



Interview No. SAS8.12.96

Roy McCoy

Interviewer: Elizabeth Schaaf, Archivist

Location: The McCoy Residence in Baltimore, Maryland

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Q: Were you born and raised in Baltimore.

McCoy: No, I was born in Virginia

Q: When did you come to Baltimore?

McCoy: When I was about ten years old. I don't tell nobody that. If you do that, you have to tell them where you come from and where you lived.

Q: If you've been here since you were ten years old, that's close enough.

McCoy: I thought it was time to find something to do. I started to look for another school so I could find one where I could learn some music. That's what I really wanted to do. I found a school where I could learn a trade. This was on Preston Street, between Druid Hill Avenue and Preston. Davis School, I think was the name of it. They had shop, woodwork and metal work. Before that, I had a chance to get in to the Afro-American Drum and Bugle Corps. I was able to get in there because my friend, [William Harris], sold papers. I didn't sell papers. I went 'round with him so I could get in. There was an old German guy, a cornet player, and he taught all these kids how to play. We got around real good in that band. We had parades. That was in about 1933. That's when I first started playing.

I got a chance to go to the Royal Theatre and saw Louis Armstrong playing his horn. It was just shining and the notes were just coming out and I thought, "this is what I'm going to do." I decided I had to get me a trumpet. My mother and father couldn't give me a horn so I started selling papers for a while on Howard Street and Mulberry...no...on Franklin. I used to get on the street car and ride up to Eutaw Street and get off. I really wanted that trumpet. I saved every penny I could get hold of. I took it home and throwed it in this jar. Finally, I saw this trumpet in the window [of a pawn shop on Eutaw Street] for \$14. I took \$2 in there and put it on the trumpet.

I was pretty excited about that, my first trumpet. I got a couple lessons (they cost me about a dollar or a dollar and a half) from a man named Babe Wright.

Q: Did he teach you in his home?

McCoy: Yes, in his home. He played in Bubby Johnson's Big Band. I had a couple lessons with him.

Q: That was a great band.

McCoy: You've heard about them? It was a real good dance band. They played dances and shows at the Royal Theatre. Anyway, I got to trying to play. I don't remember how I got hooked up with the Ritz Club. I went there first. It was on Pennsylvania Avenue and Dolphin Street.

Q: There was the club that people called "the barn" because it was so big.

McCoy: It was a big club. I don't remember it being called the barn. I was too busy trying to figure out how to play.

Q: So you started out at the Ritz. You must have been really good.

McCoy: No, I just got a break. I was just starting to play. They were showing me how to play this horn. I just wanted to make people happy. I'm still trying to make people happy...to get a smile...you've got a good one. That's the best thing I can give you!

So, I was going there. Some of the notes I couldn't play. I started going for an "A" and on the trumpet you play A with the first and second fingers. I was really using my first and second fingers expecting an A to come out...and a G would come out. The fellow next to me didn't like that because I was supposed to play the A. Anyway, to make the story short, he left and another fellow came in. He was a clarinet player [Wilton Crawley]. He would do all kinds of tricks with his clarinet. He'd turn to me and say, "you got to play that horn...Play It!" I was by myself then. "Play that horn...play that horn!" So, I played. That was about March. Now in May they decided that they were going on the road. So I decided I was going to stick with this and keep on going. We played for a carnival. We used to dance on the stage. We'd go around front and play this music for a lot of people and they'd come up and do that dancing. Then we'd go back inside like we're playing the show and the people would come in. Then, we'd go out again if we didn't have enough people in there. We called that "ballyhoo." We'd do this the whole day to get the show going. Finally we'd have enough people in there to start the show.

Q: What is the name of the first band that you played first?

McCoy: That was Sammy Louis' Band and show too.

Q: Where did Sammy Louis come from?

McCoy: I don't know. He was at the Ritz when I came around. He was there all the time. I started talking to the musicians. I don't even remember how I got into this thing. Then I went out on the road with them.

Q: Where did you all go?

McCoy: We went to High Point, North Carolina, to start off and then we played small towns up through Pennsylvania. I remember the horseshoe curve that the train took. I remember riding that train.

Q: So you toured on the train?

