

**FRED** This is volume twenty-something of the Berklee Oral History Project. I'm Fred Bouchard, and our guest today is  
**BOUCHARD:** Lisa Thorson, an esteemed, popular member of the Voice department here at Berklee. Lisa's been on the scene here since 1996, and has had a long and distinguished career as a singer, actress, and music educator. Lisa, so nice to have you here today to talk about...

**LISA THORSON:** Nice to be here.

**FRED** Music!

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** Yeah.

**FRED** Our favorite subject. We were talking before we came in here about our favorite singers and composers and, you  
**BOUCHARD:** know, good repertoire. Maybe we could jump in with a little bit of that, and talk about the fact that you're going to be picking up your voice teacher at the train station in an hour or two from now, Jeanie?

**LISA THORSON:** Jeanie LoVetri.

**FRED** Why is she so special?

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** She's special because--why is she so special? She's special because, for a few reasons: she's devoted her life to teaching for the last, I would say, thirty or thirty-five years, and to the art of teaching; she's special because she's a pioneer in investigating vocal science, and acoustics, and physiology as it applies to vocal production.

**FRED** You mean the voice box and the thorax and all that?

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** Yep, all of that. How the vocal folds work, developing different kinds of things that elicit different responses from the mechanism. She's special because she's actually codified this, and she has three levels of a course that she teaches on the university level that teaches other people how to do this. It's specifically geared towards contemporary styles of singing--so non-classical, basically, although she is a classical singer by training, but she's worked with many, many Broadway, jazz singers, pop-rock singers. I think she's really special. When I found out some of my friends and colleagues were studying with her, I said, "Gotta take a lesson with Jeanie and find out what's going on here, what's different." I think she's special more than anything else because not only has she devoted herself to this real thorough investigation into how the voice works, and how to get people to do that, but-- [phone rings] Should I keep going?

**FRED** Yeah.

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** Or should I stop? With the phone?

**FRED** Don't worry about it, it'll stop in a minute.

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** But when you watch Jeanie teach for the first time, she doesn't do exercises that are complicated with regard to notes. She does things that we would think would be very simple.

**FRED** You mean like long tones and things like that?

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** Yeah, but she doesn't do any fancy scales or those kinds of, just very what you would think of these sort of average vocal exercises, major scales and arpeggios, you know, those kinds of things. But she asks people to do sometimes very unusual things with their voices to get their cords and their apparatus to function in a certain way, so that they can realize what they want to do in terms of sound. But, what I was going to say is the most special thing about her is when you watch her teach, and even if she's just working with somebody for the very first time, she sits at the piano, and she just starts to play very slowly, and she closes her eyes. And she doesn't even watch the person at first, which for me as a teacher is very unusual, because I'm usually watching. Do they have tension in their jaw, do they have tension in their neck, are they breathing, that kind of, while you're hearing at the same time.

**FRED** So it's purely aural for her.

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** Yeah, because she can tell what's going on physiologically just by the sound that's being produced. So it's--and I've seen her in twenty minutes do things that seem like magic with people. She just is a technical wizard, you know, and she works with some of the best singers that I know, and she's--for me, in terms of studying with Jeanie, I was counting that before I got here, how many voice teachers I've had. I've been studying since I was sixteen, so thirty-five years, off and on, you know. And I think I had, one, two, three, four, five, six, eight teachers--but I say seven, because one guy almost destroyed my voice my first year of undergrad school at Boston Conservatory--but I've had seven teachers, and Jeanie is just, for me, is like in the right place at the right time, because of now my teaching career, and also because she's taken the whole study of the voice to another level, which I find is really exciting.

**FRED** It must be inspirational for your students to realize that you're still a student, and that the learning and

**BOUCHARD:** development of musical skills and techniques is a lifelong experience. How do you impart that kind of wisdom to the kids who just walk in the door the first time, or people, with students that you have one-on-one with?

**LISA THORSON:** I mean, I always let them know that I've studied with a number of teachers, that they have different methods. I'm not indoctrinated into a way. I mean, just because I study with Jeanie now and she does certain kinds of things, it's not like I'm holding the banner saying this is the only way. So I really like to let them know that they need to get information from a lot of different sources and assimilate it into what works for them. There's some very basic things that everybody has in common that they teach, but the art of teaching voice in particular is, sometimes you have to say things three or four different ways to somebody to be able to understand what it is that they need to do because it's very elusive.

**FRED** Yeah, it's not a--everything's internal, it's not like a saxophone technique or piano scales, it's all inside.

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** Yeah, I mean, you can ask somebody to look in the mirror and say, "Loosen your jaw," or "Don't furrow your brow," or do those kinds of things which will start to add tension, you know, into the mechanism. But it's not like we have an ultrasound thing on that you can go, you know. And you're not--I mean, some things you're not--you can't move consciously. You can't. There's not--you don't have nerve stimulus to be able to do it consciously. So sometimes it's metaphoric, sometimes it is physical, but I guess, going back to what you originally asked, I let them--I guess it's sort of like learning about improvising, there's not just one way. And sometimes that's difficult for students because they want you to say, "This is the way, and this is the way. This is the path." You know. And I do that to a certain degree, and then I have to say, "You know, I'm not going to be with you all the time, so you have to learn to start to diagnose yourself."

**FRED** Yeah, internalize what I'm giving you and then adapt it to your best uses.

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** Yeah, and then also when you go to the practice room, or two years from now if you don't have a teacher, and you're running into a wall, you have to be able to self-diagnose, and figure out what's going on; and if you can't figure out what's going on then you need to go see a teacher. And that's what happened to me, basically, I mean that's why I studied with the number of people that I did, because sure, I learned how to sing well by the time I was sixteen, seventeen, eighteen years old, but there were things that I couldn't do. And so when I hit those walls, whether it was having an accident and having to sing sitting down, or just getting stuck, or just knowing that I couldn't be as creative as I wanted to, that's when I sought out somebody who could give me just sort of like a fresh look on what it is. So, I mean, I just say to them, improvising and technique you study your whole life. And maybe not every musician or dancer or actor says that, but for me, it's the way that it has to be.

**FRED** Since we're on this thread, maybe you could talk about a couple of singers whom you admire and tell us why.

**BOUCHARD:** And then maybe mention one or two students who've done particularly well under your aegis. Maybe like Miwa [Watanabe], or someone who is fresh in your mind.

**LISA THORSON:** Singers that I admire... Well, that's sort of hard. I mean technically, musically... I'll tell you--so this is funny. So a singer that I admire, we were just talking about the Ella Fitzgerald documentary.

**FRED** Yes.

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** So I show that in one of my classes every semester, so I've probably watched it twelve, fourteen, eighteen times. It feels fresh to me every time. But there's lots of live footage of Ella. Students love her, I love her, she was a big influence. She's inspiring because of how she sings, what she sings, the connection that she has to the audience, the joy that she has for the music, the imagination that she has. I mean that's why she's inspiring.

