

FRED BOUCHARD: Well, hello there, this Fred Bouchard. We're back again with round eight of our video jazz history series, for the Berklee Library. And today our guest is Mr. Ron Gill, who's been a colleague and associate on the Boston jazz scene for thirty years plus. Ron has just been recently elected president of the New England Jazz Alliance just recently, a month or two ago. And he's revving up his activity also with the Boston Jazz Collective, an armada of musicians seeking space and work and artistic success and survival. Ron's been a singer in and around Boston since the late forties; he has been the co-founder and president of the Jazz Coalition with Marc Harvey and other people like myself aboard back in the late seventies and early eighties; he has been an em-cee of concerts here at Berklee; and is the radio host of Jazz Gallery at WGBH FM, which is a Berklee media sponsor, since 1988. Here we are, sitting here in the Davis room, about to tackle Ron's perspective on Boston jazz history. So welcome aboard, Ron, nice to have you here.

RON GILL: Nice to be here, yeah. It's a great opportunity to get a chance to talk about some of these things that we have been involved in over the years. It's very important as far as I'm concerned to put down for historical facts. This is something that especially in Boston, people are really struggling trying to figure out what the history was of jazz in Boston. And there are some people now who are really making that effort, finally, putting down in a historical manner, the people that made a contribution to jazz in the Boston area.

FRED BOUCHARD: You've been a part of it since you were singing in local dance halls and parties. And you made a record with the Calypso Rhythm Boys back in the what?

RON GILL: Fifties.

FRED BOUCHARD: Fifties, okay. Why don't you reach back into your memory bag and tell us about some things that were on the scene when you were growing up.

RON GILL: Well, you know, when you're involved in any kind of venture music was mine you always look back as to what helped you to get involved in that situation. My situation was that I was very fortunate, and I always feel [it's] very important for me to document that. When I was six years old I lived with an aunt in New York City, in Brooklyn, and for me it was fortunate because she was a person that was young and vibrant and loved jazz just loved music in general, but loved jazz. So when I was six years old, I was listening to recordings by Billie Holiday and Count Basie and Coleman Hawkins and Benny Goodman, you know. It was a natural kind of thing, it wasn't like the music was there and nobody was playing, it was active. We were constantly having music in the house. So when I was six years old, it became a normal function of my daily life, and fortunate for me because you know when you think back at that particular period of time, we're talking really early forties. We're talking about 78 records, you know 78 records were breakable. You could drop a 78 record, done, you gotta go and buy another one. So here I was at six years old, having the freedom to go, get a recording, put it on the turntable, and play it. I wasn't restricted. Nobody said to me, "Oh, you can't touch that," you know what I'm saying?

FRED BOUCHARD: This is entrusting you with the family jewels.

RON GILL: Yeah, actually. And it wasn't until many, many, many years later really, I was grown up I found out through my mother that my aunt had a short aspiration to be a vocalist. My aunt never told me that. And I saw this picture of her one day in this kind of a gowny thing, and I said to my mother, I said, "What was that about?" She told me, she says, "Well, your aunt wanted to be a singer." She said, "When she was living in New York, in Brooklyn, she wanted to be a singer." She obviously got married and that was the end of that. But it took me away because I said, "You know, that's why she had this music." And she used to always go out and hear it. Because at that time, there were dance halls in New York City we see the reflections of that on the television series.

FRED Roseland Ballroom and places like that.

BOUCHARD:

RON GILL: Roseland Ballroom, places like that. She used to go to the Cotton Club. And she would come home from these ventures, and she would tell me about these things. It was part of the conversation. Besides that, I was very fortunate, was that she took me to all the theaters. So, I went to the Apollo Theater, I went to the Capitol Theater, went to the Paramount Theater I saw all these live bands, I saw all these live performances. So you imagine how, from the time I was six years old up until I was eleven I left her when I was eleven I saw all these things. It takes now that I'm much older, I say to myself, well, who did I see? You know, because, I was so young, and I see reflections, I don't see exact anymore, you know? I see reflections of people that I might have seen. And when I think about it sometimes, I say to myself, "Well, you remember the possibility you might have seen Count Basie on the bandstand. You might have seen Duke." Because she liked all these people. So there's no doubt in my mind that she took me to see these people. I mean, she used to always take me also to the Radio City Music Hall, which was a completely different kind of a venue because it had stage shows.

So when I think back, I say to myself, it's no wonder that music was so much part of my life, that by the time I was eleven or twelve years old, I found that I had a voice. By the time I was twelve years old, you could ask me anything about anybody, practically, that was big at that time because you had movie theaters, you had movies, you had MGM musicals, you had RKO musicals, you had Fred Astaire and Jane Powell, Frankie Lane You had all these people, big people, that were in movies. So you'd go to the theater and you'd see these kinds of things. And all of this really, I think, seeped in. So by the time I was twelve years old, I knew all of these people.

FRED And you knew the songs.

BOUCHARD:

RON GILL: I knew the songs.

FRED You remembered the lyrics, you identified with the melodies.

BOUCHARD:

RON GILL: Absolutely. So when I was in my first year of high school now I'm in Boston in my first year of high school there was a Christmas Show. And now previous to this, I had done some performing you know, local little things, no biggie, little community kinds of things. I had already begun to experiment with what I was feeling. Because basically what it is, is that, at a particular stage in your life you realize it isn't like you sat down and learned how to play a piano. I recognized the fact that I had a voice. I knew the songs, I knew the material, I could sing them. So I decided, well, let me see how good I am. And I'll never forget, they had a Christmas show, and they asked the student body now this was at a time when a lot of schools in Boston were separated. You had girls' schools, boys' schools; I went to Boston Technical High School, which is basically right around the corner from where Berklee is, right near the church. Berklee is sitting on practically the foot of where Boston Technical High School was.

FRED You mean the Christian Science Church?

BOUCHARD:

RON GILL: No, right around the corner.

FRED Oh, this little brick joint here. What do you call it? Saint

BOUCHARD:

RON GILL: Saint Cecilia's or whatever it is.

FRED Saint Cecilia.

BOUCHARD:

RON GILL: Basically that's where Boston Technical High School was, generally. The church was there, I'm sure, but this was sitting basically this was a hotel at the time, and behind the hotel was Boston Technical High School. And it was an all boys school. And they wanted a performance for the Christmas show. And there was a kid in my class that was a good friend, and he told me he knew how to play piano, and I said, "Well, maybe you can play for me." Well, it was really interesting because I'm not sure how good he was, but the music teacher decided he was going to play for me. I sang at this event, and I sang "Because." And there was such a reaction, a positive reaction, after I did this, that I realized right then and there, that I had something. That I could move an audience with my performance. And that's where it started, basically, and I just went on, and continued to find places to perform in the Boston area.

FRED And when did you meet Manny William?

BOUCHARD:

RON GILL: I met Manny when we were probably about, he's a couple years older than I am, so I was probably about fifteen. And I had, you know, by that time, I was getting involved with other people who were interested in music. Some of them were rhythm and blues type performers, some of them were jazz singers et cetera, musicians. And some of them actually, like Maquita [Makanda], went on to become big performers.

FRED Who was that?

BOUCHARD:

RON GILL: Ken.oh goodness, I got a mental block...

FRED McIntyre?

BOUCHARD:

RON GILL: Ken MacIntyre was among a lot of musicians at that time locally; we used to perform at dance halls, playing dances. And it was really interesting because, you see there's something, when you look at the history of this music, and you look at the history of this music in terms of community, basically, when I look back at it, you have to say to yourself, "Well, how did I come to the music, where was I when I came to the music?" I mean, I was living in an African American community, so naturally the environment that I was in was basically a Black audience. With mixtures of people, you know, et cetera, but you know it was virtually a Black audience. When I think back about how they place music today, and how they put it in a box they gotta have a label put on it, etcetera there were no labels. You either liked the music or you didn't. You had a choice about what you liked. And this is my problem today in how the industry has, in an essence, destroyed the music. They really have.

FRED The catholicity of it.

BOUCHARD:

RON GILL: Yeah, 'cause what they've done is that, they've put everything they've categorized everything. They don't give the listener, the audience out there, the opportunity to choose; they make the choices for them. So they, so what happened, people say, "Oh, you know, jazz is dead." Jazz isn't dead. Jazz is alive and vibrant. You and I know, we go to festivals and concerts and people are there, okay?

FRED It's under the radar of the "industry."

BOUCHARD:

RON GILL: Of the industry. And even the industry doesn't respect it. They don't respect it, and that's a problem.

FRED They don't respect classical music either.

BOUCHARD:

RON GILL: No, well, that's the problem! There's a problem. Because again, they've got everything so categorized, and it's there for a reason: they want control, they want to feed you that information, okay? And to me it's very important to try to change that. You know when you talk about the fact that, well, you know, you took over a position doing the Jazz Alliance. Well, when you take over somebody else's position, you have to have respect for what that person did before you. And then you also have to say to yourself, "Well, where do I want to go with this?" I have my own personal feelings about something that's very vibrant and very important to me and it truly is, it's not there because, oh, I can sing and this is all I want to do. It's more than that, it's deep because, it's history. It's part of what I do, it's part of who I am. It runs through my veins. I like all kinds of music, but my heart is with jazz. It's with the things that I know that I've seen the reaction that people can have because of it. I enjoy the exploration, I enjoy finding the material, I enjoy working on it, I enjoy being part of it.

