what I remember. And it was no religion whatsoever. There was no religious part, any kind of religion there. But he was going to be buried.

And a beautiful young picture of him, about eighteen, and then a picture of him just before he died. And then, people got up and talked. And then, Red got up. And Red was just too much. So it could be humorous without being rude or anything, because it was what Artie would have loved. So then, I was talking with Rose, "What am I going to play for this guy?" All the great tunes are love songs. So I said, there's only one tune you could do.

Gordon Jenkins.

"I'll Be Seeing You" because that can be-- so I'll play one chorus of "I'll be Seeing You," sort of a not really ballad, little bit of a lilt to it. And then, I play three choruses of blues, just blues. In each one, I got a little more aroused with-- and then, I stopped. Then, I went to the last half of "I'll Be Seeing You" again. And I had my eyes closed, because I'm looking right at all these people.

And I'm seeing, they've got handkerchiefs and everything. I'm trying not to see it. I don't want to go myself. So anyway, I finished it. And Red came rushing up, which was kind of nice. Red came rushing up. He says, "That's the most beautiful thing I've heard." And then, another guy came and said, "What a sound you got out of that." I didn't have the heart to say, "I just borrowed this clarinet to play."

But anyway, it was just probably-- I came home after that and having the band twenty-two years, and then having it end with me doing that was almost like a-- I can go now. You know what I mean?

I have nothing more that I have to achieve than that.

But you topped it, because you just came off a tour that was three months long that took you all around the U.S. Tell us a little about that.

The tour, tours are tours. And I was kind of scared of this one, even my doctor-- I had had a kind of a bad year, the year before. I had fallen down on the ice and whacked my head. And I thought this was doing things. But I had gone to all kinds of doctors, my friend doctors and everything. Come to find out, the whole year was sort of-- not panic attacks-- anxiety, that I had had years and years ago before I had the band, took one little bit of a pill every day, not there.

Evidently, this pill quit. So after a year, I went to a guy down the Cape that I go to, one of the few guys. He said, "Well, let's try a couple of things." So he tried one. And all of a sudden, I was myself again.

Was it like hypertension?

Yeah. I can't explain it. I just felt like I got up in the morning and I felt lousy. And what helped me was eating. Eating helped me a little bit. And then, it would fall in again. So this was happening during that thing. So I called a couple of times. And he sent me out. I never did try the pills until I got home, because I figured, this pill affects me wrong, maybe it'll hang up my playing. I took a half of one.

Come to find out, it's a very mild pill.

And so I did the whole thing. But then, I started to feel good because of the crowd. Every gig-- and there were forty-five gigs in this tour-- I hadn't done a trip like that for about thirteen years. My doctor, this one guy said, "Dick, I really don't want you to do this." And I said to Tony-- his name is Tony. I said, "Tony, if I don't do this, what am I going to do?"

Sit down and watch TV? I won't want to practice anything. If I can't go on the road, then what's the sense?" So he said, "Well, do what you want. I'll help you." So I felt the end once I felt good. And the best I felt was on the bandstand of that whole thing. Then, when I got home, I got cured of that thing.

If that's the case, you'll probably go on like Lionel Hampton until you're ninety-five, because he lived when he got out of the bandstand.

Buddy Morrow is eighty-seven. He had gotten lip cancer, couldn't play for four years. And he's coming back! He's starting to play beautiful.

Holy shit.

At eighty-seven.

Damn.

So naturally, you wake up every day. You're like the old thing, you're either on the obits to see if you're in it.

So tell us a little bit more about this tour, because you were really waxing eloquent about it across the street at Starbucks.

About the tour?

Yeah, I mean about the acceptance that you guys were getting.

It was unbelievable, because I thought the only thing you can say to yourself-- and of course, naturally, it's still affects me now, because I've never had a tour like that in my life. I was with Charlie Spivak's band. Now, this is the tail end of the big band business.

'47, '8, '9?

That was '52 and '3. And then, I was with Buddy Morrow, '53. And there was still a lot of action there, but it certainly wasn't like the heyday, like between '38 and '45, say. But anyway, we started down the Eastern seaboard. We did all the-- Washington. We do a swing dance in Washington that is just unbelievable.

This guy has worked it up to the point where people from all over the world come, all over the world. And we're the favorite band. But anyway, we went down the East: North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and all that. Then, we get to Florida. We stayed there about twelve days, played Busch Gardens for four days. And then, we came up to... what's the town that's west?

Tallahassee?

No, it's one that--

Jacksonville?

It's one where they have the airplane.... What is that, a big Air Force thing there. They have an Air Force museum.

On the West Coast?

My mind, I wish I wrote these things down. But anyway, it's on its way. It's like it's Florida goes like this, like Texas does a little, bit and then goes into Louisiana. And Louisiana, and then Texas. We did about twelve dates in Texas, which-- now, every one of these are done in mostly high school auditoriums.

Which all the high schools now-- including mine and Brockton is one of the best auditoriums of all time-- the whole tour was all grand pianos, most of them nine-foot Steinways.

So who's coming?

You're getting the old timers who knew the bands when. You're also getting high school kids who are players?

Yeah, the kids that were in school, they usually got it for nothing.

They had a program there. They'd have two or three of the junior high school bands. And then, they have the regular high school band. Some of them were very good. They would be able to come, or they would open up for us, or something like that.

It's amazing how the high school level has just grown and grown.

Like Brockton, Vinny Macrina, the guy in Brockton. He's great. He wins these things all over the place. And it really is something. But these things are so-- in other words, the tough part of the business, if you're trying to book the business a tour and you start-- I say, well, in four months, we can be there--that's not-- these are all booked a year, and a year and a half before, from people who belong to clubs that go to all the shows that come there.

They're like groupies.

Yeah, that's right.

They follow you.

So consequently, you've got that, plus anybody else who wants to go. So constantly, they're all jammed.

Great.

Now we got to go to Texas, now we go to Colorado. That was a different story. Now, I figure, we're going to die here, because it's all kids. It's still ski seasons, it's February, March.

Vail, Aspen, all those places.

That's right, yeah. I love this one, Crested Butte. That's one of my favorite ones. Anyway, that's like one of the best ones out there. So we did about twelve of those. And I see all the kids are coming. Naturally, we were getting my style, my blue-hair friends, here, a lot of them. But a lot of kids because they've got no place to go. They don't have-- they might have a couple of bars that have a rock and roll thing.

But they want to see what this is. They came in. They're dancing in the aisles. They're dancing in the corridors all over the place.

Hallelujah.

And every one of them. I never saw such beauty in some of those places, watching the kids come down the hards-- the real great skiers are over in one side over here, and all that. And then, they have in the old Glenn Miller movie, they have those heated pools where they come out at midnight a kimono and everything, and drink, and sit in the warm water, and watch the twenty-four, twenty-three, zero degrees, drink it away a little bit.

It must have been a refreshing change for them from digital DJ hip-hop stuff.

So anyway, they love this music. And then, we went into Arizona, played a great right near Denver, Scottsdale. And then, we went into-- of all the things, the ones in California, the most remote, little towns-- one name was Redding, I've never heard of it, another was Paradise. It's up under San Francisco. Same thing, though, these people have great places to go without having to go to the big city, so we played.