**FRED** Tremendous joy.

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** Just all the time, you know, that's really her life. Sings perfectly in tune all the time. I mean you watch the ninety-minute documentary and you're just going. like... You know, I listen to a lot of singers all the time, including myself, and I'm going, there's not one note that's out of tune. Not a single note, you know. And so you just say well, it just is what it is, I just accept it after a while. But then when I look at her and I start looking at a technical standpoint, I'm thinking, she breathes completely the wrong way from what we tell people. All the time, you know. And she breathes in odd places, I mean, from a classic music standpoint you'd say, "Oh no, you would never never take a breath in that place." But then here's somebody that you know you see, here's one of the greatest singers of all time, long, long career, learned it on the road, didn't have any voice lessons, just did it. She just learned how to do it. And she sort of breaks the rules.

**FRED** Yeah, like a Ted Williams or Kevin Youkilis standing at the plate holding the bat in a bizarre position--but they  
**BOUCHARD:** always hit the ball.

**LISA THORSON:** I know, you just go, what is wrong with that picture? So, but I do point it out and students go, "Yeah, that's really weird. When she took a breath she went like" And you can actually see what you're not supposed to do when you're singing. But she makes it-- she doesn't do it all the time. but you can see that happen. So I mean that's sort of a funny, funny thing. I can't say that I don't admire her technically because her facility is just amazing, absolutely amazing. Who's another? There's so many, it's such a hard, such a hard... such a hard question I guess, I'm sort of blanking on.

**FRED** Let's leave it.

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** Yeah, let me just think about that. In terms of students, you know... Last night I went to this recital of Miwa Watanabe and I was there. She's a performance major, so she takes half of her lessons with one person and the other half with another in the department. Sharon Brown, who's a classical musical theater singer faculty in our department, was teaching Miwa and then I was. We both taught her for probably at least two years now. And here's a Japanese singer, first language is not English. Very smart, beautiful sound, very just rich, warm sort of alto mezzo-ish. Just beautiful, beautiful. But you know, struggling with style and...

**FRED** Vocabulary.

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** Yeah vocabulary, diction, swing feel, certain kinds of technical things, all that kind of stuff. And I turned, when the recital was over Sharon and I looked at each other. and I said, "This is the payoff, right?" And she started smiling and I said, "You know, a lot of faculty don't go to their students recitals so for me, it's just the ultimate payoff because you see what you started." And it's not just me, I'm the guide. That's the way I feel about it. I just offer everything that I could possibly offer and then they just go where they go. And if they're good students and they really listen, and they learn how to assimilate information, they get better. But it's not only just the vocal part of course. She still has stuff to work on, she still does. But she's twenty-four, twenty-five, she's delved into a whole-- she started out as a dancer.

**FRED** And one of the things that comes latest is the really imbuing meaning into the lyrics. In other words,  
**BOUCHARD:** understanding these rich, love stories. You have to live some of it to get there.

**LISA THORSON:** Yeah, but she really--that's one of the things, it's funny you say that. Because one of the things that I noticed... She's done two other recitals that I've gone to. And she does a lot of Brazilian music, she sings very well in Portuguese. So she sang last night, English, Portuguese, and Spanish. And I was all over her to do a Japanese tune and she wouldn't do any, but whatever.

**FRED** She will.

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** But she really excels in, she did like a bossa nova version of "Speak Low."

**FRED** Good.

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** Very sensuous, you know. And I realized that she really understood the words. The way that she was playing with the words, the color of the sound, the vibe. I mean just everything...

**FRED** That's pretty sophisticated material.

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** Very. And she plays flute also, and we worked on just getting flute incorporated into the repertoire and how it could be played. And I was really--you know to me, it's just really gratifying because not only did I see her get better technically in terms of hearing for improvisation skills and vocal stuff, but also just putting the program together. It was like: ah, she's really evolving into a style of things that she really excels at. I mean it's just totally gratifying. And when she was singing, there was sounds and stuff she was getting where I was like, "I'm so jealous." You know, she just has--It's like anybody when you hear them. For me, with singers, the sound is the thing. For me anyway. And you're always envious of what other people have that you don't have. It's just the grass is always greener, I guess.

**FRED** And it's so very individualized with the voice.

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** Yeah, it doesn't have to be pretty and round. I mean it can be all that kind of stuff. Listen to Ray Charles, you know. I mean that's not what you call a pretty voice, but man, so many layers in it.

**FRED** Since you're talking about the boons and the good stuff of teaching, are there any things that are constant beefs with you, in terms of the students that come in or just you know, day-to-day things that you wish could be different?

**LISA THORSON:** The hardest things are having very talented students that don't practice. And I'm not patting myself on the back, but I've been there. I know what it's like to be able to get by and not do the tough work, you know. Oh, you sounded great, did you practice? No, not really. Of course, I have to now, at my age. Now I have to, you know. But when you're younger like that, sometimes it just comes out. That's hard. So my mission sometimes is finding absolutely the most difficult repertoire that I can find for them, that I know they're going to have to work on it.

**FRED** In other words if they're talented but a little bit lazy, you give them really tough material. Cool.

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** Hardest that I can find. Whatever it might be, you know. Or you got to do this transcription, or you got to sing this classical piece. Stuff that I know is going to just go to whatever that very...

**FRED** Whatever that weakness is. Very good.

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** You gotta do it. So that's, I mean that's... it is frustrating though, you know. And again, I know where it comes from. Not that I haven't practiced, because I have really spent a lot, a lot, a lot, a lot, of hours practicing. But I do know what it's like to slide by. Hard, that discipline part. And I think instilling discipline is really hard. I struggle with it myself, you know. If I have gigs coming up, I work work work work work. When I don't, I don't practice everyday. I just let it go, you know.

**FRED** You got other stuff to do.

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** True, true, true, true. But you suffer. You pay the price.

**FRED** Your ass is on the line when you've got a deadline and you've got to do it right. I got to write these five hundred  
**BOUCHARD:** words on the Berlin Jazz Festival now, and I better make it damn good.

**LISA THORSON:** You're not kidding. You were there for a nice week. But I think the other thing, I mean in the context of Berklee, you know, we have students at a variety of levels. And it's... sometimes the students that come in that have what I would consider to be sort of medium level talent, often they excel more and find more opportunities when they get out of Berklee, have more opportunities and actually have more chops than the talented students because they work harder. So it's hard.

**FRED** Yeah, that makes sense.

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** I mean I think discipline is just being attentive to details. Teaching stuff that goes beyond just the craft. Like what's it like to be responsible about being on a gig? Why is it important to show up on time? Why is it important to return an email or a phone call? I mean those are... I feel like that has to be part of what I teach in some small way. So the assignments always sort of reflect that. There's always sort of some small detail that goes with it. I mean, I'm a total detail discipline freak.

**FRED** I wish I were.

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** My mother always said, you know, if you got to be there at nine o'clock, be there ten minutes before. I mean I was just brought up with that and so I try, I always try to do that.

**FRED** Yeah that's a pitfall for me. But this isn't about me.

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** Right, right. We'll turn the tables on you!

**FRED** But let's go back to, way back. Let's go back to your childhood upbringing, when you first started listening to music. What was around the house? Where'd you have to go to get it? What was your first big impressions? That kind of stuff.

