



Interview No. SAS4.02.02
Jimmy Wells

Interviewer: Tony DePaolis
Location: Baltimore, Maryland
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Q: This is an interview with Mr. Jimmy Wells on April 2, 2002, in Baltimore, Maryland. I'm the interviewer, my name is Tony DePaolis. First of all, could you say your name for the tape please.

Wells: Oh, Jimmy Wells, James W. Wells.

Q: When were you born?

Wells: Baltimore, Maryland.

Q: When you were born.

Wells: Oh, I was born October 25, 1927.

Q: Where did you grow up in Baltimore?

Wells: Yeah. That was south Baltimore, you know. As a matter of fact, not too far from the ballpark or the Ravens Football Stadium—four or five blocks, as a matter of fact.

Q: Was it different then?

Wells: Was it different? Oh yeah, man. Back in them particular times, man, they had Lee Street—up on 638 W. Lee Street, the clean blocks, man. They used to have clean blocks [sponsored by the Afro-American Newspapers]. The school down there was on 117 Warner Street. You know, it's the thing about it—we was poor, but as a kid, we didn't know we was poor. Because as long as you could put shoes on your feet, good clothes, and a full stomach back in those days—you could take ten dollars and go to the Lexington Market, and probably need a truck, man, to bring the food back. The economy—it was different. Speak about food, you could buy fish, vegetables and stuff off the Arabbers. For quite a while, they just had horse and wagon. They would come around. They would sell vegetables. You got to know the guys. There was a few girls down there, that's for sure. You know, and it was great. It was really great.

I stayed in touch with everything down there until I became around seventeen years old, then I started hanging up in west Baltimore. Most kids, they'd get out, well, hang up in other

neighborhoods, you know. But it was great. Everybody knew everybody. If you did something wrong, the neighbor would almost spank your butt for you. And, you know, they'd get in touch with your parents and then you'd get another spanking. But it was different. It's different from what it is now. Very much different.

All this killing and stuff that's going on. It wasn't that kind of scene back in those days. You've got to understand I was coming on at the tail end of where I begin to realize World War II. And I remember the blackouts. I remember when they used to have auxiliary police used to walk around with little guns on their sides. And they would tell you put your light out, or close your curtain up. They were serious, man, cause they thought that just maybe the Japanese or the Germans or even the Italians, man, might attack the United States.

So it was a pretty wild scene then. But it was a great scene. It's different than what it is now. As a matter of fact, most of south Baltimore is all chopped up now. Got the football park, we got the baseball park, and all this stuff. There was advancement with University Hospital — that's always been there.

One of the reasons why a lot of houses beside the ball parks were torn down because of the thruway out of Baltimore to Washington, D.C., the Baltimore-Washington Parkway. Where if you're going to Washington, you're driving through the city of Baltimore, you'll run right over where my house used to be.

Now on top of that, you know, speak about your neighbors being so great. Right across the street from me, there was two brothers. One was named Buddy Nelson, the other was named Jerry Nelson. No. No. No. Let me get their names straight. One is named Buddy Nelson, the other is named Joe Nelson. I got it straight now. Now, their mother was poor too, but she always managed to have what they call a "floating" piano teacher come to the house every Saturday. And he would come and give these guys piano lessons for one hour. I knew the time would be like from twelve to one, you know. I used to run over his house and sit way back under the chair and watch these two brothers as they was taking their lessons. As soon as the teacher would walk out the house, like the teacher would go left up that way, those boys would come out and go that way [indicating right]. I used to stay there and practice their lesson. You know. And I would stay in there, and in the summertime from about 1:00 in the afternoon until when it got dark, you know, it's quite late, about 9:00 o'clock and I used to do that every Saturday, because my mother knew where I was at. But I used to stay there and practice their lessons, and practice their lessons and I wouldn't see them anymore that day or that night. And that's how I kind of got involved with the piano.

Their mother used to come out the kitchen and look at me, and my nickname, they called my nickname Wilbur, you know. And she'd say, oh, that's you Wilbur. And she'd go back in the kitchen. She'd smile, you know, because I was getting something out of their—her sons—lessons that they should have been in there practicing.

But, you know, when a teacher teaches something, you know, especially in music, you need to get at it right away. You know, you don't want to put too much time in between. And I managed to do that until I was able to move right along, and starting selling papers and started making my

own money, making my own way. So I took a private lesson at Larry London School of Music, which used to be next door to the *Afro* [Afro-American Newspaper] down on Eutaw Street, you know.

And then after that, of course, I got drafted in the service.

Q: Now, what did your family think of your involvement in music? What was the general opinion in the neighborhood of people who were musicians?

Wells: You know, that's a good question. That's a good question! Because my dad could play the harmonica. My dad also used to say to me, he'd say—the word was boy—if you want to play a musical instrument, you must learn those notes. Learn how to read the music. And he used to put a lot of emphasis on that. You know, constantly telling me learn how to read. Don't play by ear, but learn how to read the music—what's on that paper.

But my mother never said anything one way or the other, pro or con. My family, after I got married—my mother and dad—they never, ever, saw me perform. So they heard my name all the time, they knew I was involved, but they really didn't know whether I was good or bad.

Q: They just knew that that was your job.

Wells: Yup. And that's something—that's a good question because I'm thinking back on it and a whole lot of things happened—getting involved, you know. Say for instance, when I went in the service, I was playing piano so I was attached to the 36th Army Band.

Now, in 1951 at Fort Knox, Kentucky, they had three bands on the post. They had the 158th Army Band, and it was still segregated then, you know. So all the white guys was up on the main post in the brick buildings. And then down in the company area where I was stationed at, they had Third Armored Division Band, and it was white. And then they had the Band Training Unit in between, and the band on the other side of that was 36th Army Band. And that's the band where all the jazz players came out. I mean Cannonball and Nat Adderley, Junior Mance, Curtis Fuller, Sink Jenkins (he used to play drums with an all girl group called the Sweetheart of Rhythms, you know), Kenny Denny (that's the guy from Philadelphia that married Nancy Wilson), and a trombone player—well, he'd wind up for twenty-five years being in Count Basie's band. So all these hot players at the time—nobody knew they was hot—but all these hot players, man, really came out of the 36th Army Band in Fort Knox, Kentucky.

Eventually, when I got discharged out of the service, oh I guess about two years or one year later, man, they abolished it, and they shipped all those guys up to Aberdeen Proving Grounds.

Q: Going in the Army Band, was that like final school for you? Or did you have to work to keep up with them, or had you been prepared?

Wells: Oh yeah, well, see the thing about it, I was on a "DS" with the band, you know, attached to the band. And what had happened was, that in order to get in the band, they had a warrant

officer, and he would actually have to pass on your audition. It was really up to him. It's just like everything else, Tony, in a lot of cases it's not what you know, but who you know.