And then, we started on our way home, and we ended up towards Chicago. And that's where I told you we played that Big Band Era. And I can't believe it. I said, every night, even the guys don't believe it. It's jam packed, and we can't get off the sand.

Now, this band has been more or less together since the mid eighties. Am I right?

Yep, since '83.

A lot of the same players, some of the same players?

Actually, there's nobody left but me now. Keith Gottschalk stayed the longest. But from the last... I'm on my twenty-third year. We've completed twenty-two years. And the guys that are with the band now... like Phil Person has been with the band fifteen years. Kerry MacKillop has been with the band fourteen years. Even Jay, Jay from... Jay Daley, he played lead trumpet. He's been with the band almost seven years now.

We have some people from New York. There's a young tenor man named Matt Koza, who's a beautiful tenor man. He's been with. He takes-- if we have a gig down here, he'll take the Chinese bus to come down here. It's only about twenty-five dollars, and they go to both Chinatowns. And I never even knew they had that.

And then, you mentioned some of your--

So we've got about four or five guys from New York. And they're always the same. I'll say we have a seventeen-piece band, but we have probably twenty-five people. If one guy can't make it, we got a guy from Washington, a trombone player.

You platoon them, kind of.

And he plays great. But it's definitely not a pickup band and could not be a pickup band.

No, no, no, the charts are too tough. It's demanding music.

You'd never make it. And plus, the things that I do-- I do this and do that.

You break out the Gramercy 5 foam mat.

Yeah, we do a Gramercy 5. It's pretty much [*sings rhythm*] when--

"You Are the One." [*sings rhythm*] That one?

"Summit Ridge Drive."

Oh, "Summit Ridge," sorry.

Well, that was the big one. And I can't do too many, because we've only got two hours and we don't want to have two or three of those. One is enough. Although, I'd love to play a couple of the others.

And you've studiously avoided having a singer, because it cuts into your--

That's right.

--the personality of the band.

Because he a vocalist, and he never had that much luck with vocalists. I mean luck, he had Billie Holiday. But at the time he had her, she couldn't go south.

That's right.

And it ended up with a thing. She actually quit. She says, "Artie, I'm holding you back." He wasn't the one.

I remember that from her autobiography.

And of course, Benny did the same thing. They both hired Black players, which were great. And it certainly opened up a whole new thing. But then, I've worked a thing like, what's his name was saying, like Louis Armstrong, filled them-- if you try to pick a guy out of the band that would-- if you didn't know-- and say, which one sings like Lou? He'd be the last guy you would ever figure. So I'll go up and say, "We got a guy that sings just like Perry Como, you won't believe it." I can put this whole thing on. And they're waiting for this and they hear that. And he got bigger applause than I did on the concerto at the end. *[Laughs]* I tell you. But guys like that, it's a regular... and then, we got the gig to do the World War II Memorial. That was great. We got that because the guy that we do the swing dance out there for down there is a very good-- he has these bands come in from all over the world. We're his favorite. I guess they were going to get the Glenn Miller Band. Somebody told me they refused it, but I can't imagine. And I love the guy that runs the band. He's a very good trombone player. But I heard he refused it. But I can't understand why. That's a big-- but anyway, they got us. And that was quite a thing. I never saw anything like that. Rose and I went out, my wife and I, and we played the night of the opening. And to look out there and see 90,000 people sitting in the mall. And they had sets of speakers here. And then, maybe another hundred yards there, they had another set of speakers. So it's all going down. You look out there, and you hear round of applause, and you can't believe.

The applause is coming in waves.

Yeah.

So that was great. But then, the next day, we were playing about ten miles away. They were opening up a ballroom. The government put in so many millions, some ballroom that used to be really big years ago, they're opening up again, because some of that stuff was happening. So we were playing there, but I had the afternoon off, so Rose and I went down and saw-- we missed the big thing. There's one with fountains and all that where the shrine is. We never did get there, because we're going to go back. But we went into this place where they had tents. And the gigantic tents on the mall. And one of the girls that was working there said, "If you don't go to any of them, go to the biggest tent there." There were places where every branch of the service, and every branch of the branch-- like the thirty-ninth something, the twenty-ninth thin--g all had booths with big pads up there where guys could walk by and write their names. And if somebody came by that knew them, they could answer. My sister was in the service, so I put her name down, and a bunch of guys that I knew-- I went, I wrote my name on the two fleets, because during World War II, I guess they wanted the Germans and the Japanese to think that we had more fleets than we did, because the Seventh Fleet and the Third Fleet were the same fleet, only with a different admiral.

So I put my name on both the Third and the Seventh. And maybe someday, somebody came through later on. I'll probably go back there now and see maybe some names on there of guys that are on the same ship with me.

So it's an ongoing message board, so to speak?

Yeah, exactly. And it was mind boggling, because it was great. And about every twenty minutes, I would choke up. I never saw one even serious look. Everybody had like a half smile. And of course, that drew a lot of guys in wheelchairs and things like that. And everybody would do for everything. Everything was free if they were giving away something.

I never saw anything like could be an attempt at a utopia like that particular mall was that day, the first day it opened. Probably still is. And it's so sad to know that most of the guys had gone before they got this up.

Wow. When were you in the service?

I was in the Navy in the Pacific from '44 to '46.

Oh, my God. My dad was out there in Okinawa.

I was with a lot of--

He was a Seabee.

Wow, that's pretty wild. He was a brave guy.

Yeah, right, it was a tough gig.

But I even went on the ship. I was drafted. But at the time I was drafted, if you were physically okay, you could pick anything. And a lot of my buddies joined the Navy, so I joined the Navy. I didn't play yet, but I put music down anyway. Naturally, they didn't put me in it.

You didn't get to-- you didn't play any of the Navy bands?

I fooled around with the clarinet, but I thought I was too old. Lou Colombo was a couple of years younger than me. He was already playing great at fourteen!

How old were you when you went in?

I was eighteen.

And you hadn't played clarinet yet?

Yeah, I fooled around. I got a clarinet-- too lazy. I played a couple of-- in fact, I learned one Artie Shaw solo. My mother gave me some money for the-- I started spending it on candy. Little crook. *[Laughs]* And then, she caught me doing it. And she said, "That's enough of that." But that was like when I was about fourteen. Then, when I became sixteen, there was a great tenor player in Brockton who died of leukemia when he was twenty-nine, Al Betosi. I don't know if you ever heard people talk about him.

Petosi?