So there are all kinds of factors involved. So when I go back to the fact of when I was growing up the Black audience liked all kinds of music. And whether it was termed jazz or whether it was termed rhythm and blues, or whatever, whether it was termed blues, it was either good or it was bad. It's like the Ellington comment: "Music is either good or bad." And when it was good, man, it was good. You know, so we could sit and we're no more than teenagers we could sit, or we could go to a party. Dancing was the thing, you see, we talk about the involvement of the music dancing was very important. Because we would dance, we'd go to a party and we'd dance. But we were listening to Errol Garner, we were listening to the Orioles, or we were listening to Joe Williams with the Count Basie Orchestra. It didn't matter to us because the music was vibrant, it was good, so there was no separation, you know? It really wasn't about Black and White. Even though the industry was trying to make it Black and White, and they still are.

FRED Well they were marketing race records to the Whites, and they were marketing Hollywood movies to the Blacks.

BOUCHARD:

RON GILL: Yeah that's right. And what happened was that the White audience was begging, was anxious, was excited about some Black composer, or some Black performer. They were, "that's why", when it finally did change, and it did change around the fifties, when it did change...

FRED When the R&B groups started getting really big.

BOUCHARD:

RON GILL: Yeah, right. When it did change, there was this incredible surge, you know, towards the music. When you look back at it, you look back at the industry, so to speak, and the way I see it, you find that there was always this effort, even if they didn't realize it and I really don't believe that they, I believe that they did realize it there was always this effort to separate it. You know? So, the late fifties, early sixties you started having this emergence of Elvis Presley, you had this emergence of White groups, singing groups and et cetera. And what were they doing? They were copying Black records.

FRED Yep. Otis Blackwell, for Elvis

BOUCHARD:

RON GILL: [Laughs] And it was always this effort. And instead of them just leaving it alone And what has happened to it is that, the audience we know today really have no ability to differentiate between what's good and what isn't good. They don't know how to do that. And that's the sad part, because you know, it's almost like the industry has shot themselves in the foot, rather than open up the thing for so what happens is, you go and you sit in your car, you're sitting somewhere, you turn on a radio, and you turn it to four or five different radio stations, and you hear the same thing after and after and after.

FRED They're all copycats.

BOUCHARD:

RON GILL: All copycats. And what happens is that, they wonder why people stop buying recordings, they wonder why audiences are dying, it's because you have bored them to death.

FRED No variety. It's all same, same, same.

BOUCHARD:

RON GILL: That's why, when those of us who were in this industry, as performers and musicians, will go somewhere and do a performance, and somebody comes up to you and says, "Oh my god, what are you doing? I've never heard anything like this!" you look at them like this and you say, "Where have you been?!" You know, it's like, hello!

FRED BOUCHARD: They've got their head in the sand, or they just haven't had any exposure.

RON GILL: Never had the exposure.

FRED BOUCHARD: When you visit other cultures, when you go to Jamaica, or France, or Cuba, you realize that it's all one big seamless they've to a large degree resisted the industry, or there is no industry.

RON GILL: Yeah, there is no industry.

FRED BOUCHARD: In Cuba and boy, that's really an earful down there to hear the way they all mesh and blend and feed each other.

RON GILL: And the thing about it is this, is that they're probably able to recognize immediately someone who is good because they're not blinded by all the other things. Their ears are wide open. And anybody that wants and you know that you have musicians that go to some of these countries and end up performing with these performers down there, and they come back and their eyes are wide open because there's this sharing of the music between people of other cultures and yourself, and it opens up your ears, opens up your mind. And I think that's absolutely an incredible experience.

FRED BOUCHARD: They also rise above the celebrity genre, which blinds people to what's really talent and what's really just hype in the market.

RON GILL: Right.

FRED BOUCHARD: Anyway, back to Ronnie in Boston, emerging out of the past the high school years, you getting involved with some vocal groups?

RON GILL: I was a friend of a group called the Love Notes. And this was one of the groups of guys that I hung around with. We all liked the music, we all listened to the music together, we got what it was. And I wrote a song for one of the members of the band I liked his voice, his name was Teddy, and I really liked Teddy's voice. One day I said to him, I said, "You know what, I just wrote a song that I want you to sing, it's perfect for you." And they recorded it. And I have a copy of that recording, it's like, so special. And the copy of the recording came to me just a few years ago on a CD, because somebody was involved with I'm trying to remember the recording company there was a gentleman out in where was he, he was out in Belmont, who had a recording studio in his home, and he did those Monogram and Tico records for us, with the Charmer [Louis Farrakhan]. The Love Notes went out there and recorded as well. And the guy was a great guy. And all those tapes languished in his house after he passed away. Somebody was doing something with his wife, with the man's wife, and she obviously said, "Well, you know, my husband did all these things, and he's got these tapes here," etcetera etcetera and obviously they were all in good condition. And a couple of people went and got those tapes and produced a recording of the Love Notes. And my song 'Surrender Your Heart' was one of them. That was my first exposure of writing something that got recorded.

And you know when you're [laughs] sixteen, seventeen, eighteen years old and something like that happens to you, that's like, that's a major thing to happen to you in your life, you know? So that was, we used to perform together, we would do concerts and stuff together, but it was a great experience. My teenage years was a wonderful experience. Because when I was in high school, by the time I was in high school you know, you're fifteen, sixteen, seventeen years old to look back at that and say, "Gee, you know, I had a great experience."

You know another experience was right we talk about Berklee, it's amazing because there's a lot of history, right here at this spot. Right here at this spot there's a lot of history, because Stanley Brown Studios used to be in this building, right above the theater. He lived in this area, he lived in this space.

FRED I don't know him.

BOUCHARD:

RON GILL: Stanley Brown was a dance company, Stanley Brown Studios was a dance he was a dance teacher and a promoter of young people. And Stanley he would have dance recitals, and people think of dance recitals of the people coming out with their little costumes and doing their little tap dance. See, that wasn't what Stanley was about. Stanley was about production. And Stanley had people who I'm trying to remember names here, because all of a sudden... but Dean Earl was one, who was also part of Berklee. Sandy Saniford.

FRED Yes, Preston.

BOUCHARD:

RON GILL: Preston Saniford. They used to what's his name Hanks Forget his first name. All these piano players used to be piano players for Stanley. They would do the rehearsals and they would do the dance recitals and they would do all those kinds of things for the kids when they came in. And the kids were from everywhere, everywhere, all over Boston, outside of Boston. He had a huge group of people here, and Stanley was a wonderful person, you know. You had to respect him. He was a mentor, but he was a very vibrant man. And he would produce a yearly dance recital that you could measure anywhere at any theater in Boston, with the scenery, with the costumes, with the music, the whole thing. With the variety of dances, ballet, tap, whatever, Afro-American, whatever. So, I got involved with Stanley, and ended up doing some of those performances.

FRED As a dancer.

BOUCHARD:

RON GILL: As a singer.

FRED Oh, as a singer.

BOUCHARD:

RON GILL: Because the show was a combination. He would use vocalists, he would use dancers, he would use all kinds of people in the shows. And I have programs for those, because every now and then I'll go back and look at them and say, "Oh my goodness, this is great." But it was an amazing thing. And he would have these performances at places like New England Life Hall, which is now demised, or John Hancock Hall.

And you know when you look back at that, again, here's where your experience comes from: by getting involved with people who are mature, people who are aware, people who are experienced, taking their experience and passing it on down to you, and you taking that with you, as you move through your own personal experiences as you grow. And even to today, you know, when I'm doing a performance, that's all a part of what it was. That's what makes me who I am because of all those experiences I had. And at this stage of my life this is why I make an effort to pass that down to people who are younger than myself, to show them the opportunity, to give them what experience I have. Because sometimes it's not only just being a performer or an instrumentalist or whatever. There's another part of that business as well, you know, how you carry yourself. Stage presence, personality, there's a lot of different things...

FRED Projection, improvisation, oration.

BOUCHARD:

FRED Project, improvisation, all those things. Those are the kinds of things that you try to pass down to someone. I

BOUCHARD: mean, I can't tell a saxophone player how to play 'cause I'm not a saxophonist. But I can give him instruction on how he should look, how he should act, how he should present himself, how he should promote himself, et cetera. Because, that's a part that somebody else who may be training him to be the best saxophone player in the world but is not giving him all those other things that he is definitely going to need. We have to see how others do it. That's why it's important to see how others do it. It's important to look at others as mentors, even though they may not be physical mentors, you know? But people you go to see a Roy Haynes, and you watch them, you go, "Oh, this is how I'm supposed to act, this is how I'm supposed to look." That's why it's important for people who are in those positions to be positive, to be positive mentors, to be positive examples.