Q: Gotcha.

Wells: So if the warrant officer liked you, you get in the band. If he didn't like you or your attitude with him, I don't care if you could read the music or what, you would not get in the band. Now, let me give you an example: Cannonball [Adderley] was a sergeant in the service. There was a bass player named Paul Dunn from Philadelphia. Great bass player, that was a cook.

Q: I see.

Wells: See, he was cooking in the kitchen, man. He tried all he knew how to get in the band. Cannonball didn't like him. Wouldn't let him in. Now check this out, Tony, there was an alto saxophone player man that was in the tank outfit because that was 3rd Armored Division down there. Could play just as much as Cannonball. Cannonball wouldn't let him in the band. But I was just sort of detached to the band, but what happened all the guys took a liking to me, and Cannonball took me to Bardstown, Kentucky one night, and I made my first eight dollars. Man, I was in seventh heaven.

You know, and Nat Adderly always took a great liking to me. He just would say, hey man, play those vibes, man. Get up from that piano, play those vibes. I would say, man, I don't know how to play the vibes. He'd say stop whining, get on up there. And then after I went there a couple of times, I ran into this fine little lady. So I kind of liked going down there, you know.

But these guys, if they liked you, you know, they would take you under their wings. As a matter of fact, Cannonball went to Louisville, Kentucky, one Friday him and his brother. I mean, they came back man, they brought me an LP, an album, you know. And they said, Wells, they said, I want you to listen to this guy. I said, who is it? They said Milt Jackson. I said, oh, okay. Now on the album it has Dizzy Gillespie, Lucky Thompson, Percy Heath, and Tootie Heath. And, Milt Jackson was doubling up on the piano. They were playing piano in time. You know I wore that record out, man. I lost that record, man. I wish I still had that LP.

Q: Yeah, it's probably hard to find now.

Wells. I know. But see I'm talking about Cannonball gave it to me.

Q: That's true.

Wells: It's like a treasure, man. They said, this is who you have to listen to. Now, little did I know at the time before Cannonball came into service, he was teaching high school. He was a teacher. And then eventually he started college, but he always had in his mind that teaching is not for him. So he turned Army, as a matter of fact, Nat Adderly was a corporal, and they lived in a non-commissioned officers room, but they spent six years in there, man. Saved their money, and then finally went to New York.

But they always treated me well, man. Curtis Fuller—as a matter of fact, I did a concert about a year a half ago, and they brought Curtis Fuller down. He told his friends, he say, man, this is my buddy from forty-eight years ago. Because we was in that same time, you know.

Q: I'd like to ask you about like the time right before you were drafted. Because you went in the Army at eighteen, right?

Wells: Right.

Q: Okay. About what time were the piano lessons, like how old were you then?

Wells: Oh, that's a good question there Tony. I hear you brother. I had to be somewhere around twelve or thirteen.

Q: Okay.

Wells: Somewhere around there, you know. I never thought about that. I just come out my house, right across the street and sat in on it. Now let me tell you something. Time would have it that the one that called himself Jerry Nelson, I wind up years later with the vibraphones playing with him at the Comedy Club—used to be on Pennsylvania Avenue.

Q: The Comedy Club?

Wells: Yeah. Used to be on Pennsylvania Avenue, you know. And he had a group called Jerry and the Tomcats. I was one of the tomcats. And we played with Paul Crenache, or whatever people that he would bring in.

Diz Nelson, he wound up playing for Pegleg Bates. The guy that had one leg that was a tap dancer up in New York someplace. But what happened to those two brothers, one that called himself Jerry, went to California, and he got involved in drugs so he went to prison. The other one's up in New York somewhere. Very interesting about them, man. They were very talented kids, but this day and time, you have to understand what order is. It's about coaching you and what to do. Especially when they know you should pay attention to this order. I played the scales, or played those chords, or either asked questions, you know—what's the notes involved in to progressions, or how you do this? How about, what's the C7, Flat 9, Sharp 9, Sharp 11 or Add 13. What kind of chords you got?

It's all kind of questions are gonna come up—and even might ask you about the Greek modes. What kind of chords, man, are Herbie Hancock or Chick Corea or those cats using? They're using a Sharp 4, man, the Lydian scale, you know. Or Miles used to use the Dorian scale, you know. You just have to know these things. Darn, I sound like I know what I'm talking about, don't I?

Q: So your first experience playing was going to these floating piano lessons then?

Wells: Oh yes. I started the piano. I got so that, especially when I got enough money and started going to learn. I was able read stuff like "You Are My Sunshine" and the "Wagon Wheel", playing things with the ii, V, I chords and reading top and bottom lines and telling everybody, yeah, I'm a piano player. I soon got away from that. [Laughter] A piano player all right.

But the piano thing started growing on me, and I must say I got fairly good at it. Very good at it, man, because then people wouldn't hire me for the vibraphone. They said, oh man, we need a piano player. I said, well, man, you know, I play vibes. Yeah, man, but you play enough piano, man, you know, we can do this gig. And I said, well, okay. You know, that's money. We'll take it.

So I wind up there for quite some time. That's before I got my big set—those vibes right behind you. Those vibes are thirty-two years old, man. Bought them in 1972. But I wind up, man, getting enough money together in order to buy those vibes playing piano.

But in the early stage, like all kids, you know, I think I was a slight different because I knew what I wanted. And I knew I wanted to play music. I knew that. Sometimes as kids, man, you get lost. You don't know what you want. Sometimes you have to do a whole lot of things. And I think I say something to you one time we was talking, you almost have to do bad to know what good is.

Q: Yeah.

Wells: But I did, you know, the music thing was always in my head.

Q: And what music were you listening to, like, how did you hear music before you started playing?

Wells: Well, my sister and my brother-in-law had a lot to do with some of this stuff man. I got more interested in jazz because I knew I didn't want to listen to what they was listening to: R & B.

Q: Well, what kind of artists were they bringing back?

Wells: Well, the artists, when I started—my mind started opening up—what really fascinated me was Nat King Cole. Because Nat King Cole could do a record date singing, not playing piano. But he could come out that particular set and do a day with Jazz at the Philharmonic on the piano. So see, Nat Cole was a hell of a piano player, man. He was a great piano player. He used to record under the name of Sonny Mandine. That's the name he recorded under.

And at that time, he was right up there with Oscar Peterson and all those cats, man. So I just used to listen to him. Buy records, you know. And then the rest of it, my sister, you know, they liked Gladys Knight and Pips, and the Temptations. I mean, they was all cool. It's all part of it, but it wasn't what I want to hear.

Q: But, I mean, what did you hear when you were younger though?