McCoy: No, what happened...we had a bus and I found out that I could ride easier and better on the train if I did something else, like some other kind of work. I could get on the train and ride and sleep and everything else. I had a tent (we played outside shows - that's with the carnival). I could make my way of living that way without getting rooms. I could go different places. This way I had it made. We'd get in on Sunday and you'd stay over on Sunday night and then Monday we'd unload all this stuff on the fairground. So on Monday I was always ready to go to work. I liked that better. I could take my little tent and all the junk I had. It was exciting...like camping.

Q: What a great solution!

McCoy: It was beautiful for me. It was like camping...I was outside. I don't remember if I cooked or not. I had a cot. I could put all that stuff on the train so there was no big problem. One day, we were up in Pennsylvania somewhere, and they came through this town up on a big mountain. The bus was coming down and the brakes failed on the bus. They came all through the town without running into anything and got all the way through without stopping. I was glad I wasn't on there. I'll never forget that. Everybody was really shook up. I was glad I wasn't on the bus. That tent helped out a lot. I was a young kid - only sixteen. Food was the only thing I had to buy so I could save my money. I was walking around with a pocket full of money. It was exciting for me.

Q: So you were already on the road when you were sixteen?

McCoy: Sixteen. Yes.

Q: How long did you study trumpet before you got work?

McCoy: Let's see. What happened with the horn, I practiced and studied my notes. I didn't have manuscript paper to write notes out. I didn't have a book. I wrote just on a piece of paper and drew lines on it and made my own manuscript paper. I put the names of the notes on there so I could memorize them. I kept working on it until I got it pretty good. Then, my grandfather used to play an alto horn. What I could do, I could take my bugle from the Afro-American Band, and take the slide out and then take the slide out from the Alto horn, and I had the keys. Since I had the keys I could play all the notes. So I worked on that. Then, after I was doing that, I'd study, practicing hard every day. I wanted to play. It was my dream. I worked with it and, let's see, I took lessons about three months or something like that. Then, when I came back I studied really hard. I only stayed out for about three or four months. My teacher said, "You're going too fast for me. You are ready for some better teaching."

So there was this gentleman named A. Jack Thomas. He said "I'm going to send you around to A. Jack Thomas because he is a good musician and he'll teach you all the stuff." That's where I went. I started studying all kinds of exercises, playing horn, and then I got into theory and harmony and counterpoint. This I've never done a whole lot with yet. So he came in there. By that time some of the guys — I think Babe Wright — decided to get out of the band because he could work with Rivers Chambers Group and make better money than he could with the other band. Of course, anything I made was always all right for me. But at the time, when I came back from the road the first time, right away I got a job in another nightclub. This was "High Hat" out in East Baltimore. This is where I played with Billie Holiday. She would come in and sing with us. Anybody could. They had a good time. We'd come in and call it jamming. That's when she'd come in and jam and some of the guys would come in with their horns.

Now like years ago, there was clubs all along Pennsylvania Avenue. It was like that in the '40s. They had dance bands. We'd go from one club to the other playing our horns. That's where you could learn better playing.

Q: You could just go in and sit in with the bands?

McCoy: Yes. That's what made me go because I kept on working. At the same time, I was going to rehearsals with Charlie Gwynn's concert band. He had rehearsals on Monday night up on Druid Hill Avenue [and] Robert Street I think it was. He had all the makings of a concert band. In later years he had the concert band for the city. At this time he just had a rehearsal band. In the rehearsal band you'd run over a lot of stuff that you'd play in later years. That pushed you ahead so you'd be ready for it when you got into it. That's what happened with me.

I played at the High Hat (I don't know how many months) but it wasn't long. Then Babe Wright left Bubby Johnson's band. I wasn't good enough to play first, but I could play second and third and I could solo.

Q: What instrument did Wright play?

McCoy: Trumpet.

Q: What about Mr. Gwynn?

McCoy: I think he played the baritone.

Q: To back up a little but, what was Mr. Thomas like? He sounds like an amazing man.

McCoy: He was. He was real good. In fact, I would like to find someone like that now. I'd go to him. He was the first black man I know of that led an army band. I was going to him when he was writing this symphony. He said, "see, I'm writing this for the Symphony and I'm going to direct it." I said, "Yeah?"