Betosi, his name was. In Brockton, there's a club called the Betosi Memorial. But that wasn't he, that was his brother, who went down with the Sullivan brothers on the same ship. So they met. But anyway, this was a buddy of mine. And I was doing the day gig before I got drafted. And I was working with this guy at the London Clothing Company. We were pressing army seams, piecework or something. So these guys, Al brought his clarinet. He was a tenor player and he had a buddy that played guitar. And every noon, they'd play old standards, exactly like you. So anyway, he talked to me. And he says, "Well, you play a little clarinet." And I said, Well, yeah, but I don't play like you." He said, "Well, bring it." So I brought it down. I knew exactly like you and all those guys. So he was the big thing for me. After a few afternoons of doing that, he said, "You know, you should do something about that. I'm serious. You should do something about it." So I started hanging around with him. And I started to learn a lot more. I didn't take any more lessons at that time. But we were making homemade records every week. He had one of those little players. And when he enlisted, he had to-- because he went into Admiral Nimitz's personal band, probably the best gig you could have on Guam. So he went to-- and he used to send me-- I was in the-- he'd send me, through v-mail, lessons, because he knew how to play guitar also. So show me changes on. So I learned. And on the ship, we had unbelievable bunch of... Well, in typical Army, Navy, and probably Marine fashion, they put you where they shouldn't. This guy was with Tommy Dorsey, he was with a great band that was around here. I can't think of his-- I can't think of his name now, a real great jazz band during World War II. And he told me, you're going there. They said, "No, we're putting we're putting you in radar." So with my luck, this guy is in radar. And all of a sudden, this officer starts putting the little things together, a quintet, "Let's play this for the guys." And guys get together. Next thing you know, he says, "We got enough guys to put a band together." With two Marines. There were forty Marines on the ship to man some of the forties and twentiess guns. But we had two Marines in the ship. And the DI of those guys wasn't too happy with us at all. But they were with the band. But this tenor man was one of the tenor men I had ever heard. And I followed them around all day.

Who was this guy?

His name was Preston Hudson. And he was just a great player that was completely disgusted that he didn't get into the-- we'd hear other bands. We played opposite-rated bands. And we just give him a solo. He wiped the whole other bands out.

How big a band was it? Was it a big band?

A fifteen, sixteen-piece band we'd got.

Damnation.

Guys-- like the buglers, a couple of the buglers played trumpet. And we had a guy from near Providence, Paul Wins, he played lead alto. We had another guy from Chicago playing tenor. A marine-- after this Hudson guy I told you, he got points to go home.

And you guys are cruising around the Pacific. And you're having daily sessions.

Well, this is like the war was on about a year. I was out there one year. And then, this band come on. So we'd go back to a rest island to recoup and get news. And then the band would do something. And then, they send us over to a couple of other ships to play for them.

I see.

And the executive officer snapped, because this is not a rated band. He told-- we got a band on the ship with unrated musicians that are great. So we could do no wrong. Most of the rest of the guys in the ship wanted to kill us, because we had such a good dea [*Fred laughs*] But I lucked out. I learned how to play. I was practicing like four hours a day, if I could.

Were you doubling on alto?

What's that? I had to play alto.

The clarinet was the preferred axe.

That's when I picked up the alto, on the ship. But what was happening, we get in the war area. And I would be in the fan room. And there's no microphone, intercom. So I'd be in there practicing scales, doing the tunes. Well, all of sudden, a banging on the door. You got these things that you got to open.

Yeah, those big wheels.

And they'd say, "Johnson, you idiot, get to your battle station!"

"Oh, yeah, okay!" Luckily, we never got hit. But a lot of them did. Well, we went through the whole thing.

Were you on a carrier, or a battleship, or what?

I was on a cruiser, a light cruiser, which is-- they call it light, because the guns on it are just a little bit smaller than a heavy cruiser. They're both the same size.

How many personnel?

1,500.

Oh, geez. So you get one percent that can play in a big band. That's pretty decent. You'd be hard pressed to do that nowadays.

But listen to this tenor player, I just followed him around.

Preston Hudson.

And he played with bands. He played with Dorsey before he went in.

Yeah, he played with Dorsey. And when we came back out, he went with Dorsey.

What did you do when you got out?

Well, I took lessons from Norman Carroll at the Conservatory. He was with The Pops at the time. And I got very friendly. I think he might still be alive. But he'd come to the thing-- once I got the Artie Shaw band, he came down and see me. And I took lessons for him from eighteen months. And then, I split and went to New York.

You hooked up with Spivak in New York?

Yeah, because when I first got there, we lived with my sister-in-law out in Brooklyn. And she just begged us to come there-- because I almost stayed out in the coast. I went to the coast. But I'd rather be around where my roots are.

You were already married to Rose?

Yeah, I was already married.

This is '52. No, '50.

Well, I married her in '51. And I had already been playing since I got out of the service, which is '46. So I was already. I had to catch up. And so I was-- and I played some piano, so I knew what I'm doing here all that kind of thing. And I really put some-- what's his name?

The clarinet teacher, Norman Carroll. I said "You know, Mr. Carroll," I said, "something's wrong here, because I want to do things on my own after I practice what he told me. I said, "It's taking me four hours to finish what you gave me." He sort of laughed, he said, "I know it." He says, "You're going to be a good clarinet player." So every once in a while, he'd say, "Play me some of that stuff that you guys do."

You mean he was teaching you legit? And you were boogying on the side.

That's right. Matter of fact, I came home, and I was playing alto. My favorite alto player from Brockton, who was a great alto player, he just got homesick when he got out, so he never-- Leo Pinonon, his name was. I took three alto lessons from the guy. He had a gorgeous sound. So I went up there the third time. He says, "Dick, do you want to go to New York to one of those great embouchure guys?" I said, "Well, you play better than they do."

He says, "Well, I can't do any more for you. By the way, can you take my place at the Roma Cafe tonight? [Laughs] I said, "What do I have to do?" He said, "Well, it's sort of a Dixieland gig, but they play some swing things too." So he gave me the gig in the club and says, "Don't bother coming back. Just keep on doing what you're doing." [Laughs] I said, wow. So I did.

And when did you meet Lou Colombo? When did you start playing with him?

I knew him when we were little kids. He grew up in the same park as Rocky Marciano. There's a place called James Edgar Park, which they've given-- Rocky has a shrine there and everything now. But that was the place we all went in an area, a little park to go to. And so he was a wise little guy when he was young. He was about a year younger. But he had all these big guys hanging around with him.

I did a roast of him one day, it was funny. I said, "Yeah, he was pretty fresh when he was a kid." And I said, "We all popped up. He stayed little. And all of a sudden, my buddy and I, we popped right up. We were about a foot and a half taller than him for a while. And he didn't pick on us anymore." Until maybe he got bigger. But anyway, I can remember him getting into some of the-- they had these talent shows at the park on Fourth of July night.

One of the tunes he played, I'm trying to think of it. But anyway, he started playing-- oh, and I heard that. And the guys-- he played pretty good. He was about thirteen, I guess. And so the kid that lived beside me, Joey Laughlin, played ball with him. Lou, he was always in the-- he lived on the park. And he played. He would get up to double-A.

He played double-A minor league ball for about five or six years. He broke his ankle in three places, and that did it. But anyway, he was over there all the time. So this Joe, the guy that lived by me, said, "Man, he says, you got to hear Lou Columbo play trumpet now." Because everything was a big bands. This was the Harry James-- everything. And it was just the biggest thing in the world.

So he says, you should-- so my mother played piano. She played good piano. And she was a piano teacher. But she had great ears and knew all the tunes of the day. So he played "Stardust." I put this on some of the articles, there. He was fourteen, probably almost fifteen, and I remember it was in D-flat because of the way he headed it. He only had about an octave and three notes.

He had all the feeling he has today in that octave and up. I'm sitting there, and I don't believe it, because I'm a couple of years older than he is.

That was a huge hit of the day, right?