Wells: When I was really young we had, well, a gramophone, whatever they call it. Anyway, we used to listen to Bessie Smith and all that kind of stuff. You know, great big records.

Q: 78s

Wells: But at that time my mind wasn't tuned into that part of the music. My mind was tuned into I want to learn how to play.

Q: Gotcha. So it wasn't necessarily wanting to play a style, it was just learn how to play music.

Wells: No. The style thing didn't come about until 1951. That's when I really got involved with listening to Milt Jackson. I started buying his albums, and started listening. I did a little lying those days. We had a sergeant in the company. He said, man, what do you think about Thelonious Monk. I said, man, he's great. I didn't even know who Monk was. Had no idea at all. I'm lying, you know. And then I just call him monkey. I said, you're talking about monkey. Guy said, do you know what I'm talking about, who I'm talking about? I really didn't. So I had to give it up. I said, no man, I don't know who you're talking about. But most of my involvement with jazz came from the Army. The Army didn't hurt me at all.

Q: I guess not. No.

Wells: You know, it didn't hurt me. Like a lot of the guys was going to Korea, you know, a lot of guys was getting killed too.

Q: That's right.

Wells: But it didn't bother me staying in Fort Knox, Kentucky. That where's I got discharged from.

Q: So it was before that it was basically just learning. What kind of music did they give you to learn?

Wells: Well you're talking about teachers? You're talking about piano?

Q: Yes. Piano, and between the time of the lessons, the floating lessons, and what was it the Larry London School.

Wells: Oh yeah. Well it would be all the same thing, you know. It would be like scales. It would be about how to look down at the base clef and see where C is at in the bass clef. They taught you about the G, B, D, F, A, A, C, E, G. I mean, you go past that, man, that's middle C. And all that F A C. You know, everybody good boy does fine. They teach you something like that. They taught you about time. Mostly all of those books, man, any book you can think of, right at the top they got a whole note. And then they got two quarter notes equal to a whole note, four eighth notes it was through the whole note. You know, just the normal things. They can't give you anything hard because you're learning. And believe me, when you're playing songs like. I'm trying to think of one particular song, *Tennessee Waltz*, [Mr. Wells hums song]. But they just had

it so that you just move from one to five. [Continues to hum]. It's stuff like that. And the funny thing about the whole thing is this: When you get up to a level where you begin to understand what you're doing and you get in a band, the piano players do not have notes written down in the left hand. You got to be able to read those chord symbols. Because that's a quick process of getting through the song. I mean, if you saw C minor 7 or C minor 9, C minor 11, man, and that was written out, it'd scare you to death. So they associate minor 11. You can tell, you know, with C minor 11, that'd be C, E-flat, G, B-flat, D-natural, F. Guys don't voice that chord that way. They put the F on the bottom. Then they voice it: [F], B-flat, c, and E-flat. And the bass player hits C — boom. So it's a different path. The voices is even different now.

Q: That's true.

Wells: But back in those days, man, if it was A minor 7 [hums], you'd play A, C, E, G, man, you know. You just play it the way it was on the paper. Or the chord might be C 13, you know: C, E, G, B flat, D, F-sharp, A. Just play it the way it's on the paper, you know.

But now the voices, same chords, but it's different. Like you can play a C13 now. It's still starting on C, but it can start on B flat, the dominant seventh. And you can go to the third, the E natural, A natural, D natural, G natural, C [hums chord]. And it sound just as good as C, E, G, B flat, D, F sharp, A natural. You know.

Q: And when you were learning all this theory and learning how to play your instrument, were you just doing this by yourself or did you play with other people around too.

Wells: No, I played with other people man, you know. I'd been one of the most lucky guys in the world man—lucky guys in the world. I have a friend named Donald Bailey, and he died seven years ago. Bass player. Unbelievable player.

Q: I was actually listening to him last night. I have a Sonny Rollins album that he's on. I was listening to that.

Wells: Oh yeah. Now Donald Bailey was a stable guy, wouldn't tell you nothing. Believe me what I'm saying. But he would show you by doing. He learned from his father which was a piano player. A great piano player that could read around the corner, man. But Donald wouldn't tell you, you know, he wouldn't tell you. Say, Donald, what do you think? He'd say, well, you know. You'd say, oh well, he ain't gonna tell me. I sometime wonder if he really knew, tell you the truth. Why he didn't tell me? But the guys like him, man.

Q: Was this before the Army, man, or?

Wells: After. After the Army.

Q: And did you play with anyone before the Army though?

Well: Oh yeah, that's when I went with Jerry and the Tomcats at the Comedy Club more or less. I went a couple of weeks down there, you know. No, man, as a matter of fact, that was after I got

out—most all my stuff is after I got out of the service. I did very little—I didn't make any gigs or anything before going in the service.

Q: Did you ever sit in anywhere or do anything like that?

Wells: No. No. The vibraphones was the thing that did entice me, man, to get involved with groups.

Q: And when did you start getting interested with that?

Wells: When did I decide to do what?

Q: Get interested in the vibes.

Wells: Oh, it was 1951. I'm a late starter. You know how I got started on that?

You ever heard of Lionel Hampton?

Q: Just maybe. Yes.

Wells: You're sort of young. You might.

Q: No. Actually I have.

Wells: You have?

Q: My grandfather had a bunch of records so I listened to that too.

Wells: Okay. Now dig it now. I went to a dance. Every time Lionel Hampton used to come to town he used to play downtown on Fayette Street or he used to play the Fifth Regiment Armory. And man, or the Royal Theater, you know. And man, I went to this dance. I used to stand up in front of the band, and I was really fascinated with him, man, getting over that instrument man. So one night he was really hot man, this particular time I went, and one of those balls on the mallet—the mallet actually almost broke in half. The ball jumped off the stick, the shaft, you know. And I picked it up and I kept it. I wouldn't give it back to him, man. And it was just something about that. I can't explain why, you know, but I was fascinated watching him playing that instrument. And this big band, seventeen pieces behind him, backing him up, and he's just wailing away, man, you know. That's how, that was number one of my interests how I got involved.

Q: Was that right before you went in the Army or?

Wells: Yeah, that was before Army. Yeah.

Q: You saw him play at a dance. Is that right?

Wells: Yeah, dance. He used to appear, play at the Royal Theater. They would only bring him once a year, maybe twice. They wouldn't let him in this town, man, because he had people coming all the way from around that corner. When they started playing, man, people dancing all in the aisles and stuff. You know, so, no man, they put a ban on him. But he would sell the house out—balcony, downstairs and everything, you know. So, and when he played those dances, he could come in Baltimore and do dances. You know, the place would be jammed with people. Lionel Hampton's ninety-two years old now. He was great for his time. He was the man. Some kind of way, man, I got away from him when I started hearing that Milt Jackson sound. Now Milt Jackson accidentally found that sound on the motor. Keep fooling with the knobs and all until he got that sound, ya, ya, ya, ya. You know.