Q: You were talking to him when he was writing that piece.

McCoy: That was pretty exciting to know that he could do that and that probably I could be able to do that one day. But I never wanted to go into symphony and concert writing. I wanted to play jazz, which you have to turn around. It's the same chords, but you have to modify it, with extra notes and they've got to evolve in just the right way. I'd struggle. I was still trying to figure out how to get them chords together.

Q: I was just so impressed with Mr. Thomas and the piece of music that you saw being written for that performance is in the Archives at Peabody. We didn't know we had it for years. It was given to Peabody and put into a box with compositions by Peabody faculty members. They were never catalogued and then they were forgotten.

McCoy: See that's what happens to music by black musicians. It gets lost. It was one of those things — aw, that ain't nothing because look who wrote it.

Q: I've had a hard time tracking down music by black musicians. I haven't been able to find any of the music written by W. Llewelyn Wilson.

McCoy: Nobody cares or wants it.

Q: I was heartsick.

McCoy: No need to be heartsick. That is the way it was supposed to be. It had to be that way to get to where we are now. I don't see it the way a lot of people do.

Q: An awful lot of wonderful music got lost and it is such a crime. For someone who writes music, that's their life...that's what they have to give and it is what you hope will be left behind.

McCoy: Thomas wrote all the parts by hand.

Q: He wrote another piece called *Pastoral* and *Mirage*, based on a poem that he wrote. The poem that he wrote was tucked inside the score. It is all there. I copied all the music to make sure it wouldn't get lost. He was such an important musician and taught so many wonderful people.

McCoy: I don't call myself good yet.

Q: Were you studying at his house?

McCoy: He had a Conservatory. He was teaching in New York. Did you hear about that?

Q: Yes, indeed.

McCoy: He would come down...I think it was Thursday, Friday, and Saturday that he'd be here and Sunday he'd go back. I'm glad you found that music. I wondered what had happened to it. I don't even know if his wife is still around.

Q: I don't think so. I'm not sure, but someone told me that she'd passed in the last few years.

McCoy: Everybody's time comes after while.

Q: I'm sorry that I couldn't have had a chance to meet her and tell her. He just so impressed me. He worked with some of the finest people in music. He studied in Paris, with [Walter] Damrosch,

McCoy: and [Vincent] Persichetti... He [Thomas] would come to our band. He would start off and count off. Every note that you were supposed to play he had it there on the stick. You just looked at him and you'd say, yes...that's it! Man, that guy's something! He plays the thing and the band would do anything he wanted.

[digression on improvisation and the similarities between early music and jazz]

McCoy: Sings an example of a straight tune and then follows it with a lively improvisation.

Q: How long were you with Mr. Thomas?

McCoy: I guess three or four years. I can't think of the name of the school he had.

Q: The Aeolian School of Music?

McCoy: No, the school for G.I.s.

[digression on Jones' master's thesis on A. Jack Thomas]

Q: What other clubs did you play in? Where is the High Hat?

McCoy: The street is torn down now. After the High Hat I played with Bubby Johnson's Band. He played at dances and at the Royal Theatre for stage shows. That's where I played for the original Ink Spots — "If I Didn't Care." We also played for performances in the pit. They had shows that they had colored and white groups — they called them black and white shows. Whatever type of music they were playing — like German music, Italian music. We had all the comedians. I played for Open the Door Richard, Buck and Bubbles, Dusty Fletcher, Pig Meat Markham.

Q: Who was leading the orchestra?

McCoy: Bubby Johnson. Now this was the first time I ever played a solo in front of Count Basie's Big Band. We always played the opening song or number and this day, Count Basie was in town and all his band members came right down to the front row and sat down. I looked out there...I was playing a song by Duke Ellington, "Boy Meets Horn," which is all trumpet. They threw me out front. When the curtains opened up, there's Count Basie's Band! I had to play, there wasn't no getting out of it, it was the first thing on the show. I played real good. That's been over sixty years ago...somewhere back there — '39. You had to improvise.

On Sundays I played with the Union Baptist Sunday School Orchestra led by James Young. He played violin. See, all this keeps me going. I never stopped.

Q: What ever happened to James Young?

