



Interview No. SAS4.02.02  
Mr. Charles P. Harris

Interviewer: Elizabeth Schaaf  
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Q: Were you born here in Baltimore?

Harris: No. I was born at Alexandria, Virginia.

Q: And how long were you in Alexandria?

Harris: I think I was brought here when I was very, very young. In fact, I can't remember anything about it that much, you know.

Q: So you started your music training here in Baltimore?

Harris: Oh yes.

Q: Who was your first teacher?

Harris: Oh, on the violin my first teacher was Lucien Odendh'al.

In fact, I was introduced to him by a teacher up at Douglass High School, the music teacher.

Q: Is that Mr. [W. Llewellyn] Wilson?

Harris: Mr. Wilson, yes. Way back there. It's been a good little while. Names evade me a little bit now, but I'm doing pretty well.

Q: I think so. Mr. Wilson I think taught everybody who is anybody.

Harris: That's right. In the music field, yes. He was very, very, very good. He started me off, and I worked with him for a year, a year and a half, and he said, I can't go any further with you. I will have to get a teacher. And so he got in touch with Lucien Odendh'al, and he started to teach me.

And he was a very nice man to go to.

Q: How did you and the bass get to be a pair?

Harris: Well, in high school, in those days, they didn't have too many musicians that played the bass and what not. But Mr. Wilson said I have a bass here for someone to learn. And if I let you have it, so you can get lessons. I put my hand up right away. I said I'll take it. I'll learn to play it.

Q: And you have that big stretch so you can play that instrument.

Harris: And he taught me as far as he could go, and then at that time he turned me over to one of the Peabody teachers, Lucien Odendh'al. He was teaching down there at the time. He was playing with the Baltimore, the white Baltimore Symphony. And that's how I ended up playing, and we had a black symphony later on. It was a very good symphony.

Q: With the black symphony orchestra? Who was conducting?

Harris: Mr. Wilson was. He directed that. Very fine musician. And he was a very nice man too. If you were willing to learn, he said I'll see that you get a good start. You'll be all right to go to another teacher. But with the bass, they had a little thing there at the high school. Now we need a bass player. And Mr. Wilson said we have a couple basses here. Who would like to join? My hand went up real fast. I said, I'd like to play bass.

He said, but you're playing violin. And at the time I was playing first violin just as well. And Mr. Odendh'al was a very good teacher too. And I said, I'll take it over. And then it didn't take me long to make the changeover to the bass clef from the treble clef.

But it's just like anything. If you want to do something and you want to do it badly, you're going to do the best you know how. And so after that, I had learned to play very, very well on the bass and the violin, but I was supposed to go down to check in on the symphony, you know, the white symphony at Peabody at the time. It wasn't at Peabody, it was at the Lyric [Theater].

Q: Baltimore Symphony.

Harris: Baltimore Symphony. After they found out that I was black, they said, in those days, you can't come to Peabody. But I did have a Peabody teacher. So it worked out well for me to learn, but I'd rather had gone there with the prestige of the school and everything.

But later on, they invited me down several times to give speeches and what not. I didn't want to hold any malice against anyone. I was trying to do my best thing I could do, and that's play.

Q: Now did Mr. Odendh'al teach you to play the bass, or did you go to another?

Harris: He taught me to play the fiddle, the violin.

Q: But not the bass.

Harris: Not the bass.

Q: So who was your teacher, bass teacher, or did you just do this yourself?

Harris: I did most of it myself, but Mr. Wilson was a very well rounded man, and he taught me. He said making the change from the violin to the bass wasn't that hard, you know, to do. And I was able to conform to whatever I had to do. Because I had a very decent teacher. Mr. Wilson was a good teacher at that time, and he was very tolerant too, you know. At the time, I was playing in the theater.

I took the bass and started playing in the Royal Theater very young. I was very young when I started playing the bass. But the bass came very, very natural to me. And I liked, I loved the violin because it taught me to read very well, and not only that, everything else came easy. And with the bass, I picked it up very, very fast, you know.

Q: Who was conducting the Royal Theater Orchestra when you started?

Harris: Well, when I first went in there, it was Rivers Chambers. You've heard of him?

Q: Sure have.

Harris: Yes. And then I started playing society with him. We played everywhere in the country. Even they wanted him to come overseas, you know. We would take three to four pieces to five pieces any time, and we would play for mostly very rich people. At the time, they were very rich. And they were going to fly us out to California to play for them. Money was no object.