**LISA THORSON:** I'm going to tell you a funny story.

**FRED** Please, we love stories.

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** I'll tell you a funny story. Yesterday I was in the Voice department and it had gotten very quiet. I was waiting to go to this recital at seven o'clock. And Bob Stoloff, who's our assistant chair, was in his office doing a lot of work. He had on Henry Mancini themes. So I came in... exactly. So I came in and we were just chatting a little bit. And then Didi Stewart who also teaches in our department--great, great singer.

**FRED** Another wine buff.

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** Yes, yes! I'm not going to tell you the other part of the story, but anyway. So she came in and we were laughing about the music and doing this whole reminiscing of going back to the sixties. What we listened to, and how old we were when we first heard this music, and you know. And then also it sort of came up, did we have this music in our houses? You know, what did our parents have? And Didi talked a little bit about what her folks were listening to and they would sort of like dance along to big band records. And then Bob said...

**FRED** You mean Lester Lanin?

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** Yeah, yeah, that kind of... Then Bob was talking about Take Five. He had Take Five and some other stuff. And then I said, but we were really joking about--this is really martini music. And it was about the woman in the velvet dress, you know, with the long gloves and cigarette holder. So we were really getting silly. And I said, "Oh, that reminds me that my dad had this Jackie Gleason record called like Martini and Memories or Music and Memories or something like that."

**FRED** Songs for Lovers, Bobby Hackett on trumpet.

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** Yeah, something like that, exactly. And so when I was a kid, in our house we had a turntable, of course. My mother was a musician until she changed her major in college to business. But she was a drummer and a percussionist, which was really tough in Texas in the time that she grew up, you know. This was--she went to college in the early fifties.

**FRED** Not a marching band?

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** No, she was in a marching band. Yeah, she played snare drum.

**FRED** Yeah, OK.

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** So she was in a marching band, all that kind of stuff. And was going to be a concert percussionist, that's what she wanted to do. So she went to North Texas State actually, but faced unbelievable discrimination because she was a woman, they just wouldn't take her seriously. They wouldn't let women play set at all, at all. Women didn't do that. So for various reasons, that's her story, but you know it's sad in some ways because she gave it up. But anyway, so I have that lifelong singing with my mom when I was two or three years old. I mean that's how I started singing. I was harmonizing by the time I was three or four years old. I mean, just always singing, music, that kind of stuff. My dad...

**FRED** Pop tunes? Country & Western? "Shenandoah?"

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** You know, campfire songs. My grandfather had a lifelong career in the Boy Scouts. So we did a lot of camping and stuff. You know, this is a Western family.

**FRED** "Working on the Railroad?" All that stuff?

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** All that stuff. Kids songs, you know. My dad was in theater so I had this very creative environment. And I lived in Hawaii when I was three to eleven. So I had a real--I feel really lucky. I had a very rich cultural, very diverse upbringing. But in our house, the turntable, radio, were never off limits. So there was none of this, "Oh you might scratch the record or anything." It was like, "You're five years old, this is how it works. Just put the jackets back, put the records back in the jackets and do whatever you want." Then my dad was doing a radio show at that time, working for a radio--well, he wasn't working for a radio station, he was doing a radio show. And that's when they had reel-to-reel tapes. So he would record a lot of the stuff at the radio stations on reel-to-reels. He taught me. I mean I can remember being five or six years old, how to set up the reel-to-reel and to thread the tape in, all that kind of stuff. So going back.

**FRED** Exposure and discovery.

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** I mean, it was great. And so they had a great combination of like big band records, we had some children's stuff. We had--I remember a recording called Sparky's Magic Piano, which was great classical piano themes that would be explained. Of course I can't remember them now. But just a lot of that kind of genre. Not R&B, not much country. I think my mom had a couple like Tex Ritter records, she loved that. But you know, their era, they were not getting into the rock and roll stuff, so it was still that era...

**FRED** No Bill Haley yet?

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** No, not at all, not at all. I mean I got that from my transistor radio more than anything else.

**FRED** Maybe Bob Wills?

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** Yeah, some of that stuff. But a lot of singers. Eydie Gorme.



**FRED** Oh boy.

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** Who I just loved.

**FRED** She was great.

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** Oh my God, what a great singer, you know? Rosemary Clooney, I remember those early singers. A lot of musical theater records. So a lot of Barbara Streisand, a lot of Barbara Cook, a lot of those kinds of singers you know.

**FRED** Musical film scores and stuff like that?

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** Oh yeah. Oklahoma, Carousel, Music Man, all of that. So of course I learned every note to every, every... So going back to Bob's office, this is funny. And we're talking about all this repertoire and stuff and I said, yeah, and the Tijuana Brass was big in my house. And at the same, Didi started singing. And then the three of us must have sung the entire thing for like three to four minutes, completely by ear, as if the record was playing.

**FRED** Oh man!

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** And we really started laughing. I was like, "Wow, that shows," I said...

**FRED** What's that, like Señor Mouse or something?

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** I don't know--there was, like, I can't even remember all of them. But my father had all these Tijuana Brass records and stuff. And my mother played marimba so we had a lot of marimba-type stuff.

**FRED** And we're sitting in Herb Alpert's [Getz] library.

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** Exactly. I mean, but it was hilarious. It just showed me that when--and we were singing it, I mean, note for note, exactly, off the record, like a transcription, just like that. And so we talked about how old we were when we were listening to these things and I said, "This is either a tribute to our ears of being able to just ingest information when you're really little" But I said, "to be able to recall it?!"

**FRED** Yeah. That's some serious imprinting.

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** Forty years or forty-five years later, you know. It's just right there. So for me, that, I mean, I couldn't be more thankful to my parents for having a pretty diverse... And then there's Hawaiian music, of course. I was playing ukulele and singing in Hawaiian and doing hula dancing...

**FRED** All that slack key guitarist stuff, with the sondos and hula beat?

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** Yeah, all that kind of stuff. I mean that was a huge part of it, and learning to sing some in Japanese was part of it. And then folksong--Peter, Paul and Mary, when I started to play the guitar. You know, just picking up a Peter, Paul and Mary book and knowing that I knew F, C, and G and that kind of stuff and just going [imitates strumming guitar]. My parents never ever said no to me when it came to having a lesson on an instrument, wanting to do something that was creative. Never ever.

**FRED** Cool.

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** You know, even when times were tough and they were getting divorced and money whatever... If I wanted to continue with cello lessons, I got it, I got it.

**FRED** That's great. I just read a chapter in Elvis Costello's biography. His father was involved with big bands and he too  
**BOUCHARD:** pushed, pushed, pushed. Whenever he wanted to do anything musical, green light. Maybe you could follow those, the thread of acting from your dad and the thread of music with your mom, two career tracks for you. I mean eventually you discovered jazz and you did some theater. Maybe we could move on in that direction...