McCoy: I don't know. He went over to Enon Church in West Baltimore and then he left town and I didn't see him any more. He was nice.

In 1939 I got hooked up with a nine piece band called the *Harlem Dictators*. We played at Club Orleans on Gay Street in around 1940, 1941 and 1942. Duke Ellington came over and sat in with our group and played with us. Benny Carter, a powerful arranger from California, was playing with his band at the Royal. He came to the club and asked me if I was ready to go with his band. Every time I would see him he would as "are you ready to go with my band?" He'd remember me. He say "how's Tanglefoot?"

Q: How did you get that nickname?

McCoy: That's another long story. In 1934 or 1935 Mickey Mouse had a horse that had long legs. I've got a picture of him. Everybody said "you run just like Tanglefoot. We're going to name you Tanglefoot." That was Tanglefoot. [looking at the picture of Mickey Mouse and Tanglefoot] Look at those feet! I've got feet - I wear a fourteen.

Q: Where were you living?

McCoy: I lived on Madison Avenue, 915 Madison Avenue. Everybody in the block knew when I was home because I had the horn blowing all day. [Mr. McCoy sings scales] As much as I hate to practice now — I know how bad it sounds. You see, have to keep playing those notes. [demonstrates octave leaps] A lady lived down underneath said, "Roy, all I hear is stomp...deedle deedle da...don't you ever get tired?" I said, "naw...I got to get it." So it paid off. You see all this time I'm still playing with the City Park Band with Mr. [Eugene] Prettyman.

Q: When did you start playing in the Park band?

McCoy: It must have been about 1938. Then later, Mr. Irvine had the band. I was able to play solo. Mr. Prettyman also had the Maryland State Guard band. That was around 1938 or 1939. He also had the Elks Marching Band.

Q: I knew about the Elks band but I didn't know about the Maryland State Guard.

McCoy: I had a big experience with that. We went to Camp Meade there came a day when we had to pass in review. There was only one trumpet. When a band marches, you need three or four trumpets playing because when you pass in review you've got to keep the music going and before you get to the review you've got to play something. So I had to figure out how to do that with only one trumpet because I was the trumpet. I figured it out. I played the whole thing all the way down. I played some and then, every chance you get you take the horn away from your lips. If you keep it here [on your lips] the blood doesn't get a chance to circulate and then you get

tired. So, you play a while, then every chance you get, cut her loose. Instead of holding the note four beats, you cut it to one. There have been times when I've had to play a real high note on the number that we'd be playing and I think, Lord, I don't feel I can do this. You say, Lord, give me strength. I'd be down on the end of the stage, up high, and I'd play the note and pretend I was going to fall off the stage. It would crack them up. I would get my laughs.

Q: You have to be half musician and half showman.

McCoy: That's what happens with the band. You can just play. If you don't show them anything, they'll think it's just coming out of the wall. A lot of guys just stand up and play a whole lot of notes. You've got to be doing something!

So I was playing with Irving. Then, one week, I think it was in 1942, Lionel Hampton was playing at the Royal Theatre and I saw Cat Anderson. I said, "what are you all doing?" He said, "we're doing fine." I said "what's happening in the band, you need someone?" He said, "why don't you come in and see us?" because Joe Newman was getting ready to go into the service (this was during wartime). I went down - I don't know why, I never thought I played that good. I guess I must have been better than I thought I was. I used to play all the leads. I played the solos. Sometimes Gene Walker would have me play — I'd play the whole show and then he'd put me on the solo at the end when you're tired. You think "I'm going to make it." I look at some of that music today and think, "did I play that?" See, when you're young...and I had the idea that I wanted to play and that I wanted to be good. I kept on trying to be good. I made it.

So, I'm touring with Lionel Hampton now. We were out there for nine months. We were in New York. We played for the Mills Brothers, for Buck and Bubbles. While I'm out there, I knew I could solo some. Right after this was when I decided to leave. We had been laid off. We were supposed to go into the Capital Theatre but the show that was already playing was so good that they held it over two more weeks. We didn't have no jobs and that drained all our money. I didn't have but a little change in my pocket. I didn't have enough money to send my wife an anniversary card. Everybody I saw said "don't come back to Baltimore." So that's when I decided to come back. After we went to the Capital Theatre, we had bought uniforms and we had to pay for them. She wanted her money right away.