FRED It's like sports figures being role models for the kids who are playing sandlot ball.

BOUCHARD:

RON GILL: Absolutely. Because they're looking at them. You know, see? That's why sometimes it angers me when I see people not taking care of business in terms of who they are. They've have this feeling that "I've got this talent and everybody's supposed to love me," and that's it. Well, it's not about that because once you put yourself out into a public situation, you are now an example, and you have to think about that because it's important. Because you are setting yourself up in the minds of other people of how they should do things. That's why when I see people you know, a person's personal life is one thing, but when you react in public... Just recently this baseball player pushes a cameraman down, and he thinks that that's the thing to do, you know? That's not the thing to do. I mean, how do you where is your head at? Who's around you that looks at you and says, "What are you doing?" And I always wonder, who's around you, who can look you dead in the eye and say, "That's not the right thing to do." And where did you come from that you think that this is okay? It's just not the way to do it. So I think that's what's important in terms of setting an example for what other people do.

FRED Who were some of the exemplars for you in your life? Who are some of your influences or your idols?

BOUCHARD:

RON GILL:

Well, you know, one idol always comes to mind, and you know who that is, it's Billy Eckstine. [Fred laughs] And you and I had that opportunity, fortunately, because of you, to visit with him before he passed away. That was an important thing in my life. The other person was Nat Cole. I had an opportunity through the years to be in his presence. It's really funny because life is very strange, you know. Sometimes you look back and think, well, I'll give you an example.

I was performing somewhere when they were doing the concert series at Chestnut Hill. And a young man with his mom... young man to me, but older came with his mother and his brother to see me perform. Interesting thing about that, this person was part of Stanley Brown's group back in the fifties. Very handsome young man who wanted to be an actor. He went to New York, then went to California, and he basically failed at it for numerous reasons. And it was, I guess, detrimental to him, personally, and he's still a wonderful, beautiful person. He hadn't seen me in years. His mother had seen me perform before, and she came back with him to see me again, she brought him with her. And we were talking afterwards, and he said to me, "Well, gee, Ron, you know, do you do this all the time, and what do you do?" So we got to discuss what I was doing and what I had done. And he looked at me and he said, "Well, then, you're successful." And I looked at him and I said, "Yeah, I guess you're kind of right." He said, "Yeah, because you're doing what you want to do."

And you know, you say to yourself, "Gee, that's very interesting." Somebody is telling you, looking at you, that in compared to what they're going through, looking at you, is that "Wow, he's really loving what he does, he's really" and you say to yourself, "You know, we think of success [as one] million records sold, major record company, traveling around the world, performing in front of major audiences." All these things are in your head when you're a young person in this music. And when you look back at it and you say to yourself, "Well, gee, what have I accomplished?" I'm still in Boston, I'm not nationally known, I don't have big selling records. But I've stood in front of audiences, and I've pleased them. I've had people come up to me and say, "I love your recording." I've had people come up and say, "I love your performance." What is that? That's success. We think of success as buying a big house, or buying a big fancy car. Success is exactly what he said to me. "You're doing what you love to do." To me, I look back at that right now and I say, "That's true." Because I continue to do what I love to do. When I think of myself as being present in the New England Jazz Alliance. A new position, a new opportunity to discuss and move other people, to talk to other people, to talk about something that I love. That's success, you know what I'm saying? It's not measured by all the other things that people think that makes you successful. So those are the kinds of things, Fred, that is important to me.

**FRED
BOUCHARD:**

So, when as a young man you looked at Nat Cole and you looked at Mr. B., you would look at them and you say, "These are great artists, they're successful individuals." What else did they project to you? What else did they

RON GILL:

What they project to me as and it's not to say that the only Billy and Nat. Years later was Frank; years later I remember loving Frankie Lane a lot; I loved Ella, Sarah, all this kind of stuff. I had opportunity to see and hear Billie Holiday. And even though they were going through their own personal lives, I was able to separate their musical life away from their personal life because their personal life was really something that was fine to read, but that's their personal life. I really never was in tune to that, even though I knew about it. The most important thing was what they displayed musically. Eckstine was such sartorial splendor. When B. walked out on the stage, you were looking at the most exemplary human being. The man was impeccably dressed. He had such wonderful mannerisms.

I'm gonna tell you something is really I never hear anybody say this, but I remember it. I went to see Billy Eckstine at the Boston Theater, downtown Boston, I forget what they called it at the time. But they had live shows. And I remember going, spending all day in that theater, watching B. Because they would have what, three, four shows a day? You bring your lunch bag and that was it, man, and you were in. Nobody was kicking you out, you could stay there forever, right? And I sat there and watched B. Of course, what I was doing was, I wanted to see what he looked like on stage. I wanted to look at what he did. You know what I mean? How could I look like that? You know what I'm saying? I mean, this is exactly what it was.

And you know, they talked about Michael Jackson's walking on air thing? B. walked on air, man. I'll never forget it, I remember being amazed. I would watch him do it. He would float onto the stage, totally! He had this way of walking that was so cool. It was just, honestly, just like this, man. And they would say, "Ladies and gentlemen, Billy Eckstine." And the music would start, and B. would walk out, just like this. Man it was like, you could feel it here, on your arms, watching him walk out, man! The man was handsome, he was stunning...

FRED And he hadn't even opened his mouth yet!

BOUCHARD:

RON GILL: and he hadn't even opened his mouth! [Fred laughs] You know? And you say to yourself, you know, you got these people in their dungarees and their jeans and their split shirts, running out and they're jumping all over the place and they're banging on everything, and say, "Come on man!"

FRED Get some class.

BOUCHARD:

RON GILL: Get some class! You got B. walking out man... They might have even, I'm not even sure what he might have opened up with, but I know one thing, man, it was class. And another example of class is Ella. I'll never forget this, I'm at Symphony Hall. Norman Grand's Jazz at the Philharmonic. But it was Norman Grand's Jazz at Philharmonic featuring Ella Fitzgerald and the Oscar Peterson Trio. That was the

FRED '68, '66, '68...

BOUCHARD:

RON GILL: Whatever. No, it might have been earlier than that. Anyway, so I'm sitting there...

FRED It's earlier than that.

BOUCHARD:

RON GILL: It's earlier than that. I was sitting... you know what the biggest song was? "You Belong to Me." This is the biggest hit.

FRED Patti Page.

BOUCHARD:

RON GILL: Patti Page's "You Belong to Me" was the biggest hit then. So that was still fifties, alright. And Oscar Peterson had played first. Ella came out in the second half, man. It was always great to hear them announce these people, you know. And there is the hall gets dark. And it's really funny because Reid Jorgensen, my drummer, always remembers this, because obviously Reid was there maybe in a different place 'cause we probably never knew each other at the time. We probably didn't. We didn't. But he always remembered this because he always used to say to me, "This is what we need to do," 'cause we would try these little things. The room gets dark, and all you see on the stage: pin lights over the music. That's all. The guitar player, the bass player, the piano player. Little pin lights, and they would say, "Ladies and Gentlemen, Ella Fitzgerald." The spot would hit the entrance, and Ella would walk across that big huge stage of Symphony Hall towards the microphone. And the group would whatever tune she was open Ing with this particular night, Ella walked out, man, and the first song she sang was not an uptempo. It was "You Belong to Me." And somebody recently told me that that song is available on CD somewhere and I gotta find it.

FRED Her recording of it? I'll check to see if I've got it.

BOUCHARD:

RON GILL: "You Belong to Me." Man[Fred sings a line of the song] Oh, I was dead after that. I was dead after that. And that beautiful warm gracious voice that she had. I'll never forget it, I'll never forget it. I don't remember anything else she sang, Fred. All I do remember, vividly, was Ella walking out on stage singing "You Belong to Me."

FRED That must have blown them away. She undercut Patti Page. Just pulled the rug out from under her. [Laughs]

BOUCHARD:

RON GILL: It was wonderful. And the thing about it is, you know, for her to walk out and do that, as a ballad, an opener. But you know, when you think back at that, it was Ella. She could do anything! You know, she could do anything. Just walk out on the stage, man, just stand in front. And you know she's so gracious. Even before she sang, people were applauding. And she walks out and she stands with that wonderful warm thing that she had, and then she just sang "You Belong to Me." Oh God. Died. Just absolutely.

FRED All the musicians loved her. She had the same kind of grace and generosity offstage as on.

BOUCHARD:

RON GILL: And she was a very shy person.

FRED She was great with the musicians.

BOUCHARD:

RON GILL: Yeah, she was a very shy person. But you know, these are examples. And when you think about what your influences were, these were all these influences. These were what people who talk about things today will say "Those were my mentors." Carmen was a mentor, you know? And fortunately, you know, and some of these cases you were very fortunate because of the business that you were in, you had an opportunity to get involved with interviewing a lot of important people. As another singer, I was never one to really want to get involved with another performer. I didn't like imposing myself on those people.