"Stardust" was the-- so he just said, my mother asked him what he wanted to play. He said, "Mrs. Johnson, do you know 'Stardust?'" She says, "Yeah, I do know." Anyway, so he played it. And she didn't believe it either. My sister was five years older than me. She was smack dab-- she was going to all the dances and telling me about all the bands and everything she went to. So she heard him. She goes, "Lou!" So it's been like that ever since.

Wow. So you guys started gigging together.

That's right. Yeah. Well, actually, before I went in, I did a couple of things. But I used to go watch the band. I couldn't read yet. I learned how to read in the service. So I got out. He'd come down once in a great while. He'd do that little recording thing at Al Betosi's house, the tenor player there. We'd do something. And we were all like this with him. *[Gapes]*

Didn't know anything, didn't know any chords, but he was playing right all the time. So when I got out, naturally, we got together. We started playing together. And that was it from that time on.

Who'd he sound like? He sound like Chet Baker?

He was more or less-- no, it was long before Chet Baker. He was more like Berrigan. And he loved James, but he didn't play like him. But he had his own thing. It was *[sings rhythm]*. those kind of licks as would hear Bobby Hackett. But more Berrigan and Roy Eldridge. You can hear more Roy in him. And always had a pretty good range, never got-- but in the last few years, he's getting up there on the high Gs and everything. He says, I never hit an A-flat yet, but I got a G.

But still growing, still growing.

Dizzy hired him every time he came down to the Cape, because Dizzy got to the point where he wasn't comfortable doing just a quartet, because it was starting to leave him. So he heard Lou. And he people get it wrong. They mentioned that Lou said he was the best-- he said Lou was the best trumpet player. Not right. He said, "He's the most natural trumpet player I've ever met in my life." He said, "This guy's just pick it up.

I don't believe it." And he brought him up. He had him play with him about-- in fact, Gary played with him a couple of times down at the Seacrest there in Falmouth. And Dizzy, he'd call me when he was up. I played with him three times up here. Jonathan Swift's, I played with him twice. I don't know if you saw that.

With Dizzy?

With Diz.

I may have been at one of those, yeah.

Because Charlie Lake, then he would go when it was down the Cape, he wanted Lou on the band with him all the time.

So you've carved out a career for yourself in Eastern Mass[achusetts]. You've been one of the number one players and for a long time.

Look, I was thinking of the other day, the people I wanted to play with. I got the Artie Shaw band. I'd idolize him since I was fourteen years old. And then, I get to play with Diz five times, I think. And they had a club down in Fall River. I never can think-- this day, I can't think of these names. But every club in America had it, had the same name of the club. I can't think of a damn thing now. But anyway--

Not the Blue Note.

--he came down there twice. Well it's like... they had one in Boston. Sinatra sang just before it closed in Boston. And he had one here.

Blistrops, no.

No, it was one that-- Blistrops wasn't down there. These, it was all over the world. It was almost like a chain. I was a chain.

Copa Cabana, I don't know. I don't know.

If I could say it, you'd know right away. But anyway, they had a house band down there, afternoon sessions. And so I played with-- I went down and sat in one time. And they made me the house-- Pelosi was in the house band, myself, Dave, once in a while, McKenna. Then the drummer was from there-- Hoss did a couple of things, Bob Shurtleff. He played with Byrd once and the other guy played with Bob. Lou and I both played with him twice.

McKenna was on one of them, this other piano player. The first time we got there, we're playing the set. All of the sudden, the guy says, "The great Charlie Parker." So I walk off the stand. He says, "Hey, kid, where are you going?" I said, "I'm getting off the stand." He said, "No, you're--" I said, "Yes, I am." And it was one of those things. He just went and grabbed me. He says, "No, you're going to stay right here and play."

Alto or clarinet?

No, I was playing alto. At that time, I was in the-- in fact, I got into clarinet quite a bit but guys were telling me, get rid of that thing, play the alto. So they almost talked me-- "We don't want to hear that thing!"

The beboppers, that was not-- that was passé.

Yeah, well, plus the fact-- but I still loved it. Naturally, most guys never knew I played clarinet when I got Artie Shaw Band because most everything was alto.

Everything was alto. People couldn't play it. I was too damn difficult.

John Hammond took notice of me when I was going to New York right after I left Buddy Morrow. And he came into-- Phil Woods was-- on Monday night, you used to be able to go down and ask for the gigs up there. So Phil was opposite me. You got a rhythm, second, fourth... So Hammond was in back of him.

So he came to see me. So he had to go overseas after. It was too bad, because he really started giving me-- he got me on the Newport Festival by just making a call to Wein. He says, "I've heard this kid, Dick Johnson, put him on." And he said, "Okay." So I played with Ralph Kuhn that day.

Cool, what was that '56, '7?

That was '57, because I made my first album in '56. Maybe '58. I made my first album in Chicago with Buddy Morrow. He got it on Mercury, '56. Second album was Riverside with Dave, and Philly Joe John, and Wilbur Ware. That was '57. And then, the Newport Festival was '58. But anyway, the thing with Byrd. So I'll never forget. We were playing "Sweet Georgia Brown" of all things. He called that. But there was a head on it that Hawkins had and Howard McGhee had. It sort of went like... *[sings rhythm]*

...following the chain. I knew that. So when it came to my chorus, I played that. And then I played another of my own. So he gave me a little punch. He says, "Oh, you know that riff thing," Charlie Parker. So I can't remember. So then, he played. Louis played, everybody played. Pelosi, he just waited for all of us. Then, I remember him sat and playing.

If you never heard Byrd live, it's a shame, because you never really heard him. You hear the records. But he enveloped the whole room without being loud. It was just the sound.

Amazing clarity and articulation, richness, the sound.

I'm just going, oh, my God. Now, you look back on it. And at that time, we came from-- it was an afternoon thing. We used to rush up to Brockton and do, we had a pirate[??] stand and Hoss and I, we had a gig there. And that was like the happiest days of my life, because I come from that place. And then, we get to play, get to-- "I played with Byrd today, I don't believe that."

So it happened again, it happened the second time. And then, Buddy DeFranco was there this one time. He was going by. So Byrd says, "I won't play another note unless Buddy DeFranco plays with me." So Buddy says, "Go on, Byrd, I don't even have-- my clarinet's way over there." He says, "I won't play another note!" I said, "Buddy, here." So Buddy played my clarinet, because Byrd loved-- I guess he liked the instrument, but never got into it.

But he loved Buddy DeFranco.

Jazz horn players have a lot of respect for clarinet, because it's such a difficult instrument.

Well, Buddy himself calls it the agony horn. And I was out-- I did that Denver jazz party. That went about twenty-one years. But I did the last ten of it. So I used to bring alto, soprano-- it goes off the flute, because from so much clarinet playing, I lost my spot on flute. I could play the flute for a while. And then, all of a sudden, I couldn't.

You got to do it every day, they say-- fifteen to twenty minutes a day, or you lose it.

So I was playing so much, and I was practicing so much clarinet when I got the Artie Shaw-- because I knew a lot of them, but some of them I didn't. And some of them, I wanted to play his thing.

Who was the guy, Dick Golden? The guy in Denver?

Dick Golden was a guy from-- Dick Golden is the record player disk jockey from the Cape.