Q: Yeah.

Wells: That's because his sound used to sound like Lionel Hampton, [faster] ya, ya, ya, ya, ya, ya, the motor running fast, you know. And he found that bad boy. That's why to this day when you buy a set of vibes, man, that's a regular speed on the motor. Milt Jackson made that famous. That Milt Jackson's vibes was different from Lionel Hampton, you know. All up and down this and that.

See in my book one of the greatest vibraphone players of all time—Marvin a fine player. There are a lot of vibe players out there now that can play their butts off too: Terry Gibbs was out there. Red Norvo was out there. Garry Burton was out there. Dave Pike was out there. You got Steve Nelson, that's the guy from Pittsburgh. He's out there now. You got Joe Locke. He was a teacher, been in New York about ten years. He's playing vibes. There's Stefon, or whatever his name is.

Q: Stefon Harris?

Wells: Yeah, man. He's about twenty years old, man. He's out there now. And there's a bunch of vibraphone players out there. When I was out there in the early days, man, which I spent twenty-five years with no day job, just playing music. There wasn't fifty vibe players in the whole country man. Wasn't fifty in the whole country, anywhere.

And they had vibraphones in the recording studios and stuff, man, backing the big time singers and stuff. There wasn't nobody out there man, except Lionel Hampton, Milt Jackson, Ray Nobel, Terry Gibbs—they was the hot ones, you know. Then Gary Burton came along with the four mallets. Oh, they had another guy named Johnnie Lytel too. He was out of Ohio.

Q: Bobbie Hutcherson?

Wells: Oh well, yeah. Well, Bobbie Hutcherson. Actually, the year when I started getting my brains together Bobbie Hutcherson went to New York. That was 1958 man. 1958. When I started getting—yeah, this is what I want to do. So at that time I was married, you know. So I told my wife, I said, I was working at Social Security man.

Q: Yeah. I mean, you had a day job after the Army?

Wells: I quit. I quit, man! I told her, I said, no, I said. And you know what she said, man? She said as long as you play, no, as long as you come home, it's okay with me. You know, in other words, she didn't care how you brought the money in, just bring the money in. And being typical of the young, I abused that too. That's another story. [Laughter] As a matter of fact, I don't expect you to believe this, Tony, but I wish you would. I probably dated about forty women. The music, man, I mean, you're up there playing and, even in the rock shows, man.

Q: Yeah. I've seen that.

Wells: You know, you see those girls, man, lift up their dresses. They're up on the stage, man. Same thing with jazz. Those jazz women, man, they really get serious and you're young, man, you're skinny, man, you look like you really know what you're doing, man. Next thing you know you got a telephone call, Yvonne called and she left this number, return this call. So you don't even know who Yvonne is. But she saw you in the club.

I wish I could help you more with those early days, man, but other than really dealing with those two brothers, Jerry Nelson and Joe Nelson, that was about it. And this girl I dated for instance, lived right across the street from me. And I really wasn't dating her, man, cause every time I got back home around 11 o'clock at night she had her windows up. Hey, hey, hey. I said, what are you doing up girl?

But anyhow, but things started breaking a little slowly. Started breaking a little slowly. I was watching a little league football game. My son was playing. So I told him, I said, I'm going across the street to get a soda. You want one? He said, yeah, but I got halfway across the street, a guy stopped his car at the center of the street, said, Jimmy Wells. Where you been? I've been looking for you. Like he couldn't find me, right? So he said, look, man I want you to come out to Maryland Public Television, I want you to talk to me about something. So I said, okay, and so I got all the information from him, and I went out to the station.

At that time the only Black show that they had on public television in this area, was a thing called Our Street. That was the name of the show, Our Street. And that's one that Howie Rollins was in. And I thought that was very interesting. So he said, well, man, you know, I want you to apply some music, man, to our show. So I said what do I have to do. He said, well, stand in front of the camera, we're gonna roll the picture, and you play what you think should be in the picture.

So I told him, I said, well, I can't do it by myself, man. I said, I got to have a bass player, my man, Donald Bailey, and we'll do it. He said, well, bring him too. We'll pay him too. Just like that. The music director there was a guy named Don Swartz. He came in and he introduced himself, and he listened to us. So, you know, nobody pays attention to public television, you know, we're just doing the job. We're flirting with the girl, man. Because this real tall girl, man. She was as fine as she could be. So we're just having fun. So a couple of weeks later, man, I got a call from the music director of the Maryland Public Television. He said, look man, we're doing a session, and he said we're going to use some of the Baltimore Symphony people, and we want vibraphones on this. I said, okay. Because my reading was up to power, man. As long as they don't write something too difficult. So sure enough he did, man. He wrote a piece of music that took up the vibes from this end to this end. I accidentally, man, and played the right notes all the

way up. It was the hardest piece of music I ever seen in my life. [makes sound of vibraphone] You know, man, like an arpeggio. But it was up from one end of the vibes to the other, man. So I got in good with him.

So we were doing a big, big recording session. There used to be a recording studio in Baltimore called ITI. And George Massenberg, by the way if you're not familiar with him, he's the engineer that used to record Weather Report and Earth, Wind and Fire. Oh, he's a big time guy. He's in Nashville now.

Q: That name does sound familiar.

Wells: So we're doing this thing, man, at the studio where he was. So again, they got the Symphony players, they got the strings, man, they got about ten of them. So the guy that was playing first violin, when he'd look around, he was going inside his pocket, take the top off and swooping down. Drinking Pikesville liquor. So Don Swartz, the business director, is watching him. So every swig he would take his part was starting getting stranger and stranger because he was getting drunk, man.

So Don Swartz said to him, look here, man, I'm having a problems with you. This guy was a contractor too, man, with the Symphony! And he said, I'm having a problem about you man. He said you're not delivering what I want you to. So he looked up at Don Swartz and he told him, well, if you learn how to conduct I wouldn't have this problem. That's where he messed up. So Don Swartz said, break time. So broke the group. And he said, Jimmy, come with me. So we go into the control room. He says shut both doors. And I shut both of those doors, padded doors, you know. He said, you're my next contractor. I said, man, I don't know those people out there. I didn't know them. He said, you'll learn them. That's how Don Swartz and I hit it from that point on man. He gave me the power to be able to hire musicians, man, all depends on whatever the music needs. You know, and I did it man, you know, just as a side thing before getting a job out there. I made twenty-five thousand dollars. Just a side thing.