But I did have an opportunity to be in the presence of some people who I admired. I came out of the service in nineteen sixty, early sixties. I did perform for a while. But I came out of the service and Nat Cole was going to be at a tent out in Framingham at that time I'm trying to remember what the name of it is now, can't remember. But I went out there that summer to see him. I was alone, and I walked to the ticket booth, bought my ticket, and just as I was getting ready to go into the hall, it wasn't a hall it was a tent, all these performers came out. Because of the nature of who you are, you look at people and you know they're performers. And they were all coming out. And I looked at this one person, and it was somebody that was in the Special Service with me, in Germany, was in the Nat King Cole singing group because he carried a chorus 'cause he did kind of a pop kind of thing.

And I said, "Oh my goodness, Dick!" He looks at me and he goes, "Ron! Did you buy your ticket already?" I said, "Yeah," and he said, "Jeez! If I knew I knew you were in Boston somewhere but I didn't know where if I knew, you wouldn't have had to buy your ticket, I would have brought you it." And I said, "That's all right, I bought the ticket." He said, "Don't worry." So he takes me in the place, and I'm sitting, like, twenty feet away from Nat King Cole performing. And I'm sitting there, I'm going, "Whoa, how did I do this?" What was even better was that at intermission, he comes and gets me and he takes me backstage. And who walks in the room but Nat King Cole. He's in a robe, the ever cigarette in his mouth, which killed him. And when I think about it, it wasn't very much longer after that that he had got cancer. But he walked in the room and he was an avid baseball fan, he knew all about baseball, and he was talking to the members of the group about who won the baseball game.

And there was something very interesting that I recognized at that point in time, was that, even though I was in this room with this giant, there seemed to be an unwritten respectability. My friend didn't say, "Oh Nat, I want you to meet a friend of mine." It was sort of like, no, I don't impose that on him. That was the feeling I got. Even though I was there, in their presence, you know he didn't question who I was, whatever, he just did his natural thing, was talking with everybody, was very friendly and very open I just accepted it as what it was. Just to be there in his presence was wonderful. And now, years, years, years later, I've become very good friends I haven't met him yet with Dick Palm, who used to be his publicist.

FRED Oh, right, yes.

BOUCHARD:

RON GILL: Have you met Dick?

FRED I have. He sends a lot of emails

BOUCHARD:

RON GILL: I've never met, but we talk on the phone, we email back and forth to each other. And it's through Nat because I sent a tape of my program because I pay tribute to Nat every year on my show because his birthday is my birthday. So I say to the audience all the time-

FRED Pisces.

BOUCHARD:

RON GILL: March seventeenth.

FRED Oh my.

BOUCHARD:

RON GILL: Yeah, you're a pisces too.

FRED I'm the fourteenth.

BOUCHARD:

RON GILL: And I say to my audience, "This is my gift to me." I play Nat every year. And this year I played Nat, the pianist, for two hours. Just the pianist. And Dick went crazy. I sent him the tape. He called me up

FRED One of those great little trio things? Oscar Moore

BOUCHARD:

RON GILL: Yes! Yeah, all kinds of stuff. And he said, "Man, what made you think about doing that?" And I said, "Come on, I do it every year, I'm always thinking about it. How can I change, and I said, Why don't I just concentrate on" you know? And I recently read an article that Will Friedwald did in a discussion with Bill Charlap. And Bill Charlap said to Friedwald, "It's amazing how many people don't really know how important Nat King Cole was." Oscar Peterson

FRED With Lester Young, oh man. Economy...

BOUCHARD:

RON GILL: I played those.

FRED Taste... where do you think John Lewis got it, you know?

BOUCHARD:

RON GILL: Yeah! I mean, Nat was impeccable. And somebody said, "All you really need to do is listen to Body and Soul' and you know what's happening." And I wrote back and I said, "That's fine, but the real Body and Soul' is the one that he does live on Jazz at the Philharmonic with Les Paul." Man, you're talking about pianistics. You just say, "Oh if I had been there," you know what I'm saying? And you can hear him just enjoying himself. I made a comment because this is an online group that I'm with I made a comment that said, "The sad part about it is, is that, how Capitol really blew it, because they didn't have the good sense to understand and realize what an important person he was as a piano person, and how they allowed him can you imagine, if somebody was really thinking and we think that because people are executives and they're the head of record companies or whatever you know, they too are human beings. They sometimes don't get it. And you know, and you say to yourself, "How could they at any point in time, from the early years, through the time when he became a great vocalist, allowed him to step back from the piano like he did?" Even if they said, "Okay, Nat, you do these vocals here, but we still want you to do your piano things" with all these greats that were available at that time! Can you imagine?

FRED He would do a little bit at the end of his TV shows. But not much.

BOUCHARD:

RON GILL: Yeah, but can you imagine Nat we could have had Nat playing with Coleman Hawkins. Or Nat playing with Louis Armstrong. Or Nat playing behind Billy Eckstine. Or playing behind Ella. Look at all the mishaps that they did. You know what I mean?

FRED Yeah, all that weird packaging and funny pop things. Dave Cavanaugh has lapses in taste.

BOUCHARD:

RON GILL: You know? It's a shame, you know, that they allowed that to go by. I mean, I think today, there are people who are thinking that way, that would find it so important. So many recordings out nowadays where even the musicians are understanding how important it is to get involved with each other, play with each other, share their music, and record it for history. Because, twenty, thirty, forty years from now, we'll be listening to the Chick Coreas with Herbie Hancock, and all these wonderful players, you know? And they'll be here or gone, and the music will be left behind, but look what you got, you know? And look what we missed with Nat King Cole, and I think it's sad.

FRED BOUCHARD: Since we've already made the leap to radio, let's back up just a bit and talk about the similarities and differences between passing the baton on, passing on the knowledge and the history to a new generation. How do you do it from the bandstand as a singer? How do you do it from the airwaves as a disc jockey and a radio host?

RON GILL: Exposure. I do my radio show like I do a performance. I do. And when I had the opportunity to do that you know, you say to yourself, "Well how do you want to do this?" And how I do it and I'm fortunate because I don't have somebody telling me I can or I can't, which is an advantage for working at WGBH so I said, "You know, if the listener on my program, if I want the listener on my program to understand my music, jazz, pop-jazz, whatever it is, how am I gonna do that?" So my belief is that on my show, if I have an artist, I expose that artist to the audience. I don't play one cut. I play two, three cuts. I play twenty minutes, some cases a half an hour of one artist. Because I want that listener to hear and understand who that person is. Because I believe that my job and I believe this strongly I believe my job is to expose that person, that listener. I'm on an hour, I'm on a time frame where it's one to five o'clock in the morning, but there are people out there. But the thing about it is that I know it works. Because I have people who call me and tell me. They don't know why, see, they don't know what they're feeling the way they do, but I know why they're feeling the way they do. Because see, if I played say for instance I was playing Joe Williams. If I played every day, they would go wow, that's great. But if I play Joe Williams for half an hour, and I play every day, and I play a blues thing that he does where he talks and raps, now there's another Joe Williams! If they never heard that, they would never be able to connect it. But when they hear that, they go, "Oh wow!"

FRED BOUCHARD: And then you play "Imagination."

RON GILL: Yeah or you play "Man Ain't Supposed to Cry." You know, and you go, "Wow!"

FRED BOUCHARD: Or those duets he did with George Shearing.

RON GILL: Oh yeah! You see what I'm saying? So you have this exposure. So when I play piano players for instance, I get on a piano player that I like very much, I play them. You know, and I play, I get somebody calling in and they'll say, you know, "Who was that piano player you just played? Who was that? Wow!" If I played one cut, they may go, "Oh, okay, that's different, that's nice." But they may not have listened to the telephone call. But if it's like twenty minutes of that artist, and they hear two or three different versions of a different particular thing, now they're hearing variations. They're hearing a ballad, they're hearing an uptempo thing, they're hearing maybe a far out improvisational piece, it's a completely different so when I'm playing music on the air, that's what I think.

When I go out to perform it's the same thing. It's the material I use, it's the unusual song that I like. I remember when you think back of your life and you think back when you're starting and you have people around you, I remember some friend of mine saying, "I don't think you'd sound good with just a guitar." You say that to me and immediately in my head it's like, "Oh really? I'm going to prove it to you that that's not true." "Oh, you're good at ballads but you're not good at uptempo." And you say to yourself, "Oh, really? Then I gotta change that." It's a challenge. It's an opportunity to prove that you're wrong. But it's also an opportunity to prove that you can do it. And so when I was growing up and performing, these were things that I listened to, these were things that I learned how to do.

You know, when I was seriously thinking about performing, I would be in my house, no music, singing and performing by myself, looking at myself in the mirror. I really did, I would do that. I'm going to tell you something else that just came to my mind that I did, that was very important. When I was growing up there were two newspapers that are probably still available, but they're different today. It was Billboard and Variety newspapers.

FRED The two big show magazines out of New York City.

BOUCHARD:

RON GILL: The biggest.

FRED And competing. Back and forth.

BOUCHARD:

RON GILL: Back and forth. But you know what was really great about those? They used to do reviews, by some of the best reviewers ever.