We played the Apollo before we went to the Capital. We made pretty good money there.

Q: So what made you decide to come back to Baltimore?

McCoy: Well, that layoff and she was greedy, she wanted her money right away. We had other bills...so I said, I want to get off. It was like all the time I was there, I wanted to play a solo. I'd say, Hamp, I'd like to play a solo. This went on a week or so. Finally, one day, he call me "Gate", he said, "come on down and play one, Gate." I go down and started playing. I played, figuring maybe two choruses would be enough. I'm playing all kinds of stuff and then he says, "play another one." I do another, figuring this is going to be it and give it all I've got and then he says "play another one." This time I was wrung out but I played it. Well, he saw I had showmanship so he had me out there with Buckner, the piano player, and we would do a little funny thing, like a dance.

But you know, being at home, I could make some money and have some and do something. Out there [when the band was off] I had no money and couldn't do anything. I knew where I was going to eat at home. I knew where I was going to sleep. But out there, I didn't know where I was going to get money.

I almost missed the train one day. Boy, if I'd missed that train I'd been in a world of trouble. Well, they have parties for you. We played in Annapolis and they had refreshments for us when we got off and I'm sitting around there talking and talking because I don't drink. First thing you know, everybody is gone. I said, "where is everybody?" They said "they've gone to the train." I ran down there and caught it just before it was beginning to pull out. I decided that I wasn't going to do that anymore. It is a rough life out there.

I feel good that I came home. I got a little bit of a house, a little bit of a car. I play some things when I want. I've got a lot of hobbies. I like to sew and cook. I made this jacket. I like to sketch. With all these things, I've always got something going on.

Touring is hard. The reason a lot of people get hooked up on dope is that they push too hard. They have to play on the road one night after another. We played in New York, we went down to Norfolk and got there the next morning. We had a 10:00 o'clock. We got there about 9:00 a.m. We warmed our horns up and get on the stage and there is a broadcast. That's the life. It's glamorous because you figure you're playing with big. But when are you going to get rich? You don't get rich. You make a recording, you write a song, they steal your song. Joe Morris, he was with the band. Since then he wrote some arrangements and they were recorded. I found the music on a recording and played it about a month ago. It's got Joe Morris on it but Lionel Hampton's name is on it as the owner. So he recorded it and Lionel Hampton is getting the royalties from it.

Q: So what did you do when you came back.

McCoy: I went back to Club Orleans in East Baltimore. I was in charge of the group. We had saxophone, drums, piano, and guitar. William Makell did the writing for us. He was with Lionel Hampton too. He started playing single notes and melodies on guitar. He had the parts on his guitar like another horn. The trumpet would play the lead and he would play the bottom part.

Q: How long did you stay at Club Orleans?

McCoy: I don't know for sure, about two years. At that time I came back and got hooked up with Rivers Chambers. He did all the society work. This group, you had to know all the late tunes, the show tunes and the old tunes. They ask you for all kinds of tunes and expect you to play them. So these people that Rivers had to play most of those things, so I had to learn how to play them and then you don't use your music. Most of the time you are walking around and they'd come up to a table and ask you "what's your favorite song? what song do you like? And they'd say "Stardust" or "Back Home in Indiana," and we'd play it. They all read music but they didn't have to. It was the type of work they were doing. It was like an act. All they'd have to do is just play it. It was a lesson, too. With music, you just don't look at it, you have to hear it so you know what the music is telling you.

Do you remember Buster Brown? Tee Loggins? Jack - they called him "Squeezebox."