You know, half a day here or a week there. I used to catch those symphony people, man. Some of them would be on vacation in Florida, different places. I called their house. So whoever was in charge of the house said, well, we got a number, Mr. Wells, where we could reach them. I said, give me that number please. I'd call them right on their vacation. Oh yeah, Jimmy. I could do it. So they turned out to be pretty great.

Q: After you got out of the Army you came here, right? Or came back to Baltimore.

Wells: Yeah.

Q: So you got a Social Security day job then?

Wells: Yeah, I got a job down there. You know, it's a funny thing. Let me tell you one more little bit about the Army days. Curtis Fuller, man, tried to talk me to going to Detroit.

Q: To move there.

Wells: I said, no man, I ain't going to Detroit. He said, where you going? I said, I'm going to Baltimore. The sergeant, man, not Cannonball —this was another sergeant—tried me to get me man to take three more years. Take three years actually, this for three years. He said, I'll make you a sergeant in six months. I said, you had two years to do it, and you didn't do it. And I was just a private first class when I got out, man.

Q: So you spent two years in it.

Wells: Yeah, man. And military is not for everybody. Although I didn't have a bad time. But military, man, the thing about the military is, you can have fifty guys in the barracks man. Fifty guys! But you're still lonely there. It's a lonely place there. It's very lonely especially when you're just grown and want to be with a woman. Man.

When you stop and think about it, how things happen. Now let me explain something to you. There was a friend of mine, just before I got my vibes, when I was at Camp Pickett, basic training, there was a friend of mine that lived on Fayette and Broadway in the projects. And he was a vibe player. He was a real vibe player. But he couldn't get in the band either. He was an engineer.

I used to help this guy take the vibes down the company street. He was a short guy too, man. And I'm on one side, and to this NCO club, non-commissioned officers club, and we had bass drums. And he said, I want you to play piano. And so on the break I used to get up and I'd go to touch the vibes. And he'd say, ah don't touch the vibes, don't touch them. Don't touch them. You know, I said, well, okay. He said, I just want you to play piano.

So we got separated, you know. I went in in his company. But we got separated when I went to Fort Knox, and I got my vibes—well, you know all about that story. When I got out the service, I was living with my mother-in-law and we were living up in west Baltimore, off of Presstman Street. Presstman and Whittier Street—as a matter of fact, not too far from Douglass High School.

Q: And when had you gotten married?

Wells: Well, I got married when I was in the service. I hate to say it, but I don't remember the date. I'd probably have to call my ex-wife up and ask. But she didn't deserve none of the stuff that I did. But that's okay. That's another story.

But when I got these vibes, Earl Brown knew what I had, but I didn't know what I had. You know, it was a small two and a half octave set. So he used to come down because we lived two blocks from each other. He said, man, I want to use your vibes. Well, I said, man, it may be a possibility that I'll get a job this weekend. You know, I mean, you don't need to go and play, man. Give me your vibes. I'll pay you to stay home.

So I said, well, he's a friend. I thought that's a good idea. At that time the musicians was only getting ten dollars a night, you know. And that was big bucks, the economy was good. And I noticed here, that he was constantly on my case. Like he said, look man, why don't you come up

my house. I want to talk to you about something. So I went up to his house. He had his vibes set up, and the motor on it, he had tape all wrapped around to hold the motor up. He said, man, I'll give you a hundred dollars and my vibes for your vibes. I said, no, no, I don't think so. So that passed over. And then, week or so, you know, went back up to his house, and he say, look, I'll give you two hundred and fifty dollars for your vibes and my vibes. That's when I knew I had something. Because the more his price started rising, I knew I must have—I don't know what I got, but I know I've got something. And I wouldn't sell it to him. So eventually, I got a job in the nightclub, playing, playing, playing. I bought a silver set of Musser vibes, and I used those other vibes as a trade in. I never would let him have those vibes. Of course, he never got hard feelings behind him. That was too bad. But he was trying to run a game on me. You know, con man. Then the jobs started coming in.

Q: And this is while you had the day job, right?

Wells: Yeah. This is while I had the day job.

Q: What were you doing at Social Security?

Wells: I was working in claims and registration.

Q: Right.

Wells: And it's funny. I tell you about that too, man. Because initially, I took the Post Office test and failed it. And a day or so later, man, took Social Security test and passed it. And also I had two points by being a veteran, you know, would push me over the hump. That was a good deal. I got in trouble on that deal too with the girls.

But anyhow, I was working in a club down on Baltimore Street, and I just wanted to play. My hard time, and it was really hard brother, was working until two o'clock in the morning, and getting up the next morning and be on the job seven-thirty.

So I was down at Social Security Building on Paca and Pratt Street at that time, downtown. I parked my car and I run, and a whole bunch of people and there'd be like twenty-five after seven. All these people be on that elevator, and when that elevator came back, man, I got on it. It would be seven thirty-five. And then the supervisors would come watch me. So he walked up to me one day. He said, look, man, I'm going to do you a favor. He said, quit or we're going to terminate you. He said if we fire you, you ain't going to be able to get another company job. But if you quit. I said, well, can I have a couple of days to think about it? He said, sure. So I went home that day and I told my wife, I said, look, I want to play music. You know, I can't handle this day job. And she said as long as you take care of your family and come home, whatever you want to do is fine with me. And that was it. And that was my last day job.

So the jobs started coming.

Q: And what was the scene like then? I mean.

Wells: Back in those days?

Q: Yeah.

Wells: The music scene?

Q: What was the scene like back right after you started doing this full time.

Wells: Well, the scene was crazy man. First of all man, everybody was trying to cut each other up. But believe it or not, your dad probably—how old is your father?

Q: How old is he?

Wells: Yeah.

Q: He's like fifty-four I think.

Wells: And how long he's been playing?

Q: He's been playing since I guess '70 or so. Like the late '60s, early '70s.

Wells: Well, he knows about the scene out there, where saxophones players trying to outblow each other. Trumpet players trying to outplay each other. You know, the vibe players don't like each other, you know. The bass players don't like each other. Especially if you played good, man, my goodness, man, you in for a world of trouble.

The scene was crazy, but on the other hand, with those that had serious minds about the music, it would come together, and you would have rehearsals, man, in your home. And, you know, saxophone players, and bass players, and all that. And you would learn, you would learn that style of playing that they was playing in them days then. And it's hard music to play. Even to this day if you stop and think about it, this bebop, man. And all that syncopation in bebop is mean, man. You know, like "Grooving High" or "Confirmation." And then Charlie Parker wrote that Minority, Dr. Jefferson, Jack and Be Clean. All that stuff is hard to play, man. Sonny Rollins had, what was the song that he had? He had some song that was hard.