FRED Stage reviews. And recordings.

BOUCHARD:

RON GILL: Right. But I used to read all the stage reviews. And they used to do the biggest houses, the nightclubs, you know the Copa, California, Florida, Vegas, who was at those places? Eckstine, Sammy Davis Jr, Frank Sinatra, all the biggies. And I would

FRED Wayne Newton.

BOUCHARD:

RON GILL: Oops! [Laughs] I would read these reviews, right? 'Cause you know what was in those reviews? All the hints. They would tell you how he opened, how he closed, what he did in between. And I would read them. I would read these religiously, they used to come out every week I would sit there and wait, I couldn't wait for the next issue to come out.

FRED You could visualize everything.

BOUCHARD:

RON GILL: I could visualize everything! But I also visualized how I was supposed to do something. I got a compliment from Freed our theater

FRED Justin Freed.

BOUCHARD:

RON GILL: Justin. Justin said to me one day, we're talking, this is years ago. He said, "we're talking about somebody else who was performing", and I said, "What did they do, and how did they do this?" And he said, "Oh Ron, they didn't program their show like you do." He said, "You're a master at that." I went "Oh. come on," and he said, "No, you really are."

FRED He's a key listener and a very discerning critic, Justin.

BOUCHARD:

RON GILL: He is, he is, he definitely is. But see these are the people you have around you, see what I'm saying? People who knew you or were close enough to know you, who could tell you, "What did you do this?" or "Why did you not do that?" They could ask you that because they knew that it wasn't going to be like a detrimental thing to you, it was like, they're giving you advice. So when you hear something like that, you go, "Oh that's a nice thing to say," and he says, "No, but it's true." Why is that? Why was that? The thing was that I learned very young that programming like that was important. You know, it's just like going to see Ella and she opens up with "You Belong to Me." Okay? When you think about that, you say to yourself, "Why was she able to do that?" There may have been other people that wouldn't be able to do that like Ella did. But she was Ella. She had the audience in the palm of her hand before she hit the stage. So she didn't have to come and do "bing, bing, bing, bing" to get everybody all excited. She knew that she could walk up there, and she had them already, but all she had to do is walk up there, and just sing this song, and then the rest was a piece of cake.

FRED She gave them a different mirror on a song that they heard on the radio.

BOUCHARD:

RON GILL: Forever! And she said, "I'm gonna go out there and I'm gonna sing You Belong to Me' because that's the biggest thing right now."

FRED So I get it. So when you do your Joe Williams special you're not doing a snapshot, you're doing a whole slide
BOUCHARD: show. And then when you make a record, you don't give them a taste of Billy Strayhorn, you don't just do "Daydream" or "Satin Doll," you give them the whole range, and then they see all the different sides of Strayhorn and you, through it.

RON GILL: Right. See, the Strayhorn thing as you probably know I was telling you that I was making a CD of some stuff that I'm sending to someone, and included in that CD was something that I fortunately have a copy of and that is "Daydream" that I originally did. that was the first Billy Strayhorn song that I did in public through the graciousness of Ran Blake at New England Conservatory.

FRED I think I was there.

BOUCHARD:

RON GILL: In 1977. I've got a copy of that recording. And I got through with that recording, I got through listening to it and it's really funny because every time I hear it, and I listen to the end of it, and I listen to the reaction, I relive the reaction. Because it was the reaction that made me walk off that stage that night and said to myself, "Who is Billy Strayhorn?" I knew who he was virtually. He was a writing companion for Duke Ellington, you see his name, you know, fine.

FRED His alter-ego, his shadow.

BOUCHARD:

RON GILL: Not paying much attention to it. But I walk off the stage and I'm like, "Why am I getting this kind of reaction?" Not because I walked out there and did as they used to say in those days, a boffo performance, but it was why? That was my question to myself: who is this man? So that's when I walked off that stage and started finding out who he was. And it took me twenty years, literally twenty years, to 1997, it was amazing.

FRED A lot of people never got past, you know, his seent year old wunderkind tour de force of "Lush Life."

BOUCHARD:

RON GILL: "Lush Life." Right. They never got past it, that's right. So I said, "I got to find out who this person was." And I remember talking to people like Bob Blumenthal, talking to all kinds of people, looking through record libraries and research and finding and looking and almost finding nothing, pieces, scraps of Billy Strayhorn. All of a sudden, something happened one day and I found this recording that had a lot of Strayhorn on it, by a vocalist. It was just absolutely terrible, just terrible. Beautiful group of musicians, but it was just terrible. But the music was there, and I went, "Oh my god." And I took that recording, made it a part of that library.

By 1996 I decided that it was time for me to do this. I approached a person that I knew at the Museum of Fine Arts, and said, "I'd like to do this thing." And I learned something that day because you learn something every day I learned something that day and that something was, what happens to you in your life depends on who you talk to. You can walk into a room and talk to someone and you can tell them anything you want and they can do one of two things. They can either dismiss you or they can assist you, or they can agree with you. I happened to walk into a situation, sat there with someone who was acceptable, who agreed with what I wanted to do and said, "Let's do it." Wasn't like, "Oh, well, let me think about it." It wasn't like, "Oh well, I'm not sure because I'm doing this and I'm doing that, call me another time." "Let's do it," okay?

FRED Who is that?

BOUCHARD:

RON GILL: Tamson George. She at the time was the head of the Education department. And a mature woman, which is essential. A younger person if a younger person accepted me in doing that, they would have had to have a lot of experience. And I think that's what's wrong today. I think a lot of things don't happen because people are inexperienced.

FRED There are too many CEOs and editors who are twenty-five or thirty.

BOUCHARD:

RON GILL: No experience.

FRED None.

BOUCHARD:

RON GILL: No history. No knowledge. No awareness. And I find that I can't walk into the Museum of Fine Arts I've done three concerts there that were sold out. I can't walk up to the Museum of Fine Arts today and I've tried and say that I want to do something, and somebody says, "Oh, you were here before, you did this, this, and this. Yeah, let's do it." No. Because one, they don't even have the sense of finding out who you are. Two, don't have the sense of checking back to find out anything, have no sense of who you're talking about.

FRED Born yesterday.

BOUCHARD:

RON GILL: Born yesterday. And this is why I'm so bent on education, you know? In this new position that I have, one of the most important factors that I have is reintroducing the music, whether it's jazz or good music, whatever, to the public, to the listener, to the Black community. I don't understand why young Black kids don't know who Duke Ellington is. I don't understand that. And I really truly don't understand it. I don't understand why people who are living in Roxbury and in different communities don't know that Roy Haynes comes from their community and he is one of the most legendary drummers in the world, personalities. One of the biggest people in the world, still alive, playing.

FRED And not just playing, he's vital. A vital force.

BOUCHARD:

RON GILL: Vital. This has to change, Fred. And so, that's what I find my responsibility to be at this particular point in time in my life: to re-educate and to talk to young people and get them here. And as of late, just as we speak, I've already had a conversation not directly, but indirectly with Curtis Warner, who wants me to sit down with him and talk about how NIJA and Berklee can get involved in community efforts.

FRED Berklee does have an outreach program to the Black community, but there may be ways to refine it.

BOUCHARD:

RON GILL: Yeah. And I want to try to be that spokesman for that.

FRED Good, that's very good. Now you can do that with your hat on as president of NIJA and also through this Boston
BOUCHARD: Jazz Collective that we talked about briefly?

RON GILL: Yeah, I'm gonna sit down with one of those representatives and find out what their direction is and how they see what they're trying to do. And already I'm thinking about putting a producing hat on my head to produce some young people in concert doing Strayhorn. Musicians.

FRED Wow. Here on campus or...?

BOUCHARD:

RON GILL: No, outside. And so that's one of the things that I want to do.

FRED Perhaps you could tell us a little bit about what you learn and what you impart when you've done em-ceeding at
BOUCHARD: Berklee concerts here.

RON GILL: What I learned?

FRED What you've learned and what you pick up on and ideas that you get.

BOUCHARD:

RON GILL: You know, what I've learned is, and this is really a fact, what I've learned is, is that abundance of talent out there. When we think of Berklee, that's just a small percentage of what's out there in the country. You could go to Chicago, you could go to California, you could go to a lot of different places, you could go to Texas, you could find all these different places you could go to, and there's talent there, there's young people struggling, working at it. And the more you sit down and you talk to people and you find out what experiences they have as a young person. When I've had the opportunity to come here as a host, I get an opportunity to become face to face with very talented people, and also to sit down in the audience and listen to them, watch them. And I say to myself, "Gee, you know, I miss this." Concerts would happen and I wasn't involved because of the radio station, but now that I have been involved, it's become very important to me because I find that I'm exposed to a lot of young people who are really incredibly talented.