And so I learned to do these things pretty well during the time. And later years, I knew that Peabody wouldn't stay [segregated] that way over the years, because times were changing. And my teacher, he was one of the teachers at Peabody.

Q: Now who took you away from the Royal Theater Orchestra? Where did you go after?

Harris: I left, I went with Lionel Hampton's band. He had a very good band, and I stayed with him going on eleven years. And we went all over the world too. He was a hard working man. We worked hard because he didn't know when to close out a show. You ever see people like that?

Time didn't mean a thing to him. But eventually he learned how, you know. But the people were still clapping a lot of times, you know, and he'd just go along with the flow. That's the way it was.

Q: So how did he find you? Was he in town in Baltimore?

Harris: When he came to Baltimore, he had heard of me, and he said I want you to come with me and play. And the same thing happened to me with Nat "King" Cole. He said I heard a lot about you, and I'm gonna let him make a change, and I think after this week or two, I'd love for you to

come to play for me. And I said, well, that's the best you can get, especially in our field, you know.

But I enjoyed working with the music all my life. I still enjoy listening to good music.

Q: But it must have been tough traveling and touring back in those days. I mean, just, I remember looking at one of the Lionel Hampton schedules from back in the '40s when you were traveling with him, and you would have these month-long tours. And you wouldn't have a day off. I mean, if you had a day off, it just meant that you were going from one city to another.

Harris: Listen to this. This being married [and being on tour] was a rough job. I went with Lionel, and we went on tour, and we stayed one year touring everywhere. Different countries and everything. This was something.

When I came home this time, I said I'll never do that again. Because even though I was making a good living with him, it was just too long to be away from my family.

Q: What year was, do you remember what year that was, that year long tour?

Harris: I toured, she was a baby, then just a little girl, my daughter —

Charlene. She was just about a year old when I went out with him. It was no longer. When I came back, it was something. And I went over to school to see her, and I went to the class. When she saw me, she said Daddy. She was about like [indicating a child's height] a little girl. She came up said, Daddy, Daddy! I told you I had a Daddy. They were telling her: you don't have a Daddy.

Q: Oh my goodness.

Harris: Yes. Yes. She said I told you I had a Daddy. This is my daddy.

Q: I can see why you'd want to get off the road.

Harris: Yes. I didn't want to get off the road, but I wanted more time with my family. And I know in order, especially in the area I'm from, you've got to take the jobs that you can get. You know what I mean? In order to make money. By being black, it makes it a little different.

They have to take those jobs that they can make the money with, and regardless of how much time you spend, that's another story. But other than that, I enjoyed my playing more than a lot of people in the business. Because there are a lot of drinkers. I didn't bother with whiskey or smoke. So it made a difference with me.

But it was a very enjoyable thing for me to play. And especially to play in the class of musicians I was playing.

Q: You were playing with the best in the business.

Harris: Yes, when I went with Lionel Hampton, oh when I went with Nat Cole, Mr. Cole rather. I call him Nat, we called him Nat, but we would forget that a little bit, you know.

But what happened was he was a very down-to-earth guy, and if you knew what you were doing, you had no problems. I never had problems with anyone because I didn't drink or smoke. And they used to always make little statements: Why can't you be like Charlie? I said don't you ever be telling people like that. These are grown men. When I get on the bus, I just like, I was dressed. Even though they were buses that we hired (when I was with Lionel Hampton), these guys slept in their uniforms and what not. I mean that's a sad thing. I never was like that. When I got off of work, they had showers right in the theater, and I'd go and take me a shower and get ready, you know, to what we call hit the street.

Q: Well, I know Mr. Hampton had his own buses.

Harris: Oh right. We had buses.

Q: Now how did you travel when you were touring with Mr. Cole?

Harris: We flew everywhere. He was very afraid of planes, but he didn't like that long riding on buses and what not. But he'd rather catch a plane. We caught a plane to go from Los Angeles down [San Diego]. It was only fifty-five or sixty miles. We caught a plane. That's what he would do.

He didn't want to bother with that driving. And it's safer. Oh yeah, much safer. And the police would stop you too, you know. Because a lot of times we'd get on the road, we'd have to make it to another place to play. And sometimes we'd have to speed a little to make it. And they'd stop us, and they just took advantage of those things, especially. Being black made a difference.

Q: Well, a lot of places you didn't even have to be speeding to get stopped.

Harris: I know. Especially in the South, it was. But it worked out very well. They just want to play with us more or less. Sort of like playing. That's they're play. They get a kick out of it.