**LISA THORSON:** It was, you know--it's like... I was really, really focused on music and I was doing the dancing and acting, but kid stuff basically. But I was around the theater a lot because my dad was directing a lot of community theater at the time. I mean when we lived in Hawaii, he was working as a professional for the Boy Scouts, he was organizing, he was doing political campaigns. He started one of the first United Ways in this small town on the island of Hawaii. So we were really very infused into--the community was a big deal, it was a big part of our life. But my brother and I were---things that went on behind stage were no mystery to us, you know. The magic was dissolved very early on. But still that magic was there.

**FRED** You mean the sets and the lights, the little trappings of stagecraft?

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** Yeah ,yeah, but also, what's it like to be in the dark during a dress rehearsal, and all that kind of stuff was really great. And my dad also, both my parents I have to say, they never--they always encouraged us to speak up. And my father's big thing was enunciation and diction. All the time, just clarity, be really clear. So that was, you know... But it sort of sets you up for being on stage.

**FRED** Yeah.

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** I mean to articulate with people. So it was really helpful.

**FRED** It's like a bully pulpit.

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** [Laughs] Yeah, let's not go there. No, no, no, no, no. But in any case, being in that environment though, I was still really focused on music, really playing instruments. We moved back to the States when I was about eleven. I started playing the cello. It was like--because in Hawaii, there weren't orchestras and at the level I was at. There was ukulele bands, not clarinet and that kind of thing. And the public schools at that time had great music programs as you know. So it was like, "Would you like to play something?" "Sure." "What would you like?" "Well. I think I'll pick the cello." "Okay, you can have lessons, you can play, you can do whatever." And I was really on that track, I was really on that track. I really thought when I was thirteen, I just have to be Pablo Casals and that's what I have to do. I actually practiced and I did well, you know. I would have done better if I practiced more, that's going back to the practicing thing.

**FRED** Yep.

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** But then, when I started to get--when you get into the teenage stuff, I found it was more fun to do musical theater rather than sitting in the practice room five hours at a time by yourself. And there's all kinds of circumstances that go with this, but I sort of made this transition out of the classical plane and into doing musical theater. And that's when I started singing a lot. I mean, I always sang, but I really started singing. And I'd sing with girlfriends playing the guitar and some choirs and that kind of stuff.

**FRED** What were some of the productions you were in?

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** Oh, Carousel, Wizard of Oz, Godspell, those kinds of shows. But it was really I think I was like fifteen, sixteen, seventeen that I really started to pursue this. I did a lot of work on the shows that my dad was directing. So stage managing and props and blah blah. You know, I just, I learned all that stuff. But I think partly it was the social aspect of being in the theater that I liked, you know. It was just more fun. I regret it in some ways. So I went on that path and that's how I ended up at Boston Conservatory, because they have a musical theater program. And found that when I was in high school, my voice was good enough that it could go in that direction. I took a number of dance classes and stuff, acting ability. So that's the path that I was going down, and then I had my accident in my senior year at Boston Conservatory. I was just getting ready to graduate, I had my sights set on going to New York. The head shot, resume. I had been working a lot as an actress and a singer. And then everything changed. And since that time it's been--long time, it was 1980. Long time ago--there's been this... I tried, I finished my degree. I did do some work in the theater and did some television and that kind of stuff, but as we talked about earlier, the doors were closed for anybody, for the most part, who had a disability, in the arts. You know, unless you're a Ray Charles or Stevie Wonder or George Shearing. You know, I think blind people have always been sort of more accepted in music because it doesn't matter so much. It was tough. And I did productions in Boston, and I was involved with a couple of theater companies that were sort of the first ever in the country of integrating actors with and without disabilities. I mean, this was really...

**FRED** Theater Company of Boston?

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** Uh no, it was the Next Move Theatre.

**FRED** Oh, Next Move, Okay.

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** Yeah, so we had an offshoot called Next Move Unlimited, and it dealt with topics of disability, but it also integrated performers with and without disabilities. It was pretty cutting edge for the time. Nobody was doing that kind of thing.

**FRED** Sure.

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** But after a while I just knew there wasn't going to be any work. And I really struggled, I have to say. With like, what am I going to do?

**FRED** You mean conceptually? Directionally?

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** Life. What am I going to do with the rest of my life, you know? I'm not going to be able to make a buck doing this. I'm not, if I had moved to L.A., there were more opportunities in the movie industry, but I didn't want to move to L.A.

**FRED** Voice-overs and that kind of stuff? Or just too limiting?

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** It just... I pursued some of that, but just nothing hit, nothing hit at all. And I also had to go through the process of rebuilding my voice. I had no voice at all. I was in the hospital for a long, long time, you know. Different breath capacity, different everything. I mean it was--it took a long, long time. I think about it now... I started singing, I started taking lessons when I was still in rehab, in the hospital. With a wonderful woman, Barbara McClosky. She and her husband Blair. Blair was a--they both taught at Boston Conservatory, and they had a studio down on Boylston Street for a long time. He was a classical bass. He sang in opera for a long time. They had sort of a voice therapy, speech therapy, classical music studio. And she was helpful technically, but also just sort of nurtured me back to the point where I thought, "Well, hmm, maybe I will be able to sing." Because there was a point where the doctors told me you're just not going to be able to sing. Yeah, it was really encouraging. But I think about a year out, about a year after the accident, I did do a little bit of singing and it was tough. And then I just kept studying. But I have to say, I don't feel like I reached the full potential of my voice, now when I think about it, probably for ten years.

**FRED** There was that much re-learning and re-building and experiential positive things?

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** Figuring it out. What could I do, what couldn't I do and all that. So, in a process of sort of being in limbo, like what am I going to do with my life? And I was thinking about--I was doing some consulting for the NEA. I got very involved in the arts councils and some non-profits here because I'm an organized person and fairly articulate. People were asking me to, oh, you know, why don't you apply for this job at the NEA? There were some really good opportunities that came my way and I just didn't want to do it. It just didn't feel...

**FRED** Administration didn't feel as good as performing?

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** It didn't. But I did some of those gigs. I did, if you want to call them day jobs or whatever. I felt like there was a creative component, but it just, I couldn't see myself, I just couldn't see myself there. But with the singing, I remember when I was at Boston Conservatory and working in summers in between the years in college. I did a lot of reviews, musical reviews. And I would always be given the torch song: "Cry Me A River," "Blues in the Night," those kind of tunes. And I always loved singing them. And I would go back in my ear to like, oh yeah, Eydie Gorme. Oh yeah, Rosemary Clooney, Doris Day. I loved those band singers, just loved them. Frank [Sinatra] you know, all that stuff. And then I just started going out on my own and I started to pursue this transition: so here's a musical theater singer, then there's this sort of world in between called cabaret.

**FRED** Yep, and the reviews.

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** And the reviews and stuff. And then there's this world over here that's like a jazz or a blues or a pop or a contemporary, you know, whatever you want to call it over there.

**FRED** Different audiences.

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** Very different audiences.

**FRED** Different background, everything.

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** Different style, different aesthetic, different everything, you know. So it just sort of started moving over into the cabaret thing. And some of it was theatrical, some of it was those torch songs. And then my brother was going to Emerson at the time, and my brother had a great record collection. I don't know, I got to talk to him sometime about why he collected this. But he had a lot of jazz records. He was more into it than I was. I really was not listening to it. And in it were George Benson and Al Jarreau, Oscar Peterson, Dizzy [Gillespie]. I mean it was a lot of just really, really great stuff. And he was like, I'm going to move out to California, I'll just give you my records.