Well, you had to have all that stuff in your head. I got so I could play that stuff and they paid good money. The thing about it, you never know where you were going to play. One time I was told I was going out on a small job - only an hour and a half or two hours. My mother was going to fix me some kind of steak or something real good that I was going to eat that night. I said, "Mother, there's no need to be eating. I'll just go and play and I'll be back in about an hour." So the time comes for the guy to pick me up, he blows his horn and I go out and jump in the car. He says, "We're going to Delaware." I said, "I thought we were supposed to go downtown." He said, "no, we had to change it." They didn't tell me. We get up there and we had to wait in the kitchen. I'm hungry like mad. I told the head man that I was hungry and said to him "I'll buy some food. I'm hungry." "Can't serve you none." I said, "what if they bring back some food, can I have some of that?" He said "no...you can't eat in here." I said, "well, that's all right." I was already in the kitchen and I had money in my pocket. I got over it. I forgave them. I've seen times like that. You'd have money and you just couldn't eat. I remember playing with Lionel Hampton in one of those small towns. Lady said, you can eat in the kitchen but you can't eat in the front, being colored, you know. I said, "I'll eat in the kitchen because I'm hungry." Some of the people that I worked with said "if you can't eat in the front, don't eat in here." I was hungry. I like the kitchen because that's where you get the best things.

That's life. It had to be like that to get to where I am now. I had to learn that. That could happen to me. It could happen to anybody. I'm happy I learned that. Now when I see somebody that's hungry, I know how it is. I had the money to get something to eat and I couldn't. I've seen a lot of people down on the Block, when I was down there, going hungry. I'd say, 'you're hungry - come along and I'll get you something to eat.' I'd go in the restaurant and everybody would look at me like "Are you crazy? Why are you buying him food?" I'd say, well, he's hungry. As long as he wasn't going to buy something to drink.

Did I tell you I was on the Block? Did I get to that story?

Q: No.

McCoy: Well, we're coming into that now. I got a job working on the Block. This was something new to me. I was playing at the Royal Theatre and I got somebody to take the third show — the fourth show. I'd play three shows at the Royal then go down on the Block and play two. I played for strippers and all that. A lot of musicians would come down to Kays to hear me play because they said I was playing a whole lot of stuff they'd never hear anywhere else. That was in the 1940s. Kays Cabaret. I played three shows at the Royal Theatre and two shows at Kays until 2 o'clock. See, the Royal Theatre, you had to be there until around one o'clock. You could write a whole lot of stuff about that.

In about 1948 I went to the Howard Theatre [in Washington, D.C.] with Rick Henderson to play with his band. He heard me with Tracy [McCleary's] band. That's when I started moving around. Sometime I played in Washington, D.C., for a week, then the show would come to the Royal in Baltimore for a week and then it would go from the Royal to the Uptown in Philadelphia for a week, and I played for Little Richard. He went all the way to New York at the Apollo. So I had

about four weeks. While I was playing at the Howard Theatre Pearl Bailey came there for a week. I played in her band - for her husband (he's a drummer). They wanted me to go to New York and play their show but I had another show in Washington I had to play for. I wish I could have went. That was a good time. One of the trumpet players asked me who I studied with and how long I'd been studying because he had big money to really learn how to play the trumpet. I told him that I studied with A. Jack. He couldn't figure out how I could play all the stuff that he was playing and I didn't go through all the changes he had. I had other changes I was going through. Pearl Bailey was 1948 or 1950.

Then a friend of mine (we used to play together at Kays) Purnell Williams, we did some jobs together. He used to play down at the Prime Rib. Now he would have Charlie Harris playing bass, saxophone player named Gross, and Richard Martin playing drums. That was a very nice entertaining group. Then Rick Williams came along with his rehearsal band, "Now Is The Time." In 1967 things broke off. It wasn't too good. I got a day job at Sears Roebuck's maintenance department. I did pretty good there. From 1967 until about 1982. Now I'm sixty-two and they figure that I should be retiring. I'd been there long enough to get some vacation. They figured out how to cut that out too. I got into the floor selling things. They thought I would get disgusted and leave. Instead of doing that, I learned how to do the cash register, computers and all that. I was selling cameras, computers, telephones, typewriters, all that stuff. I learned about all of that. I like to be learning something all the time.

I stayed there until 1985. That's when I retired. I still play with Gene Walker's band and with Rick Williams. That brings me up to now.

Q: I've always wondered about Rivers Chambers' band. I know that some of the people who played with him were devoted church members and they would be out practically every night on the weekends playing jobs and then be up the next morning to play in the church.

McCoy: Rivers used to play at Sharp Street Methodist. I used to go to Enon Baptist Church.

Q: Were a lot of the people who played in the churches also involved in club jobs at night?

McCoy: Not all of them. Not all of them went to church. I did and Purnell Williams used to play in the church. He still plays in churches.