Q: Well, I remember hearing that you had some very tense moments touring in the South.

Harris: Oh yes. We did. But when you think about it, it worked out very well in the later years because the people liked you.

Once we were actually three blocks from where he [Cole] lived. We played the auditorium there, and that's when these people from another area came and knocked him down. We had two shows a day. We did the black show first, and then we'd usually do the white show later, the next one. And the place was packed, and the people were waiting outside. The whites were waiting outside to get in, and this is what happened to us. So he just said I'm not going to go any further after that. I'm trying to think what city now — Atlanta in Georgia. Yeah, it was amazing, but that place was packed. And the next show, everybody waiting outside to get in.

He drew very well. We always had full houses. I don't care where we played, we had full houses. And he was a talented man, a very talented man, and he did a good job. Very fine pianist. Played beautiful piano.

Q: Absolutely.

Harris: Yeah. He played beautiful piano, and he sang as well.

Q: Had a wonderful honey voice.

Harris: Yeah. What happened, that came accidentally. More or less accidentally. You've seen the TV show. They asked him, do you know such and such a number? Well, sing it, don't play it, sing it. And that's where it started in this nightclub, and from then on he started to sing.

And that goes to show you how things will happen. It was for the best for him that it happened because being just a piano player back in those days you didn't make the money like singers did, the great singers. So it was very interesting the way it happened, but it was a true story.

Q: Were you with him when he began singing or was this before?

Harris: No, no, no. I was with him, this was when he first started to play, and then the band wanted him to sing. So this was what happened, but I came with him in nineteen —[1951]. It's hard to say now because I was working with so many good people then. I was with Lionel Hampton for almost ten years, then I went with Nat and stayed almost eleven years. The time flies. But he was a beautiful man to work for. In fact, Lionel was very fine man. All the people I ever worked with were nice. You know what I mean? And whatever I was going to do, I was trying to do the best that I knew how. And I tried to conform to any situation, and that's the way I was.

Q: Now, you've done a lot of recording too.

Harris: Oh yes. Quite a bit.

Q: Who else have you recorded for?

Harris: Well, I recorded for Nat, mostly Nat. [Mr. Harris also recorded with Wynonie Harris, Herbie Fields, Milt Buckner, Arnett Cobb and Lionel Hampton.] We recorded all the time. He had such a repertoire it wasn't funny, and he had a thing that he could do that most singers couldn't do. He had absolute pitch. And he didn't need an introduction.

And the violinist, in fact in those days they were all white. They played all that, you know, spiffy stuff. And he when he come out on the stage, he would start to singing, and then we would come in, the conductor would bring us in. You know. And that's an A — can he do this all the time? I said well yes, absolute pitch.

Q: What a gift.

Harris: Yeah. He had a gift. Really, and he would tell them once in a while: somebody's a little bit out of tune. Tell them to tune up!

And it's a funny thing about life in anything. They didn't believe that he had that kind of ear. You could call the note out and he'd sing it. He could. He was no accident so far as music was concerned. From the playing, they wanted him to sing. And from then on, it just went. Singing more than playing.

Q: You have seen a lot of changes in the entertainment business.

Harris: Well, what they brought in, they didn't bring music in. They brought noise in. This is the truth so help me. They just start singing and making, you know, the noise, and whatever came out was good to them.

But do you like what's happening after the ballads when everything went out? Did you like that kind of stuff?

Q: Well, I have to confess I am a real Nat King Cole fan.

Harris: Not only that, I was talking about.

Q: No, I like the earlier recordings so much.

Harris: I know that. But I'm talking about the music that's played after we went out. This other music came in.

Q: I have to confess I have a hard time.

Harris: I do too. Very hard. Now every once in a while you catch one, any group that played real well, I can listen. I sit and listen. I say, well, whatever they're doing, they're doing it well. But half the time I don't know what they're saying or what are doing. You know? But that's the way it is.

Q: So many of the jazz musicians of your era had a thorough classical grounding. And you certainly did.

Harris: I did have a classical grounding before I started playing jazz.

Q: Right. So and you all had this phenomenal technique that you could draw on for jazz performances that a lot of the younger people just don't have.

Harris: That's so true. I couldn't go to Peabody, but I had another fellow that would come to my house, and teach me the bass. He was a short fellow. I can't think of his name to save my life right at the present, but I'll get it.

Q: There were a lot of musicians coming out of Douglass High School.