But all that stuff was hard to play, and we used to get together man. And I was involved in a group called Sinbads, and Albert Dailey on piano, James Jefferson and Bobbie Nelson. Man, we rehearsed that group seven days a week almost. And believe it or not, we had that group together for about seven, eight years, and could never get a job together in a nightclub. We played all concerts, but we couldn't get a job in a nightclub. We just couldn't get that. And it got so that the older musicians, man, they realized how good some of the players were in my group, man. They were snatching them from me.

Q: So the older musicians had a lock on the nightclub gigs?

Wells: Oh yeah, the older musicians—the same as it is today—the older musicians are scared of the younger musicians. They're just scared of them. You know, musicians are more knowledgeable now. Most of your musicians out there have got conservatory training. They know what they're doing. They're doing a lot of things because the younger musicians trying to prove that, hey man, we don't have to play—that's the old way. We can play it this way. You know, this sounds more hipper.

A lot of players had a lot to do with it, like Bill Evans. Bill Evans was an older musician, but he was advanced. Monk had his style of playing. Chick Corea, jumped in there, man, different way of playing. Herbie Hancock—different way of playing. McCoy Tyner turned them all around for a while when he was with Coltrane.

Even that kid now that's in charge of the jazz department down at Peabody, Gary Thomas. If you listen to him, man, he's playing a lot of scales. Scales, scales, scales, scales. That's what he's playing, man. He's not dealing with the changes. And he can read, man, and he can play. But he's not dealing with it. In the older days we dealt with the changes. C7, F, F minor, B flat, whatever. We dealt with it.

Coltrane actually was dealing with the chords, but Coltrane was chasing the chords. He played up, man, like almost 32nd note speed, *bruuup*, right up. And I don't care how fast he played, he always wind up playing on the knife man. Every time, man. *Bruuup*.

But back in Baltimore, it was five of them, they either had concerts — battling the horns. And some of the older cats wouldn't let you on the bandstand. You know, man, when they saw Jimmy Wells, they said, oh hell, here's this guy coming again, man. Can I play? Oh, man. And they would have that attitude—not that I was a kid, you understand? Cause I didn't have no car at that time, and I was pushing my vibes up the club, pushing them up the street. Had a blanket over, you know. And took them up, I still had the small section, so I wasn't going to let them turn me.

There was some guys who said, yeah, man, c'mon play, Jimmy. But there was the other story. The more advanced you become, the more you know what they ain't playing. I said, wait a minute now. I thought this guy was doing this. I thought that guy was doing that. And you say, ah man, you know, this is really sad. But you don't say this to nobody. These are inner thoughts, you know. And then you find yourself getting away from them, and getting with the cats who want to do some playing.

There was a piano player we had, Albert Dailey. He died a few years back. I got one of his CDs in there now. Oh, this cat, man, was the strongest person in my book, you know. As a matter of fact, he was seventeen years old, but he could play though. And he was one of my bosom friends. I truly miss him too.

I remember one night at the Famous Ballroom, they hired this big band, and they hired our four-piece group. Now, we were just supposed to play intermission, you know, five piece, drums and piano. So every time, man, we'd get ready to play, they'd say, no, no, no. Let the big band play. And no, no, no, the big band gonna play now. So I told Albert Dailey, man, we got to play something, or otherwise, man, there'll be a little discrepancy about the money here. The guy say,

well, you all didn't play nothing. I know you're not going to charge us the full price. I saw that coming. So I said, man, we got to play something. So went to the stage, waiting for them to call us. So finally they called us up there. Because they were saying the people would start dancing if we went up there.

We went up there and we played, man. We couldn't get the people off the floor. So they said, well look man, why don't you all stay a little longer? Oh, no. No. We're coming down. Let the other band go back up. We only played one set, but we got paid. They had to pay us. There were things like that.

Q: Where were you playing—in what neighborhoods and how were the owners when you were getting these jobs?

Wells: What about them?

Q: How was it to deal with them?

Wells: Oh, the club owners. You're gonna love this. You're gonna love this story. What a great question! You got a job. The job is only paying you ten dollars a night. You get forty dollars, four guys. And you're not even getting the leader's fee, which should have been fifty dollars. You say to the club owners, now look here man, can't you do a little bit better than this price. And he said, look, today is a bad business, man. They say as soon as business pick up, I'll give you guys more money. We say great. All of a sudden, business started picking up. All of a sudden, he gets a new band. It would happen all the time, man.

Now, here's another thing... When business is bad, the first thing they do is get rid of the band. "Band ain't no good that's why people are not coming in here." He don't stop to think about he might be charging too much money for a drink, or the waitress, man, got personality problems. You know, or you don't stop and think about maybe people are not hip to him because he watered down the drinks. Or the people there are getting a bottle and putting water in it, filling it up and putting it up on the shelf.

So the club owners, man, the only club owners that I know—two of them that I know—was fair with me, one was a gangster down on Mulberry Street. His name was Angelo. Angelo—what you saw is what you got. Straight up and down, you know. And he liked me because I used to come to work with a sport jacket on, shirt and tie, and pants creased, shoes shined. And I was really going into a joint where I could have put blue jeans on and sweaters, it should have been fine. But I showed class, man. He's looking at me. Yeah, man. He was fine with me.

The second one that was fine with me was Abe Applebaum. He was the general manager of the Playboy Club. I stayed at the Playboy Club for six and a half years. I just got sick of it. I told him, Abe, I'm sick of this place, man. I've got to quit. You know what he said to me, "Wells, get out of my face and go on back downstairs. Man, go and play." So he had a lot of respect. As a matter of fact, within that six and half years, I wound up playing shows upstairs, man,

The club owners always promised you a whole bunch of stuff, but never delivered.

I hope that answers your question a little bit.

Q: What were the audiences like? What kind of people would come out, and how would they like enjoy it?

Wells: Well, you're talking about in the jazz scene. Jazz scene, man, they would come out, man. Girls would come out with pretty dresses on and they'd be fine as they could be. The guys would come out, man, with suits on, and they'd be really sharp. And jazz was always thought of—until the '70s as—something special, man. Special. The musicians, man, would have continental suits on. They would have Italian boots on, man. You know, pencil weight ties and stuff like that. Look sharp man. And the response of the people used to be a puzzle to me. Now, I'll tell you what I'm saying: I really felt that I was coming along on the vibraphone, man, I'm playing, man. And I was getting a lot of attention. I take a solo man, and everybody just look at me. But the bass player solo, man, surely he'd [makes clapping noise]. I said, man. Another solo. [Clapping noise] I said, now what am I doing wrong? I'm doing something wrong here.

So I said to Donald, you know, I said, Donald, I said what am I doing wrong? You do a solo on the bass, you got applause. I don't get nothing. I'm pouring my heart out to these people, and they look like bumps sitting on a log here, man. What is this?