I've got tapes, but I don't have time to listen to them. Sometimes I record when I'm playing. I call them my practice tapes. Then I bring them back and play over them so I can analyze them and do better. I never have a chance to analyze them. Next time I go, I'll record another one.

I used to sound pretty good.

Q: What was the atmosphere in the clubs in the 1930s? Like the Ritz

McCoy: Let's go up to the High Hat...that was the first club I worked at. A lot of people would come there to have fun. They had a show. Every night somebody like Billie Holiday would come in and that would make the show better. People really looked forward to that. The singers would

look forward to going there to jam because we played the background for them. That's the only time they had a chance to get things going. That was a happy feeling. Now we have tapes, record players, disks and all that stuff now. That's done the clubs no good. We had no TV. In order to be happy, you had to go somewhere.

Q: So the performances at night were never the same. You never knew what was going to happen with different people?

McCoy: We'd have a couple of singers and the band would stay the same but everybody else coming we added on. At the Ritz we had chorus girls and regular shows. We had a comedian. On Sundays we had a matinee. We'd start at 2 o'clock. They'd fix sandwiches for us so we wouldn't have to go home. We'd stay there and eat the sandwiches and then go back to playing again. We kept the thing going.

Then they started taking moving pictures of the guests at the club. Then next week, you'd come back and see yourself on the screen. So that brought people in too. It was pretty nice.

Q: The Avenue sounded so glamorous, with so much happening.

McCoy: See, each club had a little something different. Like the Ritz had that big show. In the next block there would be another little club and a guy with a guitar and one of those little horns you sing into — a kazoo. We'd make the rounds, taking them all in.

The girls at the Ritz danced on the tables then, excuse the expression, they would dance on the tables and reach over like they were going to get the money off the table with their bodies, down below. All the men got excited about that. That was the time. That is what was going on. Things have changed and so they are better than they used to be.

Q: I think a lot of things are better.

McCoy: There are some things that are bad too.

Q: But the music scene seemed so beautiful — one of the wonderful parts of life in the 1930s and 1940s. All these marvelous clubs and wonderful musicians.

McCoy: You had musicians and you had dancers. Tap dancers...that was the show. Now you have TV. There's so much dirty stuff on.

Q: I remember being surprised to see that there was a show that Rivers Chambers had written the music for at the Royal Theatre. There was criticism about the show being a little too racy. I cannot remember the name of the show.

McCoy: I heard about that. He was there all the time before we started coming in.

Q: You were going to tell me about the clubs. Where did you meet Tracy McCleary?

McCoy: I lived on Lanvale Street and Pennsylvania Avenue.

Q: When was this? You were at Madison.

McCoy: I moved to Madison after Lanvale Street. I lived on the west corner of Lanvale and Pennsylvania and on this corner there was a building and in the basement he had the band office. They would play and rehearse over there and I would listen to them. I lived in back of a dentist's office - downstairs was a bakery and next door was a night club. The night club in the daytime wasn't doing anything so Tracy one time had his rehearsals there and I had just got the horn. I started playing some music, trying to get with the band. I knew him and down at the school, one time they came down to play for the kids. When they came down I talked to the trumpet players and they explained to me how I needed to take care of my teeth. One was decaying and he said to get that fixed because you can lose it. I did lose it later. I knew them from then on. It must have been around 1936 or 1937 because soon I went into the union and most everybody began to know who I was...Tanglefoot.

That's when I had a big surprise. It was really exciting. Louis Armstrong was coming to the Royal Theatre. See the only thing that happened at the Royal was big time. One of the trumpet players was late and couldn't make it. So they called down and had to get a replacement. Well, the union called me. So I'm sitting up behind Louis Armstrong and he's playing notes that I used to be up front listening to. That was really exciting.

Q: Did you tell him that he was the one who got you interested in playing the trumpet?

McCoy: No, I didn't get a chance to tell him. I don't know why, though. I was really thrilled by it. I never thought I'd...well, you really have to think high. Then good comes to you. You think down... You have to think up...think positive. Things are going to happen.