Harris: Oh definitely.

Q: During your period. I mean, Anne Brown was there and Cab Calloway. And they're senior to you.

Harris: Right.

Q: And Avon Long.

Harris: Avon Long. Yes. Very good.

Q: And who were some of the other people? Do you remember any others who became musicians from?

Harris: From the school? I just can't put my hand on it, but there were quite a few of them went to Douglass and then went with the bands.

Q: When you were playing in the orchestra that Mr. Wilson conducted, was Mr. [John] Larkins, Ellis Larkin's father still performing, still playing?

Harris: Yeah he played violin. Also Ellis Larkins. He was a fine musician too. Fine musician.

Q: What was Mr. Larkin's father like?

Harris: Oh he was a very nice man. A very nice man. He tried to keep his son on the right road. And he did pretty good with him. But you know how when you grow up, you're gonna do what you want to do anyway. And he stayed in New York quite a few years. He had his problems, but he stayed in New York.

He always could get a job because he was the finest pianist I ever heard.

In that particular field, he knew how to entertain, and a lot of them don't know how to entertain. And you couldn't call a tune or song out that he didn't know. And you know how people keep calling while he's playing and clapping, and he used to go right into it.

He's still living.

Q: Oh yes.

Harris: Yeah. He's doing fine.

Q: Yeah. He lives near me, just a few blocks away.

Harris: He's a nice person. Very nice.

Q: Lovely man. When did you come back to Baltimore?

Harris: Oh, this is hard to say because I was in and out. See at first when I went with Lionel Hampton, I stayed with him about ten years, and Nat, until Nat died.

But I worked with very fine people though. They were nice people to work for.

Q: Your daughter has put these photographs down here, and I was going to ask you.

Harris: This is Lionel Hampton. That's Lionel Hampton. We had the two basses then. See them right here. Now this is me here, and this is Charlie Mingus. You've heard of him?

Q: Yes.

Harris: Very, very fine bass player.

Q: Now, were you in the, was Roy McCoy in the band when you were playing with Lionel Hampton?

Harris: Yeah. Yeah. He didn't stay long. We played Baltimore, and he left with us, and we went to Boston. But he didn't stay in the band very long. I think he got homesick very, very fast, too fast. Because he would have been really a fine, he's a fine trumpet player in the beginning. He would have been much, much bigger in the field than he was. But he had to come home. I don't think he stayed with the band.

Q: Maybe a year or so?

Harris: Not quite a year. Not long. Because we would have, he went from here, from Baltimore to Boston, and we played Boston. And it wasn't long after he got homesick. I call it homesick. But he just didn't want to travel, no doubt.

But I have to take it off to my wife, she became a very, very fine wife with me traveling like I was, traveling all the time. And at school they used to kid my daughter. Say, where is your dad. I have never seen you. You don't have a daddy. And she used to cry.

So one day I visited her school. It was right in back of my house on North Avenue, West North Avenue. And when I went, says this is my daddy, this is my daddy. I knew the principal because I went to Coppin [State College], and I was a teacher too. But I didn't want to teach. I played music. We didn't make any money back there in those days.

Q: Were you teaching music at Coppin?

Harris: No. No. No. I was teaching elementary education. I went to elementary education. I finished Coppin, but I didn't want to teach. I wanted to play. More money in playing than in teaching at the time.

And luckily I was able to get in with the better people in the business.

Q: What was the album that you recorded with Nat "King" Cole that you liked the best? I know you did a lot of recordings.

Harris: Oh I'd say.

Q: Was there a piece that you were most fond of or?

Harris: Well, you know, he had to sing "Mona Lisa." That was a must because people asked for it. That was just one of his bigger tunes. Then "Unforgettable," of course. Everything that he sang was a hit. Just about everything that he recorded became big hits. And you can just start singing them in your mind, they were all great. And he always had good back up. You know, he had the best people in the business.

Strings, he used strings and what not. But he was a very fine person. He was one of the nicest men I've ever worked for. He and Lionel Hampton were nice. Both of them were. Lionel's still living.

Q: Oh yes indeed. [Laughter]

Harris: He's going ninety-six now, ninety six or ninety-seven.

It is amazing the way he used to jump up and down. He put a lot of energy in his work.

Q: Oh he really did. And expected it from his musicians.

Harris: Oh yeah. Yeah. But I never had any problem with leaders anyway. I did my job and that was it.