He said, well, I'm going to tell you something, Jimmy. He said something, he said, something [Charlie] Rouse told me. I said, what's that? He said, learn how to play your instrument. Don't worry about the people, don't worry about the broads, all that will come to you. He was right, man. He was right.

You learn what you're doing, and then you get a response. Now, when I play now, man, people yell yay, Jimmy, yay. I had one guy tell me about a few months ago, he said, hey man, I thought you was dead. I haven't seen you in quite a while, man. I said, no, I'm still around. "Hey, Jim." You know. And Baltimore's always been a hard, hard, hard place for jazz, man. Believe me what I'm telling. If you could play good enough to get over in Baltimore, you could go right up to New York and say hey, New York, here I am. Baltimore was always hard, man, because most of the horn players man, go honk, honk. Hard players. When you found a guy that could play like Miles [Davis] or a guy who could play like Charlie Parker or Sonny Rollins, like those cats play, you know, it's like a breath of fresh air. Because basically the people in the community were dancing, going to the Pythian Castle, the Strand Ballroom, the Elks Hall, all these places where they used to have big bands. But they couldn't relate, man, to a small group playing this strange music called jazz.

Then a lot of them started growing into it. Now some of my best dealing man is when I played jazz for two years. And I played piano those years. I told you about some it over the telephone, man. With Freddie Hubbard, he was crazy. As crazy as a bed bug. Jimmy Heath, man, wonderful guy. Cliff Jordan, wonderful guy. Billy Mitchell, great guy, just played over at Morgan College with him. You know, Benny Golson, you know, I played with him. Kenny Dorham, played with him. Johnny Coles, played with him.

This is when all my things started coming together, coming together, coming together, coming together. The confidence started building up. Cause you have to have a certain amount of confidence too. See when you play, you gotta look like you can play. You know. And you can't let nothing around you, man, distract your attention. You gotta deal with it man. You know. And I played with Ethel Ennis. I used to mess her music up all the time.

Q: Who? Oh Ethel Ennis.

Wells: Oh, I started playing another key, and I played minor. She said, yup, yup. You know, some of the songs I didn't like what she was doing with it. And she said, man, oh why you playing that? And the people just fall out. They thought it was part of our act, you know. Just sing a song like "Spanish Harlem" and those sounds. I said, ah get out of here girl. When are you gonna learn how to sing some good stuff. But she could really sing, you know.

And as time started going on there, you know. And, of course, you know, when my eyes started going bad, man, it kind of put a damper on these days, man. But I keep telling right now, Whit Williams have an eighteen-piece band. I played with that band, you know. I say, hey Whit, man, there's a couple of vibe, there's three vibe players in Annapolis. Go get those guys, man, you know. One is in the Navy. You know he can read the music, man. You know. Oh, no, no, no, no, no. He said, I don't want that. I just want you. Well, I said okay, but, okay, but look anytime you want to make the switch over, I'd be glad to step right out of the picture, you know.

What I'm saying to you, music don't owe me nothing. It doesn't owe me nothing. I worked at it for a long, long time, man. And you know, I got fairly good at it, and I made money out of it. You know. And I spent a lot of money on account of music. And I used to write music. Write out the horn parts and stuff. Used to do all of that, man. Played in the Baltimore public schools, man, doing jazz programs. I did that for ten years, man.

And the music director for the music division, she said, you know, Wells, you have a job as long as you don't play down to my kids. Don't look down on them. And I got a lot of the other people, performers, man, I got their jobs because they were playing down to her kids. You play the same way if the kid was twelve years old or if the kid was twenty-five years old, twenty years old. Just the same way you play for the twenty, you play the same way for that twelve, or for that eleven, or that ten. And she said, I demand that.

That's what I gave my man. And we were doing two schools a day, man, five days a week. One in the morning, one in the afternoon. That was all part of my life, man.

Q: When was that?

Wells: That was right after Martin Luther King got killed. Back in the '60s, when they started giving the schools something, you know, because they were trying to avoid the riots, which happened anyhow, you know.

Q: And what was that time period like as far as like music.

Wells: Well, you know, when the riots broke out, Tony, I was working at the Playboy Club.

Q: So that was downtown, right?

Wells: Yeah. 20 Light Street. I was working the Playboy Club. About seven o'clock that night, the manager came in and he said, look, you all have to leave, go home early. He said because we understand this guy, some guy named Rap Brown, is down on Gay Street right now. That's where they started it.

Q: Who? Who was it?

Wells: Rap Brown. And so this drummer, Tony, which always had drove his car. Well, all day long it was on the radio. I didn't know it then that some action was going to happen in Baltimore. So this drummer decided to leave his car home. So when we had to leave, he said, man, could you do me a favor? I said, what's that man? He said take me home. I said, where your car, man? And I lived in west Baltimore, and he lived in East Baltimore, you know. I said I got to get home also. I said, "Oh c'mon man." So we went, you know, I went a few blocks this way and that way. We wind up on Central Avenue. And there was a tailor shop up there. It was burning. And the further we got up towards North Avenue, man... North Avenue was burning. There was a lot of stores broke in and stuff, you know.

So I let him out, man, and I got to a phone and told my wife I was coming home. And I got home, man, safe. So the next day I decided that I had to see what was burning all this much, you know. I went to Druid Hill Park. All of a sudden I heard something go BAP, you know. So I went on over North Avenue, saw all the smoke coming up in the air and stuff, and you know. When I got home, I said I wondered what was that I ran over something. When I looked down by the bumper in the rear on the right side, that was a bullet hole in my car, man. Somebody actually shot at my car.

So I say, well, I don't think I'm going back out anymore. Playboy Club is still closed. And then they started a showcase of Maryland State Troopers. They was driving up and down all the blocks and all. That everybody know, you know, State Troopers involved, you know. That didn't slow them down. But they brought some people from inside the 2nd Airborne, that just came back from Vietnam—just came back from Korea. And these guys were pretty bad boys. They actually broke the whole thing up.

Of course, Mayor Schaeffer at that time, man, he was smart enough to open up the ball park. Because there was a game that Saturday, you know. And all those people went to the game, black and white. And that was the end of the riots.

But in the meantime, as far as clubs and things that were here, they were all gone.

Q: It was really different after that?

Wells: Burned them down, you know.

Q: And I also heard that, like, white people were welcome to come to the clubs after that.

Wells: No. You know, the white folks and black folks thing always been a mystery to me. The mystery was this: Pennsylvania Avenue. It didn't matter what color you was, you was always welcome on Pennsylvania Avenue. You could walk up and down that street any time, any time, day or night, two, or three o'clock in the morning, man. No problem. The white folks could come to all the clubs up there, Tijuana, Comedy Club, Candy's, Trolley Bar, Avenue Bar, right on up there to Fulton Avenue where the Red Fox was. Any of those clubs, cmon.