And you know, the sad part about that is, is that, maybe a percentage of them won't quote unquote "make it," in terms of how they perceive what "making it" is, you know what I'm saying? But it goes back to that word about being successful. Whether you're a good teacher, or whether you're a good performer, or whether you're a good sideman, or a good studio guy, playing what you're doing, that's all important stuff. There is no room, really, for everybody to be big. It depends on who you get involved with, but if you get involved with someone who makes you understand that as you grow, who says "Look, there are opportunities, there are all kinds of opportunities, there's all kinds of things you can share with other people, there are all kinds of things that you can do that helps you with your art and your creativity." And I think that's important to understand.

I don't really think that people should spend their life trying to be a star. The most important thing to do is play, man, sing! That's the most important thing to do: play your instrument. Be as good as you can be, whoever you are, whatever you do. Whatever's gonna come to you will come to you. Whatever experiences you have, there are always divisions in the road you take the left one, you take the right one, whatever way you go, every road you take is going to be a different road down the path, and one road may lead you to detriment, the other road may lead you to success, however you perceive that to be. But the fact is that if you keep your head and you keep your sensibilities and you work at your art, you'll be fine.

FRED It's all experience and growth.

BOUCHARD:

RON GILL: Experience and growth. And so those are the kinds of important things that I think that I want to make that contribution, you know, sit down with people, and make them understand that. And when I think of the young people at Berklee, and I look at them, I go, "Wow, that's really incredible." And I've seen these young people play with huge stars that come in and they sit down and they play the piano, and guitar, and drums, and I sit there and I'm amazed. I really truly am amazed, and say, "What a wonderful thing." You know, don't let somebody turn your head so that you can't do that anymore. Don't let somebody change you into something that you don't want to be. I think that's what the most important thing, is that I've seen this happen to performers that I enjoyed whether they're musicians or whatever I've seen it happen to people who really are talented people and they get a record contract, and the person changes the direction of where this person is going. Because they say, "We want to see you to this market, or whatever." And they take that talented person and they destroy that talent virtually, because they want Lizz Wright, somebody told me that Lizz Wright, who now records for Verve records, and has a semblance of popularity, said she is not like that in reality. She is what they're selling her as, because all the creativity that she's capable of doing is not seen because the record company has put her in this direction.

FRED Wow, she actually said that.

BOUCHARD:

RON GILL: This person told me that. And I said, "That's a shame." Because my personal opinion is she does nothing for me. Beautiful voice, but can you imagine would we see a Betty Carter if somebody said to Betty, "You can't do that." "I'm sorry, but this is who I am and this is what I wanna do.

FRED "No more scatting, Betty Boop."

BOUCHARD:

RON GILL: [Laughs] You know what I'm saying? How many people do you know who could do eighteen minutes of scat, know what I mean?

[cross fades]

FRED Can we pick up the thread wherever you were?

BOUCHARD:

RON GILL: Where were we?

FRED Where were we. Singers today, uh, uh, success... being over, being, being, having having your life veer in the wrong direction by big record companies, Lizz Wright being the example.

BOUCHARD:

RON GILL: Right. You know, how people determine the direction that you want to go to rather than respecting where you're at, what you're doing. And it makes me wonder, when these execs nowadays they call them suits when you have these people who are sitting down looking at you, and seeing you and walking away and accepting what you're doing, and then when they get you in to sign the contract, they want to take you in some different direction. And that's because they're really afraid of where you're going. You know what I'm saying? They're afraid to allow you to go in that direction. And to me it's likely you know, at this particular stage in my life, don't give me a record contract. 'Cause I'm not gonna go in some direction you want me to go, 'cause I've been around too long. And we were talking about people who you get involved with one way or another, as performers, as young people performing, etcetera. You know, I've gotten involved with a lot of people that I've mentored. And when I say "mentored," it's not like they're at my beck and call every minute. But there's a conversation or there's an email, there's a telephone call, or out to lunch.

FRED A little nudge, a suggestion.

BOUCHARD:

RON GILL: A little nudge, a suggestion. And you're talking about your knowledge of repertoire, your knowledge of material. You know, it's like, "Oh, you know so much music." Well, it goes back to the beginning of my story. Like when I was twelve years old. I remember somebody saying to me I was doing a nightclub engagement years ago, and a guy was gonna be a singer and everything, and he came and he sat and he listened to me perform, and in a minute we sat at the bar at the club, and we're having a drink and he says to me, "How many songs do you know?" I looked at him and I said, "Well, I couldn't tell you how many songs I know." I said, "How many songs do you know?" He says, "A hundred." It was like, a hundred, okay... If you want to me to multiply your hundred, we're talking about a lot of songs. But the thing about it is, is that how do you do that? But you know, I think about it's just like Manny. Here's what happened with Manny Williams and I after thirty-plus years. I can sit down with Manny and I can say, "Do you remember blah blah blah?" And he goes, "Oh yeah."

FRED And then he's all play a lick.

BOUCHARD:

RON GILL: He goes like this: "Gee, how did that go?" Yeah. But he knows it, okay? I'll give you an example. 1970s, early. Manny and I are doing some stuff here and there. I get this telephone call one night. Paul Neves, pianist, was working with a young female singer, a Black singer that used to be in Boston her name I forget, too. Wonderful singer, sort of Nancy Wilson type of a singer.

FRED Chris Key

BOUCHARD:

RON GILL: No, wasn't Chris. Before Chris's time. And they were working at the then, there used to be a steakhouse, bar, steakhouse kind of thing in Charles River Park. And they had this evening gig they would do; it was like a piano bar scene. Little stool, microphone, play, people sitting round the bar. So I get this call from the guy who used to book it, and he calls me up and he goes, "Hey Ron," he says, "Paul and so and so aren't gonna be able to perform tonight." It's now eight, eight-thirty. And he says, "Can you and Manny go and do this gig?"

And I look [looks at watch] and I say, "Man, it's late! By the time we get our clothes on and get over there" I said, "We won't be there til almost ten o'clock, man." He goes, "That's okay, that's okay. Just do it. Can you do it?" I said, "Well, let me call you back and I'll see if he's free." I call Manny, and I said, "What are you doing?" He said, "Oh, nothing." I said, "Wanna work?" "What do you mean?" "Well, they want us to do this gig." He said, "Oh, okay." So I pick him up, we go down, we walk into the room, ten o'clock at night, people at the bar, you know, it's a casual gig. We sit, he gets at the piano, no music. Sits at the piano, I sit on the stool, and for two hours straight, we just sing and play. "You know this tune, Manny, remember this one?" "Let's do Body and Soul. Let's do this, let's do that." He goes, "Okay." And that's what

FRED

And you guys go back to the fifties and forties.

BOUCHARD:

RON GILL:

That's right. There was the music. And when you think about that, you know, you say to yourself, "My goodness, how do you do that?" And we walked out that night, we got in the car, and I said, "Do you realize what we did tonight?" We sat for two hours. We didn't take a break. We sat for two hours, casually, did all of this material, like at the top of our heads. No rehearsal, no plan, no "How are we gonna do this?" We just did it. And it was one of the most wonderful experiences - it would be great if somebody had a tape recorder, just sitting on the stand. "I got you guys a tape, man," that's great, you know? It would have been great to hear what that was like. But that's what it was.

And so when you think about all that, your experience again comes into play. So when I'm talking to young people, I try to let them know that you really don't want somebody to come to you and convince you that this is where they want you to go. Don't let somebody change you. It's great if it's gradual, if somebody says, "You know, I want you to try this." That's a different story. You don't close your ears and eyes to it. But if you do something and you say, "Yeah, I like doing that, I can make it better." That's okay. But my attitude is: do I want to be in a recording studio doing some piece of material that does nothing for me, that does not float my boat, doesn't make me feel positive about what I'm doing? I don't.

And these people wonder why, after two recordings, they're dumping these people. Well, you know, it's because some guy decided that they wanted them to go in this direction that wasn't them. "Well, you know, that didn't work." It didn't work for them, so you didn't work for them, so you end up being the person that they're gonna dump because you're not selling recordings. But here again, it all works together here's that opportunity for you to perform, the listener to hear it, the listener to digest it, the listener to discern if it's good or bad, but it gives them an opportunity to hear it in a wide variety of circumstances. It just doesn't happen that way anymore, and unfortunately a lot of people, you know, just don't do that.

I don't understand, before Betty Carter died, why Verve dropped her. I don't understand why I think that Renee Marie, who I think is one of the most exciting people in the market today, decided to leave Max Jazz. Because she probably said, "I can't do anymore here. I have to move onto the next level of my life. So if I have a recording contract fine." I saw her perform a few months ago in New York City, at the Jazz Stand. It's remarkable, and I'm sitting down with people I don't know, and I say, "What do you find in Renee Marie?" They said, "Oh man, I caught her last time she was here, she was fantastic and she still is." That's all I need to hear from somebody. Because somebody else who probably never experienced that or really might have experienced it but didn't get it because there are some people that I know that didn't get it. And I don't look at that as detrimental. I look at that as exposure. There are times in my life where I've said about a piece of music, "I don't get it," or heard somebody perform: "I don't get it." Came to it three or four years later and said, "Why did I not get that the first time I heard it?"

FRED Yeah, I do that, it happens to me, too.