**FRED** Oh boy.

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** So I put them on and I started listening to them. I was like, "Wow! I wonder if I could do this?" Because I was looking for a venue for my voice. I mean, I knew that I could sing, but I knew also that there were limitations. I wasn't going to be singing that high C. It wasn't going to happen.

**FRED** No, not at all.

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** No, not at all. And then it probably says this in my bio, then I decided to really pursue it. And in 1988, I went to "Jazz in July" at UMass Amherst and that's where I met Sheila Jordan.

**FRED** Ah yes, Sheila!

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** Who I'm going to go see tonight.

**FRED** Where?

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** She's in Cambridge. It's an eightieth birthday thing for her at Cambridge Multicultural Arts Center.

**FRED** Get out! I didn't hear about that at all! She's up from New York for this?

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** Yeah she's been up here twice in the last two weeks.

**FRED** She goes to Wellesley sometimes.

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** Yeah, but she came up, she was in Newton about two weeks ago.

**FRED** Oh gosh!

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** And I couldn't go and so she's...

**FRED** I got the opera; I can't go.

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** I know, anyway.

**FRED** Bummer! Is she going to be around for the weekend?

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** I don't think so. She did an interview on WGBH last night, I didn't listen to it. But anyway... But I met her and at the same time that I met her, I met Billy Taylor, I met Max Roach, I mean, big-time.

**FRED** Yep, lot of cats out there.

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** And a lot of... and then people that are not household names, but been around for a long, long time. And it changed my life. Just, I was like, "This is where I need to be."

**FRED** Wow, Sheila. Talk about magnetism.

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** It just was unbelievable. And all of them, you know. The humility, the energy, the seriousness, the history...

**FRED** Heavy history there. All that Indian background and everything.

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** The breath of the music, but even all those people that were teaching, there was like no attitude, there was no competition, you know. The nature of the music is such that there can be competition, but it doesn't have to be that way, you know.

**FRED** Right, doesn't have to be a cutting session.

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** And I realized that I could actually do it. That there were aspects of my singing and my voice, that I could do it.

**FRED** Had you ever scatted or improvised or anything like that before? Never never?

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** I did lots of theatrical improvisation.

**FRED** Sure.

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** You know, with words and "Okay, you're coming in the door and you're so and so," and that kind of thing. "Your character is, you have orange hair and you're from Greece and you have to" I did that kind of stuff you know. But not, not so much vocally, not so much. It was what's on the page for the most part. With an acting intent. So it completely--and I went there for three summers. You know the thing I think that got me is that I did, I sent in a tape and I think I had a little demo then that Bob Stoloff played on my first demo, if you can believe this. And Marshall Wood, did Marshall play? Yeah Marshall played on it. And then a guy who used to live here named Elliott Baliban, he's a stockbroker now. But he wrote some really great charts. And so I had this full demo and I sent it to them. And when I, even before I went out there and met Sheila and everything, they gave me a scholarship and I was like, "Wow, okay." I didn't know if I was really serious about this I guess. And before that, Bob was teaching us. Before he was here at Berklee he was teaching the scat class at Boston Center for Adult Education. It was like the six-week thing. I took it because I was just trying to figure out, what do you do? How do you go about this and stuff? So anyway, I went there three summers and met a lot of other singers who were still--and people around here who are still my friends to this day. And I just started on that path, that's what I did.

**FRED** Maybe you could drop a few Berklee names in here. I mean, of people that you've met or worked with. Just to

**BOUCHARD:** make a few links with the school here.

**LISA THORSON:** Well, the one from "Jazz in July" that I think is probably the most unusual is Mark Shilansky. Mark was nineteen when I first met him at "Jazz in July." And what I would do is we would have these at-the-end-of-the-week concerts--and this is what I tell my students to this day: if you want to find people to play with, if you want to learn repertoire, if you want to hear different kinds of styles, we have eight concerts a day going on here at Berklee. I don't care if you know the people or not. Go, listen, get the program. If you hear something you like, circle it. Start making a list, tunes, arrangements, people that write, players. "Oh yeah, I like that bass player," you know. "I don't know that person," find out who knows them, go up to them, give them your card, whatever. That's what I started doing. In Boston in the summer, we used to have tons, remember we used to have tons of free outdoor jazz concerts and stuff? Oh my God! I used to go check out Rebecca Parris and Donna Byrne and Maggie and all these people who were like the grand dames of jazz, you know. And I'm going, I'm checking them out, like "Okay, what do they do, how are they doing that? And what kind of repertoire are they" I went and checked it out. I had to know what the scene was, it was so... How would I know?

**FRED** You just gave me another analogy for getting kids to write good reviews, you got to read good reviews.

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** Absolutely.

**FRED** You go open the papers, look at the magazines. Who can write, who can't write? Who turns you on to a band you  
**BOUCHARD:** never heard of before because they write so well? Who doesn't know beans about a band that you think is great? Then you make the cut.

**LISA THORSON:** If you're not inspired by other people, you can't. How can you aspire to get there?

**FRED** Yeah, you don't work in a vacuum. And you don't come to a school like Berklee to be in a vacuum.

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** And how can you build repertoire? I say listen to the radio. Man, I listened to the radio over and over. Now they have playlists so you can go online and get them you know. But anyway, I remember I was at this concert and I had the program of all the different bands, you know. All the bands would play like three or four tunes or whatever. And I see this young kid playing the piano and I'm thinking, who is that? And I see the name on it, so I circled "Mark Shilansky." And these are people coming from all over the country and even some internationally. I didn't know where the hell he was from or anything. I just circled the name, you know. Must have been four years, three or four years later, time goes on and I decided to go to NEC to get my master's in jazz studies. Because I was like okay, if I'm gonna do this, I've got to do this. A master's will help with, you know, a teaching degree. But I really needed the knowledge, I needed the theory more than anything else, because I had a theory background, but not for this kind of stuff.

**FRED** That was cello and classical, largely.

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** Exactly. And I played some piano and I played guitar and I could read, but it had gone by-the-by. So I think it was '91 or--must have been '92, so this was like four years later. I'm in an ensemble and this guy comes up to me and goes, "You probably don't remember me," and I looked. He goes, "My name's Mark Shilansky," and I was like[gapes] I remembered him, I remembered him. He was so intimidated of me because I was sort of gigging around the area and I was supposedly something. You know how it is, when somebody's in a different place than you are. And I was like, "I can't believe this." And so, we've been friends since that time. We've worked together on countless gigs and recordings and stuff. And it's just from that. Who would have thought?

**FRED** Yeah, yeah.

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** It's like the "small world" thing.