Who was the host of the Denver jazz parties?

Of the what? Oh, Dick...

I had always hoped--

He's the guy that invented the thing for the-- the tooth sprayer. What do you call that thing? The thing that you squeeze the thing and it sprays your teeth, what do you call it?

I know what you're talking about.

In fact, I got one for--

So the guy was a dentist.

Yeah. That's where he got his money. But he ran that little band, the greatest jazz band of all time with Bobby Hackett and all those guys for a while. Then, he started this thing, went for twenty-one years.

What a blast. I never got to go.

So anyway-- well, that was something. Everybody was out there-- Carl Fontana. I used to hear these guys. Of course, Buddy DeFranco. And so anyway, I saw Buddy is there. One group will be on, the next group had to start a lineup on chairs. So Buddy's on it, so I grab my alto. And he looked at me, he says, "What are you going to be, a traitor?"

I said, "Well, you're playing clarinet. You don't want the Screaming Mimis up here." He said, "Get your clarinet." He'd been so great to me. Unbelievable. He was. He said, every time he'd seen-- we did a gig together at a real great music school in Chicago of young kids. It's where the real kids go there. And so it was our band and Buddy DeFranco as a guest artist.

So we did our thing. And Buddy came in. He can't help it, he's such a beautiful guy. So he brought his charts, he rehearsed with the band. And he sounded marvelous on the thing. So while he brings me back on, he said, "You know, you hear me, you hear all the clarinet." He said, "This guy's got the hardest job in the world, right here. And he's here playing these things. And he's doing his own thing. And then, he's got to play..." He said, "That isn't--" naturally, I'm just sitting there. But anyway, he couldn't do enough for me. And the thing that he wrote in the album is all true. He said I've been very underrated, under recorded, and like that. And he's always been-- he's such a beautiful guy, you can't help it. And I thank him for whatever it is. And Ken Peplowski, he's the same way.

And Eddie Daniels was nice. I played one gig with Eddie Daniels up at the University of Michigan. We were out with the band. And as luck would have it, it's the people that write the magazine, *The Clarinet*, at that time, run this thing every year of all classical players. And they have a jazz. So they call him, he said, "We need another jazz player."

I said, thank you very much. So anyway, I went out. And we had a night off right out near there. And so the bus driver that we rented took me, and Gary was with the band at the time, and trombone player from Sweden there that we had with us.

Okie Pearson?

Bert Somberg. He called himself [inaudible] He was in one of these weird cults that he got out of. It was a bad one. But anyway, they both drove over and saw me. So we got interviewed after we played or something. So they talked to me and said, well, "This guy pretty much says it all on the clarinet. There's nobody that's going to go any farther than that."

But anyway, he was nice. He said, "Well, this guy over here made me learn 'Donna Lee,' because I had put down. He says, "All of the sudden, nobody ever-- no clarinet player." And I hear, he says, "I'll learn it." He said, and I did. Which I've heard him play it since. But he was very nice to me.

And a great guy on his instrument. I love the album he made with Dave McKenna and Joe Cohn, that trio album they made. That's a wild one.

Yeah.

But let's get back to you. And do you feel like you've been underrated over the years? Have you been a big fish in a small pond in Eastern Mass?

I'll tell you, I don't. Everything that's happened to me comes at a time where I'm savoring it. Maybe if I got all those things too soon? I've seen guys get bored with it. I'm never bored with it, because everything-- I was just driving to a gig that I was doing down the Cape the other night. And I say, this is-- the funny years to me, these are the best years of my life right here, because I've done the thing with Shaw. I've got that.

Everybody wants to know-- there's some funny stories about when that came out. And I feel good. And I'm looking forward to the next gig. And I was going to do the Tony Bennett gig. That thing was ridiculous, man.

Last Friday night at the Bank of America series.

Right, yeah. And then, I went and did a thing, a double header, the next day with Gray and Marshall at Artie Marrow's folks' fiftieth anniversary in Providence at this beautiful, little-- and just the three of us playing, man. That's as good as playing anything.

Gray and who, Marshall?

Gray and Marshall and myself.

Sweet.

And then, that's the thing, no drums. It was just a nice, little, soft thing. Then, I went from there, I went over to John Chans and Daryl Sherman was there. So I played with her. So these guys who say, "What's the matter with you? Are you crazy?" I'm not crazy. I love to play.

And that's relaxing me. I'm not doing anything-- if I had a bad heart-- and funny about the thing that I did with the heart, no damage. There was no damage to the heart there here they did some stinting and things like that. But luckily, there was no-- I still feel great.

And you're still putting out records. You've got this twofer thing that you put out yourself fairly recently with a panoply of all your favorite musicians on it.

That's right.

And you put it out yourself, because the labels aren't doing it.

I wanted full control. This is funny, I've got to talk about Lou. But Lou tried it about four, five, six years ago. He said, "Dick, we got to record." And I said sure. So he gets a place. You know him with sound. There's a schoolhouse down in Truro, man, it's got the greatest sound. So we went down there. And he went down there with Ron Ormsby, has a place down the Cape. And we did some things. And I did a few little things, little charts. And Eddie, the piano player, Eddie--

Higgins? Eddie Higgins?

Eddie Higgins. And we all get down there. We did some nice things. And we're listening to the playbacks. To play on the job like that, all due respect to Ron, it takes a certain other kind of guy to know how to go up, and go into a place, and get all-- because he does beautiful things in his own place.

But this, the sound just wasn't right. So Lou said, "I listened to the tapes the next day, Dick." And he said, I said "I knew it when I left, they're no good." Not no good, but not--

Not good enough.

So about next year, he says, "Let's do one in the club." Now, the club's got a rotten piano. All due respect to Dave. I shouldn't you say rotten. I don't mean to be-- his son owns the place. He'll probably say, "Rotten?!" But he knows it's not.

Dave McKenna?

No, Dave Columbo, Lou's kid, who owns the thing. And it's a piano that's covered with half bar and all that. It's playable, but it's not a very good sound. So Louis said we're going to do that. And I'm going, oh, here we go. Anyway, we get all the guys. We can talk Kenny Wenzel and the group that plays down there.

And we play there. He had a couple of tastes. All of a sudden, we're playing things like "The 5 O'clock Whistle." "Five o'clock with..."

[Sings rhythm] Boop, boop!

So after the gig, Lou pulls me over. He says, "I don't think this is it either."*[Both laugh]* Now about four years went by since that. And Rose, I got to give Rose the credit for that, because it was sort of a repeat of-- Lou Columbo's wife was into occasional real estate. And she had a real good one. One time, she said, "Lou, make an album."

Yeah, here's ten grand.

"You and Dick make an album." And he tried. This is what he-- he doesn't like studios. He should have gone--I mean *[inaudible]* Anyway, Rose said one time, she says, "Well, why don't you do an album?" So she said that she'll go along with me, and we do-- so anyway, I did it. It took me a long time, because I was going through implants here. *[points to mouth]*

I got five here. But the girl told me down in -- I go in Providence-- she says, "You'll always be able to play." They'll have the tent. And I was. And right now, it's all finished and everything. And they felt just as good when the temps are in there. Only they weren't naturally as strong. So the only time I took off was when they do the actual go in and make the implant, they've got to go way up in there.