BOUCHARD:

RON GILL: Why? Is it because we're exposed a little bit more to something, or it's too fresh?

FRED Can be.

BOUCHARD:

RON GILL: It's too new, whatever it may be? And then you hear it later down the road and you go, "Gee, you know, I'm hearing something different than I heard the first time." That's what the great part about music is. It's that you can come back to it, you know? I mean, how many times maybe you wrote an article and said, "You know I heard this person five years ago and didn't get it. I just came and saw them again and it's like wow!" Why didn't I get it the first time?

FRED Sometimes I feel like I'm a little too harsh the first time around, and I need to step back and listen. That's why I never never pick up a pencil until I listen to the record three or four times. That's a lot of listening, you know. And you gotta be fair, so you gotta listen again and again. It's like when you're tasting wine; If you're a real professional and you have the wherewithal, you always have a couple of bottles of the same wine. This one was cork, or the mic wasn't right on this one, or the ambience in the room was wrong, or the piano was fucked up or something. And then you go back and listen to the second take of it, you can judge a little more thoroughly. You don't always get that chance.

RON GILL: Right, right. I've often wondered about wine tasting like that, 'cause I love wine. Believe it or not, I think of you often. [Fred laughs] No really, I really do, I think of you often because I know that you're into the wine thing. And sometimes like, "I gotta talk to Fred about wine sometime." Because I like wine but I'm not a connoisseur I'm always drinking some wine, but it's always different. But I noticed oh, I really like this bottle of wine. A year or so ago I got turned on to merlot. I never would have bought merlot. Somebody bought me a bottle of merlot and I said, "You know what I really like this!" And I really do. Now when I get merlot, I know which one I really like. I taste others, and I go "Okay," and I measure it by the one I really like. But wine is such a beautiful thing to be able to know about and enjoy because sometimes you get the wrong bottle and you go, "Oh, I'm not too crazy about this." But you get the right chardonnay, the right merlot, whatever it is, it's special.

FRED BOUCHARD: Well, it's ephemeral, and it's always different. You know, in the same bottle, it's gonna taste different in six months. You can't say that about a recording. It's gonna sound the same, maybe you'll change, but that recording is going to be fixed.

RON GILL: That's true. And you're changing. Your changing may change the way or how you hear it, and how you listen to it. And that is also the very most important part about being a jazz singer. You know, people say, "What's the difference?" between a jazz singer I did a program one time, for about two or three years, on the difference between a pop singer and a jazz singer. It was an article I read in Down Beat it was a very interesting article, and I said, "Oh, that's a very interesting article, I never thought about that. What's the difference?" And the article, what the article was saying, was that a listener called a radio person, asked them the question, and he gave him an answer. But that wasn't enough. The person called another radio person in the same station, and asked him the same question. And that wasn't enough, and he did it a third time, and he got three different answers. And I said, "Interesting."

So I focused I do a show on Labor Day called "Singers' Showcase." And basically what it is, is taking the context of my program, changing it, because I have pop singers, and I have jazz singers, and I play them for four hours and I compare them. So it gives me an opportunity to play different singers that I like. Like Vic de Mone, who's not a jazz singer. Different people that I enjoy. And I play them in the context of this four hour frame. But the thing about it is that there is a difference because most pop singers don't change. Pop singers, in a way we cheer pop singers. They don't change, they sing the song the same way, there's no change in the inflection and phrasing, they'd sing it the same way. It's like Perry Como. You can enjoy it, you can enjoy them doing it all the time, but it never changes. But Joe Williams changes, Sarah Vaughan changes, Ella changes. You know, you listen to umpteen versions and they're doing it differently, you know? And one of the joys that I've had with my band with Manny, a case in point is let me see. Taking a particular song and changing the complexity of that song. Changing the arrangement. Changing it from "Masquerade is Over." Take "The Masquerade is Over." I can do "The Masquerade is Over" as a total slow ballad, but I can go in and do "Masquerade is Over" as a swing tune. And change the whole phrasing, same song. And the meaning is different.

FRED BOUCHARD: It's not sad, it's more pointing a finger, kind of thing.

RON GILL: And knowing that, knowing how to do that. The average pop singer is not gonna do that. They're not gonna take that chance, they're not gonna do it. Even if they knew how to do it, they wouldn't do it.

FRED BOUCHARD: They won't make the emotional investment. It's like wine versus beer and whiskey. When they produce a beer and a whiskey, they want it to be the same every time you open the bottle. Wine is, they want the differences to come out, they want the nuances. To let the grape express itself. Just like a singer will express himself or herself.

RON GILL: Absolutely. And that's what it's about. That what really it's about. And it's a joy, because as a performer, to walk out on a stage and to do that, take that material, it's just like the Strayhorn recording. You know, it's seven years old, and I still get people calling me about it.

FRED BOUCHARD: It's very fresh.

RON GILL: And the thing about it is, is that I can go out on the stage now, and I can do that material, and now I can play with it. I can explore it, you know? I can take a song like "Maybe," which I love doing. I love it.

FRED

"Maybe, maybe not." It's like bam, bam. You know, one side, the other side.

BOUCHARD:

RON GILL: You know what I mean? it's like such a joy to do. But now, you know, we can play on it, we can extend it, we can do all kinds of things to make it even more enjoyable.

FRED

You could scat on it too.

BOUCHARD:

RON GILL: I could, I could.

FRED

And you might, you might not.

BOUCHARD:

RON GILL: Might not! [Both laugh] You better come on the twenty-first. "I got this idea from Fred Bouchard, and we're gonna do a scat on this." And the thing about it is this that's what the joy is. You know what I'm saying? It's that being able to take it. You know it's just like now, you know, "Lush Life." "Lush Life "on the recording, was a joy for me, because I said, "Okay." I remember before I did the recording, before I did Strayhorn, I remember Manny coming to my house for us to do a rehearsal. And I'm sitting down with him, I said, "Manny, you know what song I was thinking about doing?" He looks at me and goes, "What's that?" I said "What do you think of us doing Lush Life?" And he looked at me, and he said "Uh, let's wait for that one. Okay?" I said, "Okay."

FRED

This is the first rehearsal?

BOUCHARD:

RON GILL: This was a rehearsal before we even did the Strayhorn stuff, this was talking about a thing we were gonna do. And he said, "Uh, let's wait on that one, okay?" So I said, "Okay." But when it came time to do the Strayhorn concert, in my head, I'm saying, "How do you want to do this?" And I heard and visualized and this is true, not only heard it in my head but visualized. I could see[laughs] this might be crazy I'm standing looking out the window on a dark night, and as I'm looking out the window, there's a lamppost on the corner that's the only light in the street. And under that light is a saxophone player, playing "Lush Life." And I said, "That's what I want." So when I did the arrangement of "Lush Life," the arrangement was just saxophone player.

FRED

Billy Thompson.

BOUCHARD:

RON GILL: Thompson.

FRED

On the faculty at Berklee.

BOUCHARD:

RON GILL: Right. And we were rehearsing here, and I went to Billy and I said, "Let's run through it. I wonder how we can do this." And Billy said to me, "Ron, I know what you're trying to do, but I need something to help me with this." I said, "Okay." So I added a bass player. And that's all I added, so it was just saxophone and bass. Now, I'm doing it with just a bass player. And I haven't decided whether or not I'm going to add the saxophone player now that I have a saxophone player for the September 21st Scullers gig.

FRED Is it Ron Mahdi?

BOUCHARD:

RON GILL: No, I have a new bass player, I have Kiyala Kamaheva on bass.

FRED Kiyala? From Hawaii?

BOUCHARD:

RON GILL: Yeah. Kiyala Kamaheva on bass. He plays with quite a few people in town. And Philippe Crechione, I'm adding him this year. And so I haven't decided yet if I might add, but I've been doing it now with just a bass player. It's fun, it's challenging.

FRED It is challenging.

BOUCHARD:

RON GILL: It's a very challenging piece of music.

FRED Because it's something a lot of people have done, and a lot of people have done it straight, very straight. You didn't do it straight, but you made it interesting. You did something with it, you were playing with the syllables like taffy.

RON GILL: Yeah. You know, one of the things that I've always appreciated the way in which you review singers, Fred, is that you hear these nuances that a lot of people don't hear, and this is a compliment, but this is a fact. When you say that to me, when I listen to my arrangement, I didn't approach "Lush Life" melodically. I don't approach it melodically. I approach it as a recital. It's like singing a piece, singing not in a melodic sense, but almost in an acting sense. I want to express it so that there's an open attitude about it. I don't want to, you know, Hartman does a beautiful job of "Lush Life," but he sings it. Sarah sings it, Nat sings it. I don't sing it, you know?

FRED It's like sprechstimme, like what the Germans do, it's half-sung, half-recited.

BOUCHARD:

RON GILL: That's what it is.

FRED So you get more of that emotional grit out of it.