**FRED** Sure. He's been on faculty here for sometime?

**BOUCHARD:**



**LISA THORSON:** At least ten years, yeah. So we went to NEC together. And then of course--my NEC years, there's---I don't know if you've---it's sort of funny. Dominique talks about--I think it's a little different now--but at that time she talked about the heyday of the jazz vocal program at NEC when she was teaching. In the same class was--all getting our masters--Mark was there, but he was doing piano obviously---Luciana Souza, Kris Adams, me, and then Patrice Williamson. We were like--and we became friends. And we hung out with Aebersold Records and the books where we'd like, put on an Aebersold, we'd open up the book, we'd pick a tune, we'd sightread the tune, we'd trade, we did a bazillion sessions and stuff together. It was just, it was a great time.

**FRED** These are like mass rehearsals but...

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** Yeah, they were just sessions of "Let's not even bother getting a rhythm section." Let's just put on the music minus one tracks, and let's practice and do ear training and let's do blah blah blah. You know Luciana usually always led all of that because she loves to, she's a great teacher. You know, she likes to give orders, so that was great. But that was a really exciting time.

**FRED** Oh boy.

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** Really, and just mutually supportive. I think one of the things that I really took from Sheila and that time in "Jazz in July," and then what I took from the NEC stuff, was this idea that you don't have to be competitive to exist in the business. Because, you know, and that's the one thing I don't miss about theater at all, is that there's a lot of...

**FRED** Politics, backstabbing, ego...

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** Just a lot of garbage, just gets in the way. And I'm not saying that I'm immune from it at all, you know. Everybody always wants what somebody else has. It's just sort of human nature. But I just really learned about what it's like to have people support you. Wherever you are, whatever level you're at, you know. And I have really tried to bring that into my teaching. That when people are in classes, even if they're performance classes, it's not about a competition. Everybody is at a different, at a different place.

**FRED** Yeah, and everybody is who they are. And it's not apples and oranges, we're all apples.

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** And as far as the jazz thing goes, I mean, who has any gigs anyway at this point? So to be after somebody's gig or this or that or the other thing... I mean, you have to do it because you love the music. We hope, of course, for more resurgence of business, for lack of a better word. And you just said to me, when you went, you just said this about Berlin. You said. "Oh, so and so never heard of them. Blah blah blah, never heard of them. Never heard of this person." And they're great, right?

**FRED** Yeah.

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** They have something to offer. They're skilled, all that kind of stuff. It's just the marketplace that stands in the way right now. So I try very hard, I think. I don't succeed all the time. But I try very hard not to make judgements based on what somebody's level in the business is. Like when you give me those recordings, I don't... I will say that I do filter them by if they're all standards, I sort of go, "I'm not sure I need to hear another version of 'Autumn Leaves.'" But, that's not to say that I won't put it on and listen for a second to see, "Oh, this might be a fresh take on 'Autumn Leaves'"--could be great!

**FRED** Yeah, true.

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** But I don't look at it and say, "Oh, I've never heard of that person, therefore I'm not going to listen to it." [shakes head]

**FRED** No. That's a real pitfall.

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** Yeah, because, well, you're in that...

**FRED** Yeah, you got to commit to everything with fresh ears.

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** Yeah, and it's hard.

**FRED** And you know, and the justice's blindfold, just listen real good.

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** Yeah, yeah. What else?

**FRED** Well, how about let's talk about what good singers do and favorite composers and lyricists and repertoire. That's  
**BOUCHARD:** always a fascinating subject that often gets neglected in talking about biography and the day-to-day drudgery of living. Let's cut to the chase and get talking about some of our...

**LISA THORSON:** Going back to the Ella documentary, there's an interview in there with André Previn, he's interviewing her. He says, "Why do you pick the songs that you do?" And Ella says, "I like pretty lyrics." And I think when she says it, of course, because of the time that she was singing the repertoire that she does. She's also talking about very poetic lyrics, which we don't have a lot of. People are not writing poetry songs, classic songs, quote [makes air quotes] poetry in the way that they used to. I'm not saying that everything is bad. There's a lot of really good stuff out there, but. And then she says, "I also like to sing things that when I sing them, I know somebody will have a memory that brings them back to a place, whether it's good or bad." And for me, I just love listening to somebody again, who's so great like that, just really zero in on why they sing what they sing. I have sort of-- favorite composers for me, it's a very hard thing because I'm thinking on the standards track, and then I'm thinking sort of beyond the standards. Favorite lyricists? For sure, Johnny Mercer.

**FRED** Wonderful.

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** "Your lips were like a red and ruby chalice, warmer than the sun" I mean...

**FRED** Total romantic, but then, wonderful humor too, like "Jeepers Creepers."

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** Oh, you're right. Just witty, really poetic use of words that most people do not use. I mean he and Cole Porter for sure.

**FRED** Top notch.

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** And Cole Porter. I have at home--I haven't opened it in a thousand years--but I have a coffee table book that's this big by this big by this thick. [gestures] It must be 400-something pages, The Complete Lyrics of Cole Porter.

**FRED** That's a gem. That should be on the poetry shelf.

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** It's astonishing. Then you go to tunes like "Let's Do It" and everybody sings, "Birds do it, bees do it." And you look and he's written like fifteen other verses, yeah.

**FRED** And Ella and Louis do them all.

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** Yeah [laughs], I know, I know. so...

**FRED** And he wrote the music, damn.

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** Yeah. Hoagy Carmichael.

**FRED** Another gem.

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** He's totally great. All, I think, the really, just great standard composers. But for melody and, for certain degree, lyric, Ellington and Strayhorn are--they are the hardest and the best songs to teach because they are exquisite as they are, you know. That's one of those things where I say, I think you want to be really careful about messing around with this melody. And I am not a traditionalist at all that says you got to sing the head exactly that way, or anything like that. But for something like that. And I talk a lot with my students about not to negate anybody's composition, but identifying melodies that--somebody really put that note on that chord for a reason. And that lyric is there for a reason. And if you say "and" instead of "but," that makes a big difference. I sound like Maggie Scott. Maggie Scott's the Lyric Police, that's what we call her all the time! [Fred laughs] But it's great because there is a real difference. If you hear Carmen McRae sing a tune, she would sing "and," and she would sing "but," in a completely different way. It would change the context of the phrase.

**FRED** The whole song would shift.

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** It would.

**FRED** And her tone of voice would nail it.

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** Absolutely. And to me, that's where you do have to really look to what was originally intended, then you can go away from it and stuff.

**FRED** I used to talk to Carol Sloane a lot, and Carol loved to tell the story about when she was an ingenue, would get up and try to impress people. And Oscar Peterson walked in the club a couple of times during the course of a weekend and she sang "Lush Life." And she diddled around with the melody a lot and she looked at Oscar for approval, and he went [grimaces with arms crossed] Finally, the third night she just got disgusted and sang it totally straight and Oscar was beaming in the back of the hall, you know. So she got the message. Don't mess with perfection.

**LISA THORSON:** Yeah, and I think it's hard--you know, and again, you don't want to denigrate anybody's composition and say, "Well this is a melody you can just mess with and that's it." You can't really do that. But I do think using your ears and looking to lyrics--like what drives, and this is a small thing, but what drives me crazy is I think, I forget, a pop singer who shall remain nameless, recorded "My Funny Valentine." And they sang, "Don't change your hair for me."