So it takes you at least two weeks to get the pain down. And then, maybe another week before you play. So I had that. That all got done at the same time. My teeth got done. And then, I'd get back. And then, I can't get Peter all the time. Peter is unbelievably busy.

We're talking about Peter Kontrimas.

Sometimes I'd get-- and we're buddies.

He's booked.

Yeah, that's what I'm talking about. So he'd say what he's got next month and all that. So I dealt with-- so that's what made it about two and a half years to make it. But I'm very happy about it. Everybody's saying to me--

The quality is excellent.

--is this thing ever coming out? Even my wife's saying, "You have to do a double album?" I said, "You know why?" Well, at the time, I was seventy-eight years old. "When am I going to make the next one? Maybe it's not going to happen. So let me get this..."

And you covered a lot of ground on it.

And I've never been complimented so much. Even Lou, Lou says he hears it all the time. He said, "I don't know how you got the continuity going, but you're not bored. In other words, you're going from one type thing to another."

You got the ball game in there. You got the all blues. You've got Dave--

[INTERPOSING VOICES]"G

You know that forty and zero, his folk, he's got two brothers and three sisters that I all sent records to. And they all sent me these beautiful, beautiful letters of "Gee, thanks." Well, who else would we think? Lou and I brought them to his first garden fight years ago, because Rocky didn't drive.

We were out of our minds. The town was out of its mind. The town's-- every guy that owned a house had it remortgage, they have a bet against them. They're pretty sorry for it. But he won every fight. So we were lucky. And we knew him.

So that was an interesting-- but anyway, getting back to making that album. I said, "I want the dual album, because it's almost like a little bit of a history of Lou and I." And then, I put the Dave McKenna ones in there of a concert that we did down there, because I wanted him in on it, because that thing-- I explain what I feel like when we do

Dizzy's tune, "Sure Enough." First, it took me about two months to learn the head. That is hard [*sings rhythm*] And in you're right in here. And so Dave doesn't have a problem.

What do you mean? You're over the break?

Yeah. You're in the break there.

B flat, B, C, C sharp.

Well, you're [*sings rhythm*]. And then you're on the back of the clarinet. But after a while, I find little tricks to do to trill key or something, make it easier. And so that one really, really came out good. And I got the both ends of Dave on there doing that and then doing "Lazy Afternoon" on alto flute. And that, to me, is one of the best things I ever record. Even though it's so simple, it's just so musical.

Your ballads always work well. "It Never Entered my Mind" on the old album, it was a beaut.

Yeah, that was a fun thing. But I try to-- somebody make a cartoon sometime of a mother when she's in a hurry and she's mad at her little kid, boy, or girl, or whatever. And she's hurrying down the street. And the little kid's feet are off the ground. That's what was when I was playing "Sure Enough" with McKenna.

Your" feet are in the air.

Yeah, I'm doing this! I'll catch you Dave, don't worry about a thing." But naturally, that's one of the best records I ever made.

Yeah, that's really tasty. We've got to get that reviewed.

That was never reviewed. And I really called-- I was kind of disappointed in the guy's *Downbeat*, because I went out to Chicago quite a few times to those Nam shows, where we went out to eat with one of the heads of *Downbeat*, a real nice guy.

The older guy, Mar? Jack Mar?

No, I would know his name. This goes back to this goes back maybe twenty-two, twenty-three years ago. And I was going. And that's when that came out. I'm talking about, that came out '80, I think, 1980. So now, I went out to Concord afterwards to a Concord festival. And what's it, Warren Vaché and-- what's his name-- Scott Hamilton had just come out. When I got there and checked in at the hotel, they had just come out of studio with Kyle Jefferson.

And he said, we just heard your duo album. And they both came over. They said, "Man!" So naturally, I'm thrilled. And they never put it on CD. They never put it on a CD. Jefferson kept calling me. He said, "We're going to put it on CD." And *The Swing Shift* never got put on CD. *Piano Mover* never got put on CD. The only one that was put on CD was *Dick Johnson Plays and Plays*.

And I can't believe that the duo wasn't, because, for me, that's probably the best thing that I've ever done. Especially playing with Dave like that is a whole different bag, as much as I love a rhythm section. You play with him, you've got so much freedom there, both of us. So anyway, I think Jefferson was going to do it, but he died.

And then, the company went through a lot of changes.

And then, these other guys come in, these new Concord guys. And I was talking with Scott. And he said they were looking for duo albums. They said, "We're looking for duo albums." So Scott said, "What about Dick and Dave, what's that?" And they said, "By the way, what do you do?" They're asking Scott, these owners, I play tenor sax for you. I made records with strings. These new guys-- so that's what you're dealing with.

So anyway. It's a tough-- the recording, I heard Phil being interviewed here one time. He came up quite a few years ago and did a thing at one of the big colleges up here, the Jewish college.

Phil who?

Phil Woods.

Brandeis.

Brandeis. And I went to see him this day. And he took questions from young alto. It was great. He did sort of a thing that a guy wrote and a new tune that he had just-- didn't know that. He told me afterwards, he says, "For about fifteen minutes, I had no idea where I was." I said, "Well, whatever it was, you sounded beautiful." So anyway, some kids asked him. And Phil recorded a lot.

A lot with a lot of different labels.

But he said, "Well, how's the record situation now, Mr. Woods?" And Phil said, "What record situation? There isn't." And he was pretty mad at what was happening. He probably got fluffed off by one company. There's a lot of alto players out there, and there's a lot of great alto players. But he certainly is one of them.

Absolutely.

Of course, now, he's got that thing-- you know has oxygen on him when he plays. Did you know that?

Yeah. But I saw him last year. And geez, he sounded good.

He sounded marvelous. He had a lot of things to overcome there. That's a shame, because you have to-- and he's always been nice to me. Like when I went to see him when the Shaw band first played in New York, this is about '84. And he had Tom Harrell with him. And I walked in with Paul del Nero and Gary, my son, sat down. And he went into the Duke Ellington [*singing rhythm*] on clarinet.

And he saw the-- so he come over. He says, "I know you can play clarinet. And you play beautifully." So he was great. He's always been very nice.

[camera fade]

This is, "Artie Shaw passed away on December 30, 2004." And this is Artie Shaw funeral service that I was invited to. And this is from the time Rose, Bill, and Dick left home on January 6, 2005, that's when this happened.

"Dick, Rose, and Bill Kurtis manager leave for Long Beach to participate in the NEA Jazz Masters America's Highest Honor in jazz. This is a brand new association that is being sponsored by big money from interested backers. The musicians who received plaques this year, 2005, are as follows-- Chico Hamilton, Slide Hampton," who I played with a lot.

I never realized he was a left-handed trombone player until one night I'm watching, it looks like I'm looking in the mirror. I never really-- he plays so good. He plays over here.

Where did you play with him? With who?

He plays this way.

Which band did you play with him in?

No, I didn't. I just knew him. I met him at a couple of jazz festivals, I played with him.

Beautiful cat. What a writer. What a writer.

Yeah, he is. And And Artie Shaw backed him for a while when he lived in New York before he moved out to the coast. He heard Slide and flipped over. And so I was talking about, he booked him for a while and got him-- he was interested in him, Slide Hampton.