I wanted a house. We wanted a house so bad. We paid down on it and we bought a house but so much had to be done to it that the people wouldn't finance it. We just wanted a house. We had a small place on Madison Avenue. We wanted to get away and we were paying down on this house. They said no, nothing doing...we'll find you another house. We found this one. Not a whole lot needed to be done. This one had a basement you could walk into. The other house was on the other side of the street and you had to lift up a trap door to go into the basement.

Q: Where did you meet your wife?

McCoy: I met her at graduation. I knew her. Funny thing about her, I was living on Lanvale Street and she and her sister would come down like they were going to the store, the grocery store. They would be talking to each other. I had seen them so much. They seemed to be nice girls. I never thought about her until one day she was at graduation. The band played for them and I saw her and kept on looking at her. So we got to know each other real good and we went together for six years before we got married. We've been married 52 years. It was sometime around the time I was with Lionel Hampton.

Q: How did the war affect your playing? Did you have a hard time getting around because of restrictions on travel?

McCoy: Well, with the band, we did pretty good. Then Lionel was playing at army camps too.

Q: You were fortunate in not getting called up.

McCoy: I was in the Maryland State Guard. When they called me I didn't make it. They didn't take me. But it all worked out and I kept playing.

Q: So you played with Tracy McCleary at the Royal.

McCoy: I played with Bubby Johnson and later on I played with Tracy.

Q: How long were you with Tracy?

McCoy: I think for a year or two. I was at the club and he called me and told me he needed a trumpet player. I was working in the music school, I think. I told him I couldn't make it. But he said come on, just take two or three shows and I'll get Joe Day to play (another trumpet player). I'd rehearse the music and come in and sit down and play.

I never did get rich. Just played.

Q: You said your grandfather was a musician. Were there other people in your family who were musicians?

McCoy: No. My uncle fooled with guitar sometimes. My Grandfather was in this band and the band broke up. He had a room full of all the stuff from the band - uniforms, drums. I got in there and started banging on them. That was in Virginia.

Q: So you came to Baltimore when you were about ten years old and where were you living then?

McCoy: I was living in Staunton, Virginia, before Baltimore and then in Trenton, N.J., before that.

Q: Where did you live when you were a child here in Baltimore?

McCoy: At Dolphin Street and Division Street.

Q: I loved your story about selling newspapers. It reminded me of Chick Webb who got his first set of drums selling newspapers.

McCoy: I sold a lot of papers down on that corner. I'll tell you another funny thing about selling newspapers on that corner. Up in the next block, in the middle of the block was a Conn's Music

Store. They always had trumpets in the window. They had this Conn trumpet in the window and it would shine — it was pretty. I said "one day I'm going to get me one of those trumpets."

Q: That was on Howard Street.

McCoy: Howard Street.

Q: My brother took accordion lessons in that store.

McCoy: Yes. Right upstairs. Anyway, I said give me one of those trumpets. You know, today I like that horn, the Conn horn, better than all of the rest of the horns and I've got two of them...three of them. I just kept up my momentum. I wanted them and I got them.

You have to think positive and keep looking up. Things will come to you.

Q: Tell me about the group you play with at Morgan.

McCoy: Thomas Williams (we call him Whit) started an 18 piece band called the "Now Is The Time Band." Jimmy Heath, he's a good arranger. Michael Raitzyk has a rehearsal band. Gene Walker's band is pretty good too. I guess I'm hard to satisfy.

I've just about played for everybody. When I was in Washington I played for Nat Cole's brother, Freddie Cole, when he was there. I played for Vaughn Monroe. I played first trumpet for him - he said I was playing too loud. See I used to play rock and roll and I played for James Brown - I forgot to tell you. I played for Cab Calloway and for Flip Wilson, the Drifters, the Coasters, Moms Mabley, Harry Belafonte, and Danny Kaye.

[Mr. McCoy plays tape of his performance with Michael Raitzyk's band. The band has 5 saxophones, 4 trumpets, drums, guitar, bass]

Every time I play I so something different.

Q: When did Michael Raitzyk's band get together?

McCoy: I don't know how long they've been playing. I've been playing with them for about a year. Michael came over from Gene Walker's band.

I miss playing in the concert band. Oh, I forgot to tell you that I was playing in the Shriner's Circus band in the '60s. I really enjoyed that.

END OF INTERVIEW