BOUCHARD:

RON GILL: That's what I want. I wanted emotional. I want a concentration on what it's saying. When I express because there's a lot of expression in that song, a lot of expression I want the listener to hear the expression, I want them to hear you know when you talk about cocktails, and you talk about emotion, there's a lot of emotion, there's a lot of visual, there's a lot of vision in "Lush Life." Lots of visual things. And I try to pick up that and when I'm performing it, that's what's going through my body, is to visualize it, so I see it. And that's what makes it, as far as I'm concerned. So that's

FRED

BOUCHARD: Have you done vocal coaching? Do you do any teaching?

RON GILL: No, I don't do any teaching at all. But I talk to people about it. You know, I help people who come to me. People have come to me and said, "How do you do what you do?" And I go, "Well, I just do it. But yeah, I can show you how I do it. But I do it out of my own experiences." When I try to tell people and I have several people I talk to about it I said, "You know, when you're learning your material, think about what you're trying to say. Don't think so much about your voice, so to speak." I don't want to teach somebody how to sing. I want to teach somebody how to express themselves. I want to teach somebody how to respect what the lyricist is trying to do with the music, to respect the music. Let your voice do what it does to express the music, and respect that. So when you sit down, what in your life is there in that piece of music. What is that saying, how does that say to you, what makes you want to do it? It's one thing about wanting to learn the standards, you know what I'm saying? But after a period of time, you know, you learn certain songs, standards, "Body and Soul," "I've Got the World on a String," anything. You know how to eventually you know how to express yourself in it. But there comes a time in your life, especially mine, where it's not everything you know all that. But when you're looking at something new, you're saying to yourself, "Well, what does that do for me?"

FRED

BOUCHARD: Why do you choose repertoire? It isn't just picking a song out of the air, it's gotta be a reflection of who you are.

RON GILL: Who you are.

FRED

BOUCHARD: That's what Carmen excelled at. She was good.

RON GILL: That's right. And here, mentorship. You learn that. You learn that from a Carmen. Of all the wonderful things that all the other singers did, Carmen was like to me was like, she exemplified that. A case in point, "Just A Little Lovin'." Servon does "Just a Little Lovin'," and Fred Turtin plays it every Sunday on his radio show 'cause he loves it. Jeff Turtin. And I like it. But Carmen does that on a recording, and I heard Carmen do it, and I said, "Oh. That's what that meant." [Both laugh] And it was like, oh! [slaps face] Wow, Ron! You know? When she says, "Just a little lovin' beats a cup of coffee." [laughs] It's like, yeah, okay. For startin' off the day, it's like, okay! But it was how she said it!

FRED

BOUCHARD: Yeah, she's such a mistress of the nuance.

RON GILL: [Laughs] Sarah can sing it, man, it's like "Lush Life."

FRED

BOUCHARD: Warbling like a thrush!

RON GILL: [Laughs] But Carmen was like[pounds fist]

FRED Gets the meaning.

BOUCHARD:

RON GILL: This is what it's all about, man. And that's the difference. And that's what, if I was going to do I was going to do a thing years ago, years ago. I was gonna do a three- or four-day vocal training session for vocalists. It didn't work, didn't work. It was at a time when people didn't pick up on it. And so it didn't work. At that time Reid Jorgsen had a studio over across the street from NEC.

FRED Oh yeah, I remember that little studio.

BOUCHARD:

RON GILL: We were gonna do this four-day thing. And what it was gonna be, it wasn't only gonna be just about singing, it was all about dressing and Sheila Jordan, Sheila was gonna come, I had Eddie Watson, who was a vocal coach, he was going to do some coaching one day. Then there was gonna be a listening day; they would come in and they would listen and critique vocalists. Because I think that's important. If I taught at Berklee, if I taught singing, anywhere, this is what I would do. The first part of the class would be listening. I want you to listen, I want you to listen to all of these people. I'm gonna play a variety and I want you to critique it. And I want you to go home, and I want you to come back to me, and I want you to tell me what you hear. Before you even get started. And the last day, each person was going to come with a piece of music to be called on to perform with a full trio. And it didn't work. And it was only it was something like a hundred, 125 dollars to do it. And it didn't work. I probably could do it again.

FRED Yeah, let's try it again, talk about it with Curtis. [Ron laughs] You know.

BOUCHARD:

RON GILL: Maybe I could do a little small seminar. I was gonna do. But the thing about it was, was that... That is what I think is important. Even today, even today's singers, etcetera, is that history. You listen to a variety of people because everybody had something to contribute, and whether they were a jazz singer, pop singer, or an aria, classical singer. What did you find, you know, what they were doing? There were classical music singing popular music. What did you find Eileen Farrell doing? What did you like her doing that? There's a lot of people.

You know, Barbara Cook. If you listen to Barbara Cook, man! You know, this woman's got the most beautiful voice. And it was very interesting, she did a little thing on a Sunday morning, and they showed her giving a masterclass. And she had a group of singers, and this girl got up and she sang the song, and Barbara Cook said, "Okay, that was very nice. But this is what I want you to do. I want you to sing that song again, and I want you to sing it to him." There was a young man sitting there. "I want you to sing that song to him." [Fred laughs] And what a difference. And she said, "That's what I want you to do. That's the way to do it. Think about what you're doing. Think about how you express yourself."

FRED Yeah, what do the words mean?

BOUCHARD:

RON GILL: Yeah. She said, "I want you to think about all that and I want you to sing that song to him." And it was great. It was great, and I sat there and I said, "You got it right, Barbara, you got it right." So those are the things

FRED BOUCHARD: As a singer, you're not just a musician. You're communicating something else, a story. Dexter Gordon: every time he'd play a ballad, he'd recite the lyrics before he'd pick up his horn!

RON GILL: That's right. And he had such a sartorial voice, I mean it was a great voice, you know what I mean? And it's like wonderful, resonant, speaking voice, it's great. It's too bad that it wasn't until late in his life that he realized that that was important. Somebody didn't realize that was important. See, that's another story but, you know, of capturing what's there with people and utilizing it.

FRED BOUCHARD: You know what we didn't talk about I guess we've got a little not much time left, we didn't talk about the Jazz Coalition. But let's not talk about that, let's not talk back twenty years, why don't you just wrap up now and talk about what your plans are, what you would like to do, in your new role here as the president of the New England Jazz Alliance.

RON GILL: As being a new elected president, I think my most important focus is going to be education. I want to open up great opportunities to the organization by exposure, one way or another, by involving myself in other organizations.

FRED BOUCHARD: Such as Berklee.

RON GILL: Such as Berklee, such as the Jazz Collective, such as Jazz Boston, which is another organization forming. To gather us all together, find out what our common goals are, find out what our focus is. You know, somebody said to me today, he said, "Maybe you should start thinking about being a performance organization." I said "No. I don't want to be a performance organization. I'm not going through that. There are other organizations to do that. I want to concentrate on things that are important to jazz and the music. I want to build an audience; I want to build a membership that is focused on jazz. I've started a new slogan: "I am a jazz advocate." That's what I want. I want people to be jazz advocates, I want people who love jazz, who listen to jazz, who go out and entertain themselves by listening to jazz, I want them to talk about it, I want them to expose their kids to it, I want them to talk to all their neighbors and friends about it. One way or another, I want people to know that they're a jazz advocate and that's gonna be my big push this year.

FRED BOUCHARD: So this'll be right out of the community. People who like it, just pass your albums around, turn on the right programs on BET, drag people off to the clubs, take them over to these Berklee concerts that cost a dollar or two, right?

RON GILL: That's right. Expose your children to it. Show them that there's something else out there that they can see and hear. Let them make that choice, but expose them to it. You'd be surprised what comes out of that. Some kid sees a guitar player and he goes "Wow, man, I never knew that. Where did that come from?" Five years later he's sitting down and he's with a group of buddies, playing, and they say, "How'd you get that, man?" and he goes, "Well, my father and mother took me to a concert at Berklee and I saw this guy, man, he was fantastic, and I said, How does he do that?" Exposure.

That's my goal. I'm not getting younger. I still want to perform, I still want to create music/ I've done it really with the Duke and Stray[horn] thing; I love Ellington, I love Strayhorn, I will continue to do that, I will continue to try to expose people to those because I think that those are two greatest artists. But there's all kinds of people out there that has music. And I try to do all that. I do a Black composers concert where I expose people to Miles and all these different people who have recorded their own music, Milestones and all that kind of stuff. I do all that, so. but there's just an abundance of music out there. As long as I've got a voice, as long as I can perform, I can do that. So besides doing the music, I want to be part of the music scene, and I want to be a vital part of the music scene. I want to expose myself and the organization where it's never been exposed before. I want people to know when they hear the New England Jazz Alliance, I want them to know what it is.

FRED Good, good. Ronnie, great to have you here, it's been a wonderful.

BOUCHARD:

RON GILL: Yes, it's been wonderful. I appreciate it.

FRED couple of hours, talking about music and things that we love. Good luck on your new ventures, and keep on
BOUCHARD: keepin' on with your em-ceeding here at Berklee and your radio show on GBH and your concert on twenty-first of September at Scullers.

RON GILL: Thank you, Fred.