He just wrote a bunch of magnificent stuff for the Vanguard Jazz Orchestra. Wonderful.

Yes, I heard about that.

Charts are amazing.

Well, he wrote some stuff out there that they played. That's probably what they played out there. Slide wrote most of the things that were happening for some people out there. And also, "David Baker, George Wayne, Shirley Horn, and Jimmy Smith." And can you believe Jimmy died about two weeks after this happened himself? "Artie Shaw posthumously accepted clarinetist Dick Johnson at a luncheon at 12 o'clock noon Friday January 7, 2005, being a Jazz Master."

I wrote this, I can't-- "Irrevocably, Artie being one of those. We stayed at the Renaissance hotel downtown Long Beach, adjacent to practically all the happenings." Throngs of jazz musicians. They even had, like at that same time, they had like the old Nam shows used to be. Only this was all the different companies.

Can you imagine, they had to Selma Company, they had the Buffet Company. And they went to look for a clarinet with me. And they were leaving at noon. And I wasn't doing it until tonight. They couldn't get a clarinet. "Throngs of jazz musicians. At 8 o'clock PM. And another verve hosting Gerald Wilson's big band," which was unbelievable.

"I accepted a plaque for Artie Shaw from President George W. Bush and Mrs. President Laura Bush. He was an outstanding musician that kept his big band going under Dick Johnson's direction and clarinet playing. Marian McPartland, the great artist, called me and informed me that I would play clarinet at the funeral on Sunday, January 9, 2005 in The Chapel of the Oaks, Westlake Village, California, 12 o'clock noon.

Internment would be at Valley Oaks Memorial Park, Westlake Village, California." I really don't think they did that. It was still too wet. But, "At the funeral, by invitation only, in this beautiful chapel, many speakers including Red Buttons told their stories of Artie Shaw. After the talks, I played, 'I'll be Seeing You.'" Did I already tell you this?

You said it. You told us it, but you didn't read what you--

But I told it on the air, though. And you recorded it?

I think so, yeah.

Yeah, well there's no sense of be going through that, because I talked-- the last, "Rose, Bill, and I then flew home to Boston. And I felt, at that time, on the top of the world to have been chosen to do the finishing touches of Artie's passing at his behest," or whatever. So that's all I have on that. I thought there was a little more.

Well, let's talk about your brief, starry teaching career here at Berklee College.

Berklee College was great, because the arranger I was just talking about, Bob Friedman, had been playing alto for Herb's band at this particular time. And Bob was going to move to New York, I guess. And he played great piano, great alto. But he played alto on this thing. So Herb called me, says, calls me "Spider." I get the name Spider from way back there from some columnist who said that I played-- I'll never forget this.

Herb's reading it to the whole band. And he said that "Dick Johnson played cascades of notes in Spider-like fashion." And he pointed at me, "Spider!" That's how I got that.

And it stuck.

Anyway, Herb says, "Why don't you do--" there were three nights at the Stables there. There was a big band and then the octet was Tuesday. The octet on Wednesday, and then the big band again on Thursday. So he says, "Why don't you come in and do some part time." I said, "Well, I don't know anything. I'm not very-- I know the piano. I know chords. I know this.

But I don't know the writing things-- drop five and do-- I'm not a very well-schooled musician that way." So he said, "That's okay, just be great. You lead some-- do some big bands, and small groups, and special aid to the saxophone," because Joe Viola was teaching the saxophone. It doesn't get any better than that. And they didn't need anybody.

A couple other guys here, I didn't want to-- and so he says, "I got a guy coming in, Ted Cassidy," he said, "You'll love." And he told me about Steve. So I taught there for a couple of years. I did a lot of big band things. And then, I was with the recording band. In those days, they used a couple of teachers. Everett played lead trumpet in the recording band. And I played lead alto.

Everett Longstreth.

Everett Longstreth. So the two years there, I recorded with that band and had a whole mess of solos in there.

Jazz in the Classroom.

That's right.

That series.

This probably was '59 and '60 or something around there. And so anyway, my wife loved it. She said, "Here's like a steady gig." And it was the kind of gig when you were off it-- it was a salary gig. So any holidays and all that kind of thing happened on your day you got paid for. And you also did have a little something that went into a fund that you are part owner, that kind of a thing.

401(k) like.

So I didn't drive in those days. I didn't drive until I was thirty-five years old. And so I was staying at a place called The Yellow Door across the street. Some people that taught there, two Chinese people, both taught there at the school. And excuse me. And so I stayed at their pad for those three nights. And I used to take a bus in and then the milk train home at the end of the three days.

So this is Tuesday, Wednesday...

Thursday. Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday.

The middle of the week. You'd be gigging at the Stables and teaching during the day.

That's right. But then, I knew that it was time to time to learn how to drive a car because they stopped the milk train. So then I drove in and back. But I still stayed in there the three days home. And so I taught those kind of things. I taught small saxophone, like five sax. Every week, I'd write a five-sax thing on my own before it.

And I'd have rehearsed my own little thing there. And then, I did like maybe-- like the big band thing. And then, Teddy, and then a few other private students.

Teddy Casher, Steve Marcus.

And Steve Marcus, two heavyweights. Now, Ted came in. And he could already play. He already played great. Steve came in, and he was ridiculous already. He was ridiculous. And I had a place down in Brockton. I had a jam session place called The Desert Sands in Brockton. Imagine The Desert Sands being in Brockton. But anyway, that was the name of the joint.

So all these guys-- so the other guy was Tommy Check. I don't know if you remember him. He went on to be a conductor for ED Garmayer. I just saw him. We played Vegas for three days, and he came to see me. And they were all coming down to Brockton. Who's the vibes player? The head of-- that's just retired?

Gary Burton.

Gary Burton came down. And he played piano too. And I got him gigs down the Cape. He was talking about it one day when I did a gig. They had a big vibes day there. And I brought the tenor in and played "Flying Home" with that thing. So he talked. So I had gigs for all of them. So they were all coming down to Brockton. And Tommy Check was one of the best drummers around.

He was so hoping to get into Herb's band. But there were other guys here like Jake and Alan--

Freddy Buda and Alan Dawson.

--and those guys were way ahead of him. But anyway, it got to the point where, at home, I was starting to get a lot of gigs with Lou Colombo. I hated the club day thing in town, though, that kind of music. A bunch of great guys there, but it was society music. And that certainly wasn't what I wanted to do for the rest of my life. I would have quit music if I had to do that.

So Lou and I got together for about ten years, it went. And we got gigs together. And we did pretty good. Now, it started to get into the swing shift, and started just about that time. I had a gig-- no, I had already quit before that. That's right. But it just got to a point where I was getting too busy outside and I didn't think I was putting out enough with the kids.

This is all I could do was doing these. I couldn't do first-year harmony, and second-year harmony, and that kind of-- I don't know. I can write. I write arrangements. But I do it by my own ears and the piano. And they were looking for something that was more by the book for the other classes that you would teach. That's right.

You needed to show them the book. Matter of fact, one time, I asked Herb if I could take his Duke Ellington line writing. And I was dying to do that. And I couldn't. I was too busy. Every time, he said, "Come in any time." I just said, I was too busy. Lou and I were working like-- at that time, in fact, these last few weeks have been double headers, triple headers, so I just I just couldn't do it.