**FRED** Oh, God.

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** I have students get up in my class and they sing, "Don't change your hair." and I'm like, I just stop them. I say, "It's not 'your,' it's 'a.'" And there's a real big difference between 'your' and 'a.'" And do you understand the difference that that means?" And I know it's a picky thing, but dammit, you know! Who was it, Lorenz Hart wrote that, right? It's a Rodgers and Hart song. So those are some favorites, but you know. Contemporary composers, or I would say, let's say post-standard. That's probably not right; it's not fair. Tom Harrell, you know, I've written some lyrics to a couple of Tom Harrell's tunes. Sheila does a couple of Tom Harrell tunes, you know. He's had a number of his songs with added lyrics which are beautiful. "Out to Sea" that you were talking about, that's one of them.

**FRED** "Out to Sea"--gorgeous.

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** Beautiful, beautiful lyrics. Kenny Wheeler, I love. And Kenny's thing for me, is more about singing without lyrics. The challenge of singing without lyrics. Which I like to do both. And I sort of feel like where I've evolved is this: what's it like to sing with a lyric and what's it like to sing without a lyric. And how do you convey emotion and feeling without a lyric?

**FRED** Yeah. And we're talking about some serious instrument voices there. When you talk about Tom Harrell and Kenny  
**BOUCHARD:** Wheeler. Guys who sang through their trumpet. Art Farmer, another one. Great melodists, great poise, phrasing, diction, individuality. You'll be pleased to know that somebody talked Kenny Wheeler into getting together with the WDR Orchestra in Bonn or wherever they are--Cologne, Koln. And they were recording an eightieth birthday concert for him this week. But Kenny, I saw him with Ronnie Scott when he was a shy little thirty-year-old Canadian back at Ronnie Scott's club in the seventies. And whenever he would come up to take a solo with the Ronnie Scott Orchestra, the room would just freeze and everybody would go.[twists ears] The ears would get turned on.

**LISA THORSON:** Great. One of the greatest challenges, and I feel like one of the things that I feel like I'm most proud of, is when I finished at NEC, Kenny came. He was doing a residency, but this was after--I had just been out for about half a year or something like that. And Scott, what was his last name? Not Scott Wheeler, I can't remember. He used to direct a big band there. He called me, he said, "I need somebody to sing Norma Winstone's stuff on that."

**FRED** Oh baby.

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** And I was like... [widens eyes] and I didn't really know Kenny's music that much. And so, he got me the charts, he got me the recordings or whatever and I was like[grimaces] Now I had done some scat singing, I had some singing without lyrics, and my dear friend Luciana is the queen of singing without lyrics, you know. That's really her, that's really her...

**FRED** Amazing.

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** She and Norma Winstone along with a couple of other people really made that something. And I said, "Okay, I'll do what I can." And I don't think, talk about practicing, I don't think I ever worked harder--ever.

**FRED** You had a short period of time which you had to get these things together.

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** Yeah, and a lot of charts and all of Norma's stuff, some with lyrics, but a lot without lyrics. And having to blend with the horn section and all that stuff. And to have Kenny there also.

**FRED** When was this?

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** '93, '94.

**FRED** I didn't catch it, I'm really sorry.

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** Yeah and not that many people came, you know. We did this whole thing.

**FRED** You got a recording of it?

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** I don't know, there's probably one. [rolls eyes] Scared to listen to it now. But I have to say it was one of those things where I just really felt like not only did my singing, but my musicianship just went [gestures upwards] It was such a challenge, and evidently I did really well because he was really happy. And then several years ago I was teaching in Italy, and there's a little festival that he came to. And we didn't do it with a big band, but we did some small group stuff.

**FRED** Which was that?

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** It's a small little place called Santo Pidio.

**FRED** Okay.

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** And he just came for like a day and a night and we did some stuff together. You know, those are the kinds of... I guess I'm really attracted to trumpet players. I was just going to say I've learned so much from instrumentalists, playing with them, listening to them. Again this sort of goes beyond the lyric and the story that you're telling of how can you get the voice to change shape? How can you tell a story without words? But I know just sort of being on stage with Kenny and doing that, sort of in both situations--it makes you rise to a higher level, makes you listen in a different way, pressure's sort of on. But also, just listening to those kinds of solos and then being challenged to echo it in some way was huge. I played several gigs with Herb Pomeroy and usually I would hire him. And sometimes he'd be the only horn and sometimes Cercie [Miller] would be playing also. We did a couple of two horn things. But mostly I would just hire Herb to play. Sometimes not fancy gigs. and he would always play and never--Herb was amazing--he would never ask about the money, ever. I would always say, "Pays blah blah, is that okay? I could pay you more, I could you know." "Ah no, no, no, no, don't worry about it, I'm happy to do the gig."

**FRED** Great.

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** And Herb again, another amazing trumpet player. One of my favorite recordings that I play over and over and over, is one that he did with Billy Novick called This Is Always. And, have you ever heard of it?

**FRED** I think I have, yeah.

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** I just love it, I love it. Paul Schmeling plays on it, Marshall [Wood], John Wheatley. I think Jim Gwinn plays [drums], pretty sure. The thing about Herb, again: here's this master of music, of education, of history, of everything. Herb was so humble he would always say to me, "Send me the charts in advance." We would always have a rehearsal. When I would get the charts back at the end of the gig, Herb would have written stuff out. He would have made notes to himself. And a lot of these were not, some were complicated arrangements, but some were just straight ahead stuff. Like we used to always do Miles Davis's bebop head called "Little Willy Leaps," and we would do it together, just the head together. And he would always say to me, "Are you going to articulate this?" and "I think we should do that." Every time! And sometimes even between the sets, he'd come over to me and say, "Now I just want to make sure that when we do this, do we go to the interlude?" He always... And then in the process of playing with him, you know, without saying anything, without instruction or anything, it was just a lesson. I would just sit back and listen to him play.

**FRED** Great attention to detail.

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** And I would just be like, "Oh yeah, phrasing should be like that. Space should be like that." Dynamics, everything. And then sometimes the teacher would come out in him a little bit. He would challenge you. I remember once I had written--I'm not a great arranger in terms of horn lines or anything, but I had written something. Herb was at a rehearsal and he's looking it, and he's going, "Yeah, well, I could play that note, but I could" and he goes like this: "but I could also play--" [gestures]. And he doesn't tell me! "I can also play" Like, come on Lisa, I can come up with it. I said, sheepishly, "A?" He goes, "Yeah 'A' would work really well here too." I was like, oh man, I felt like my feet were to the fire. It was Herb Pomeroy, you know. But never again.

**FRED** But he was always gentle and diplomatic.

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** This is what I mean, the same thing. People who are just at such a consummate level of accomplishment, for lack of a better word. Felt the same thing with Sheila, with Max Roach, Billy Taylor, Ted Dunbar, Yusef Lateef, all these people. And then people here also. You just, like the word is the word and you just take it.