Q: One of the things I did want to ask you, you were talking about touring with Nat King Cole and flying between cities. How, and with Cole and with Mr. Hampton, the lodging problem must have been very difficult. How did you cope with that?

Harris: Well, it was rough sometime, and some of the other time, we would get some very nice places to live, especially in homes. You know, doctor's homes and a lot of people that would take in a certain type of musician at that time. And even some of the hotels would let us in. But they were above the South, you know, coming north.

But you always had that little feeling of not being wanted. You know, you had that feeling. But it's just a funny thing about. I could have gone to any hotel in those days, but I wouldn't. Because I was much lighter. My hair was long. But I didn't want to go do that. Now occasionally I had to do it because some of those hotels were really bad. I mean, I didn't want to do it, but I had to do it.

Q: talked to Anne Brown, who had very similar experiences. And she was talking about how it was very rough on her because there were places where she sang where there was no other option. And she stayed in white hotels, and her friends couldn't come and see her.

Harris: I know. I know what it is to do that, be like that. In later years, by Nat getting so big in the business, they brought us in. They more or less tolerated us. You know, but he was a big star, and they wanted him to come. And we lived very well in the latter years in nice hotels. But because some of those, the other hotels weren't up to par.

And I don't care where I go, the first thing I look at is pulling back the linen. If it's not what I want to see, I tell them. You have to bring me some new linen or something like that.

But you live a certain way. I've been living like that all my life. My home was always very well kept, and I've been living like that all my life. I don't see why I have to do it otherwise.

Q: Just because you're on the road.

Harris: Right. I didn't tolerate that. But they would come around, you know, being very nice. You know how it is. But that's life for you in the music business.

Q: Going back, you talked about going in the Royal Theater Band when you were very, very young.

Harris: Yes.

Q: What were the musicians like? I mean were they very welcoming to you? You were just a kid.

Harris: Oh yeah, but I was able to do what they did. In fact, much better than some of them. [Laughter] You know what I mean? Because I studied a little bit more than a lot of jazz musicians studied. And my eyes were very good. I could read almost anything. You wouldn't have to tell me what you wanted read, and I could watch all the signs on the music when we're supposed to. I had stopped it [the music]. I said you're not following what you're supposed to follow, those signs. And they said, I was a youngster then, they said how do you know all about that? I said, well, because I was taught to watch those signs. You know.

But that's the way life is. You learn how to do your job, and how to do it the best you know how. But you never know what's coming to you in the music business. I was into the luck when it came to being hired.

I had a lot of people come through Baltimore and wanted to take me up on the road. I wouldn't go. I waited 'til something was very, very good to take it. A lot of people would have jumped out and gone, but I didn't do that because I was a good leading musician. But I could read most anything.

By playing violin and changing over to bass, bass was very easy for me. They aren't very different I guess. But it was a good thing. I enjoyed every moment of it.

Q: Well you had luck, you had talent, you worked hard, and you made good choices.

Harris: Yes. Luckily I made good choices because my choices came to me. Because people had heard of me. It's amazing. They said I've heard of you, and I heard you are a person that don't drink or smoke. They'd bring that into it. And you always look good.

People, well, take that around, you know. Pass it around. Well, do you know Charlie or do you know such and such a person? Especially when I was with Nat. [Laughter]

But I tell you, everybody knew how to look. And it was a wonderful life for me. I couldn't have done any better I don't think than I did.

Q: Well, you made some wonderful music.

Harris: Yes. We made good music. That's one thing. You're right about that. And it was, we never had arguments because everybody was nice in the group. You knew what you had to do and you did it. You followed your leader. What he did was direct the group. And they were all nice people.

I haven't played with a band that wasn't nice. Andy Kirk wanted me to go south with him to play with him. I had several bands I could have gone, but I didn't want to take those one-nighters like they would take. And so I passed them up.

Last year I went down to Peabody to talk to the students. Time marches on and changes will take place.

Q: And now you can major in jazz at Peabody. They have a jazz department.

Harris: Because everybody's into the jazz now.

I remember when Peabody never thought about jazz. But now jazz has become a big thing with them now. Unfortunately today there aren't as many great jazz bands as there used to be. In my day when I was coming up, they were A number one.

But not today. Because they're playing things today I can't understand. I'm not that young to understand what they are playing.

I have no regrets about anything I've done. I never drank and I didn't smoke. I tasted and everything, got high a little bit one day, and that was it. I finished that. That was it. But life has been good to me.

END OF INTERVIEW