You got the busiest, the busiest little gig book of anybody in town. That's been like that for thirty, forty years.

Yeah, it really has.

You do a lot of double headers, don't you?

It really has, yep. And of course, at that time, I was doing-- school would start. And I'd go to the schools with Al Tobias and go to schools for about a month during the day and show the children the kids in the younger grade-- the fourth, fifth, and sixth grade instruments. So I did that every year.

Well, that was nothing to do with Berklee now, right?

No, this wasn't while I was in Berklee.

That's Al Tobias. I remember Al.

I was out of Berklee. It must have been. I've probably got the wrong years, but I was there for two years. So it probably was '59, '60, and I probably quit in '61. So I just told Herb-- everybody was great for it. And then, I told you I went into the office with Larry Berk. And Larry Berk said, "I don't blame you." He says, "You're so busy." And he said, "Everybody loves you around here. And I tell you, any time you want to come back," he says, "You're welcome. It was just healthy having you here," which was a real nice compliment. And I said, "Well, thanks," you guys have been great to me.

And then, of course-- you were great to the kids, because you got them gigs while they were still students.

That's right. I had them all coming down there.

Sure.

And the ones that didn't get the gig would come down there with the cars and sit in.

That's graduate school, man.

Yeah, it was. And I remember one night, Steve was playing. And he played ridiculous from the very beginning, but he played very light at the time. And his favorite players were Stan Getz and Coltrane. And so you could hear a lot of that. But he didn't have a lot of-- and so I wouldn't say anything about that, because I knew that was going to come. I found out that if a guy's really playing. And it's pretty much my level of hearing and everything. He can hear everything. He doesn't even need the changes. He never could read when he was with Buddy. He used to learn those parts by rote. He never read. It's like Buddy. And so this one night, he came. I'll never forget it. I said, "Steve, you stopped doing some features here." He was like, "Well, I like to do 'Stella.'" Well, I did that. I remember doing that, anyway. So I got off the stand. And he played "Stella." And I'm thinking to myself, it's all over. He's there. He played so great. And he was there. And then, he came from the New York and-- as a matter of fact, when I was teaching and he invited me, he drove. I didn't drive. He drove me to his house. I stayed over at his house. And then, he dropped me in New York, because I wanted to go to New York for a couple of days. I stayed over one night at his house because--

What told you that Steve Marcus had it all there.

Because he was playing, it was all together. He was playing-- what's the word for it? He was playing completely-- what's the word I'm looking for?

Soulful? Soulful, gutsy?

Well, all that. But I mean, he was completely confident. And he was there with his chops, everything.

Plenty of volume and projection.

Yep. Everything was-- sound was all there.

So he gained that confidence level.

There's still a word I'm missing there, is being an adult about the whole thing. But he's a--

Was there some point in your career where you realize you'd hit a plateau like that?

Well, I realize you can play. But I still can't stand myself two or three years before what I played.

You mean you don't like listening to your old records?

No. My daughter and my wife both loved the way I played back when I was with-- when I did those things with Riverside. I can't stand it. I know it was passable and all that.

But to you, it's history.

You talk to Gary one time, and he knocked me out, because he said, "That's the real thing, right there." And I was playing it. I said, "How could he stand that?" And Gary said, he wasn't kidding. He was saying that that's where we came from. I was pretty much into Lee Konitz then.

Oh, yes. OK.

And I was doing-- It's good.

But you've always got your ear for the future.

Right.

You want to hear growth.

I hear myself play ballads. It's like on the one that says *Dick Johnson Plays*. Well, I play "Lush Life" on that. And on all the ballads, I would sound-- at the end, I'd be playing all over the place. And I kept finally saying to myself, a ballad is not all over the place.

You're right. You're right.

If you're going to play something in the end, play something--

Play it pretty. Play it like the ballad was. So I won't mention any names, but I've heard some of the top guys in New York, the very top unbelievable players, I heard them play with a girl singer the other day. Everything's double time and triple time, *[vocalizes]* all over the place. And I'm going, "Man, you're the greatest. You've got all the chops in the world. And you could do it." Coltrane didn't do that. When Coltrane played with Johnny Hartman, he stuck around the melody.

In that context, right.

Stan Getz didn't do that.

No, never.

But these guys-- and I had two guys who I actually idolized. They're probably two of the best in the world. Both were guilty of this in the last things of when they play him back singing say, "Gee, why don't you do a gig with me?" They're probably listening. "How about here in the such and such show here on chops?"

You won't mention any names.

No.

But being your own worst critic is the best thing you can do.

I think it is. It's healthy, because I'll go through a thing. And I got a thing going down the Cape, I heard some things that I did sitting in after the gig one night that were actually laughable. I go, "Good-- what are we doing?"

This means that you're always aspiring to a new level. And that's what keeps you going, man. That's what keeps you going. You're a perfectionist. And you ain't there yet.

And I was able to put that over to the clarinet, because on this album, you'll notice that I'll love the sound of the clarinet that I'll dote on it. And so naturally, if it's a fast thing, I will play fast. But other times, I just sort of glide. You'll hear maybe an occasional *[sings rhythm]*.

But Artie told me that. I got a beautiful lesson from Artie Shaw. We were going to Spain a few years ago on one of those cruises to Norway. And he came with us because he wanted to see the house he built for his last wife, Evelyn Keyes. They lived over there for five years. And it's a beautiful house in Spain.

So he went there. People wouldn't let him in. The people that own the house now would not let him in. Isn't that beautiful. He said, "This was--" "I don't care, you're not getting in here." So he was bull.

But what did he tell you?

So anyway, where was I?

He was giving you a lesson about hang the clarinet.

We were on our way-- we were on our way to Spain. Rose is sitting there. She always likes to watch his expressions when we were playing. So anyway, he's sitting there. And man, I was-- I thought I was burning, man, playing all these tunes and everything. So I got off. So I went over to his table. And he said, "Dick, man, you sound marvelous."

He said, "But I know you have technique. There's no doubt. You know you have technique. Probably all these people here do." He says, "Too many notes." And he said, "A little more lyrical would make me a little happier." He says, "You can do what you want." So the next night-- to him, it's not shot down, because he's like... it's weird how the thing that we had, he said such nice things about me.

And he did when we were together a lot. And he really dug my alto playing, too. So anyway, I came back. And last night, I told Rose-- and that night, listen, I did everything cooler. If I wanted to play a little thing here, I'd do it. But I didn't dote on it. And I got off the band, he said, "Dick, that's music. You just played music."

You're still playing music, Dick.

So I always call him "still the teacher," which he still is. And a couple of times, we talked. But I wanted to say one time, "What about that one thing you did in a cadenza." But of course, that's a cadenza. You can do anything you want in a cadenza.

Dick, thanks a lot. This has been great. These guys are going to break down so we've got to call it quits.

Sure.

We could roll all afternoon, here.

Thank guys, I really appreciate that.

But you've got to get your grandson a Fenway Park jacket.

That's right.

And we've got to get ourselves some lunch.

All right, I'd love to do that.

This is a blast.

Beautiful.

Thank you so much.

It was great.