**FRED** It's always meant in good graces, and it's always kind of an ennobling experience to work with people that good  
**BOUCHARD:** and that low key about it. It's like I met Ellington once or twice and served him a cup of tea in between sets, and he'd make you feel important, just addressing you and being in his presence. Anyway, well, we covered some ground here. Do we want to approach the "D" issue at all or do you want to let it slide?

**LISA THORSON:** I don't know, we sort of talked about it in terms of the transition of music.

**FRED** What about the analogy of "vineyard is to musician as a cuvee or a vintage bottling is to a set or a CD of  
**BOUCHARD:** someone's work?" Like a moment in time, a document of a particular era.

**LISA THORSON:** [pauses] I sort of feel like--this is going back to what I was talking about, when I was 20, about giving everybody a chance, even if you don't know who they are. I think if you're going to be a really good listener or if you're going to be a really good student, I feel this way. You have to recognize those moments in time. Whatever the compilation is, whether it's a show or this group of music or whatever. And I think you also have to realize that you have to give the artist the opportunity to move on from that. Which is something that doesn't happen in pop culture.

**FRED** No.

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** Somebody does something, it fixes who they are and what they do in a place. And so then there's this fifty years later--the hits of the fifties. Everybody wants the nostalgia part of it, which I understand. But I think for an artist, you just can't be stuck there. You know Miles Davis is the best example, right? Just kept moving.

**FRED** He always pushed the envelope.

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** Always moving. Didn't mean that he wouldn't, on a concert, come back to playing "Someday My Prince Will Come" or "My Funny Valentine," but always was going on from there. I think that's hard for people to accept. I think it's hard as an artist to go onto that next thing.

**FRED** That's because the artist is always way ahead of his public in many respects. And if Miles says this over the mic,  
**BOUCHARD:** "We don't play that shit no more," you know, you just have to take it. Herbie Hancock at the [Berklee Jazz] festival last week, he played some really out stuff with a lot of electronic voicings and unusual uses of his band members which included Terrence Blanchard and James Genus and Gregoire Maree and Kendrick Scott. I know the audience was upset, they were sitting on their hands, they were getting fidgety, because they're always way ahead of the expectations. And you can't just live with the music of the past. You've always got to force some new directions.

**LISA THORSON:** It's really a hard thing, though, because I do think though, you always have to be mindful of the audience. I think you have to be mindful of what their expectation is and then--I mean for me personally, I don't know maybe this is copping out, maybe this is--I'm not as creative as this person or that person in terms of projects or different kinds of music. I think some people jump sort of from genre to genre or include, you know somebody like Dave Douglas, who always has this project and that project and that.

**FRED** Going simultaneously.

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** Yea,h sometimes people really function that way. They have that much going on, they need that for stimulus. I don't know. But I guess I'm always sort of in this place where I'll give the audience some of what I think they expect and then I'll add new stuff.

**FRED** So that's right, you lead them along, but don't shut them out.

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** Yeah, so that there's a balance of stuff. Because I think if you want people to keep coming back, that's important. You know Herbie did, I give him all the credit in the world, but he may, the next time he comes back, all those people might not show up. And that's a very hard balance because I don't think as an artist that you can be arrogant and just say, "Well, I'll just do whatever the hell I want to and they'll just come."

**FRED** No, he did finish with "Chameleon." So he went full circle. He's been doing that, I have heard his stuff lately.

**BOUCHARD:**



**LISA THORSON:** Yeah, but I do think again, this is going back to listening to people, because I know that it's happened to me. Especially with writers and critics, that they hear one CD and if they don't like it so much, they're not going to listen to the next one.

**FRED** That is unfortunately the case. Particularly when you're getting stacks of them all the time. You have a bad taste  
**BOUCHARD:** in your mouth and you need to move on to try to assess the next phase of this person's career or put it in context.

**LISA THORSON:** And I know for me, just going back to sort of traversing this line between musical theater to cabaret to whatever-- this is going to be fun. I remember I did, there's a Boston Globe Jazz Festival in 1988 or 1989. And do you remember Studio Red Top?

**FRED** Sure, Cathy Lee. Great gal.

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** So we did sort of an experimental gig where we had sign language interpreters, and Stan Strickland was playing on the gig ,and it was my gig, but we brought this in.

**FRED** Did he dance?

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** He danced a little, we were singing, he was playing flute and doing a bunch of different stuff. And at that time still I was sort of, "Here's the cabaret line." I was sort of going there because I hadn't listened enough. I hadn't, you know--but here I was out in public doing this thing, working it out in public. And I remember Bob Blumenthal wrote a piece for the Globe. You always remember stuff like this, right? And it said, "Lisa Thorson has a beautiful sound, she's a fine singer, but she sounds like a pop singer converting to jazz."

**FRED** Oops.

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** But you know what? He was right, he was right. He didn't say it was bad, he just said what it was, he said what he heard. And then about three or four years later, I did a duo/duo concert with Harvie Swartz and Sheila Jordan. And then a guitarist that I was working with at the time, Bill Coon. We did like two duos together and then we did stuff together. It was over at MIT. And I remember Bob was there and I was like, "Oh no, now what?" And then he wrote a review, and he said, Lisa Thorson has made tremendous growth as a jazz singer." And I was like, "Yep, and it's because I studied, listened, I was able to work with people who were so far ahead of where I was." Always the musicians that I worked with, the people that I work with I've been playing with for twenty years. And they were always far ahead of where I was, but always just, you know... George Schuller was like one of my biggest, George always pushing me. "You can do more, you should listen to this, you should try this, you can do more," just always like that, always.

**FRED** Very cool.

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** And I appreciate that because how would I know? So when I go back to talking about my students, and even the lazy ones, giving them the most difficult stuff, I feel like that's part of my job. I push them as much as I can because if you don't, especially if you want to be an improvising jazz musician, if you don't go into uncomfortable territory, you're never going to know what it's like to really have to be in the moment.

**FRED BOUCHARD:** As a music critic, I must say that I miss Bob Blumenthal's writing in the Globe and the Phoenix. You know, he's doing great work for Branford Marsalis, but he was always a bellwether for me. And I recognize that he had great skills and a phenomenal oral memory, as he did in your case, and could see the distance that you'd grown in two or three years between his reviews. We all aspire to write that well in the community.

**LISA THORSON:** I completely agree with you. That meant a lot to me that somebody--number one, I'm sure he came because it was Sheila of course, but still, that he would come and that he would have remembered. And even taken the time, he could have written the whole damn review about Sheila, you know. But he also wouldn't have been giving the full picture of what was going on at the gig that night. But I really appreciated that. And not because necessarily that it said, "Oh Lisa, you got better," but because it showed perspective on his part. And I was like, "Okay, I guess I'm going in the right direction."

**FRED BOUCHARD:** Lisa, we've done yeoman's work here. Great to have you talk about your career. We covered all we can cover, and we went to a lot of good places. Thanks for coming and thanks for sharing. I'm sure that our students and the Berklee community will enjoy watching this little DVD in the library in the near future.

**LISA THORSON:** Thank you.

**FRED** Thanks again.

**BOUCHARD:**

**LISA THORSON:** Yeah, you're welcome.