But we couldn't go downtown. We couldn't go the movies. We couldn't go to any of those white clubs down on Baltimore Street. Even the May Company, the clothing store, we could go in there and buy anything we want to buy, but the girls couldn't try the hats on, they couldn't try the dresses on. It's always been amazing how it was all one-sided.

Even the black guys, when the black guys married the white girls, they couldn't take his white wife into a white neighborhood. They'd bring them to a black neighborhood. But you're right about that, man. After that riot stuff then, then the white boys wasn't allowed on Pennsylvania Avenue. You know the hate was up.

And now it's different. Because you can go downtown to any restaurant, sit down and eat. Any movie downtown you can go to. I remember when the bar on the corner of Light and Lombard Street - Burke's. A friend of mine, his name, Ted Hawk, white man, he died too. He died of cancer of the stomach out in California a couple of years ago. We'd go down to Burkes together, and there wouldn't be nobody in there, on the break from the Playboy Club because it was right down the street, we sat down, man. This guy named Joe, which turned out to be a good friend of mine, white guy. He said fellows, please, please fellows, please. That's the way he would talk. Oh, fellows please, please, please.

If it'd been up to me, man, we'd fire him up. C'mon fellows. He was so glad when they passed that law that we all could eat in there, you know. But he says, oh Jimmy, Ted, oh cmon. Oh. He almost had tears in his eyes.

So there are good times and bad times. But I tell you pretty much, man, because the white folks and the black folk, we knew where we belonged. A question came up one time—as black folks are we doing better now than we did before? Serious. You know. But I'm living in a predominantly white neighborhood. Now I can go to the Philadelphia Inn over there, man, sit down there and have lunch, dinner. Man, go to the bar, drink if I want. All these clubs around here. Which years ago, you couldn't do.

But, you know, even down to the schools. The schools man if you got the money, you got the know-how, they can't stop you. But are we really doing better, Tony? Are we doing better? You know. You know, are we doing better? Are we doing better, man, than when we had our own black school, and when we had our own neighborhoods? You know, were we doing better in the service, man, where the white guys be over here, and four or five blocks down the way, the black guys would be there, and we over there? Yet, when they go overseas on the firing line, they're all

together. You know, the bullet don't know the difference who's white or who's black. That's another side of me. I don't want to get into that.

Yet, most of the musicians I play with now are white guys, man. Why? Because they want to study the music and they produce. I had a rehearsal here yesterday. Right before you said that. The guy at the piano, some man at the vibes. The black cats, man, is going somewhere else. I don't know where they're going now. I have no idea.

The white guys' families brought up all the Charlie Parker records, Dizzie Gillespie, man, the Miles Davis records and all this stuff now. The kids are serious about the music now. And they claim, man, that jazz is supposed to be for the Black folks. I claim, man, jazz belong to anybody who can play it better. Whether he's black, white, Chinese or whatever. And if you have the ability to play it, it's yours. You know.

Baltimore, we got Charlie Covington here. He's teaching over at Howard University now. He's a fine piano player. He was on the road with George Benson and those guys. You know, he's a fine player. And we've got a guy named Harold Williams, you know. You know, he used to play with, what's the gospel guy? I can't tell you his name. Big time man. Big time. He passed away, and but this guy is like your buddy or your roommate. And we got Dr. Stone here man. You know, he got his doctor degree from Catholic U. You know, he should be teaching at Morgan College, man.

He's a great writer, jazz conductor, man. He need to go right in Morgan State College, go right in there and help those kids. On top of that, he only live a half a block from the school over there. It goes past his house over to catch a train to go to Howard University. I don't understand it. We got people that can do it. We got people down in Columbia, Maryland. You know, great trombone players down there that still teaching. You know. But to get them all together, and make them do something. You know.

You know, they just need to be programmed. Not as a dictator, not on that level. Because you make nobody do anything they don't want to do. But they have to have faith in whoever's on that front line in order to produce.

I have a friend of mine, saying, you know, Jimmy Wells, you talk to those guys, man. They love you. He said, I could say the same thing to those guys, they hate me. I say, it's your personality man. But those guys know. Nobody like to be dogged man, nobody.

So with music also, you can hop on a person and instead of them come forward, you can push them back. And if you come down on them too hard, you say, wait a minute man, you shouldn't play G on a 7 Flat 5 C7. Oh yeah, well, I'll try that. Or you can say, man, what the hell you playing man? And if you're going to do that, and you do it with the voice of authority, they're going to forget it every time, man. I see that happen. I've seen that happen with Charlie Elsen, the piano player we got, classical training, got good chops too, you know. I said something to him one day, man, we was playing "All the Things You Are," a standard, but we played that thing of Kenny Dorham called "Prince Al." Man, I asked him, I said, Charlie, do you know this

song? He said, Jimmy, this is one song I really know. I said, oh, oh, okay. He said I don't have to look at it in the book. I know this song. I said, well, oh, okay, then. I guess you get to play it.

We got down to section B of the song, man, he made a mistake. He said, oh man. I said, let's go back over it one more time. Back the same place, made a mistake. He said, oh man, I don't know what's wrong with me, man. I said, well, why don't you open the book. And he opened up the book, he said, ah yeah, there it is. Ah, he said, I got it. I said, you got it now, Charlie? Jimmy, I got it. You got to know Charlie. If you knew Charlie, man, you'll find out man this is the way he talks, you know. We get right back to the same place, right, and he said, I don't know what's wrong with it. I said, Charlie, don't worry about it. I said, but the guy has always been playing six months. I said, I'll get him to play it. I'll be damned if I've been playing six months. I've been playing twenty-two years. I said, then why the hell don't you act like it then?

So it's, and you know, and they laugh. But I could have went the other direction with him, and not only, man, he would never came back in here anymore. You know. So we had fun over that, you know.

I always try to get the musicians I play with to tell me when they hear something funny coming from the vibraphone. I played something wrong, tell me about it. Don't just let people hear, man, because I might be the leader. Say, wait a minute, hold it Jim. What was that you played there? That's the way you learn. That's the way I learned.

A lot of musicians also in town is afraid to ask a musician anything. You know why? Because they're so afraid of the musician finding out what they don't know. So they suck it all in. Not me man. If I thought you knew something about the music or something I needed to know, I'd say, hey Tony, let me ask a question man. How do you play such and such a thing? And they should be that way. Shouldn't care what a person think about you man. You know, put your pride somewhere else cause you're trying to learn. And you always, here I'm seventy-four years old, I'll be seventy-four years old, still trying to learn how to play man.

For the rest of your life, you'll be learning how to play. Just like you want to be a great writer, hey buddy, you may be writing until you eighty years old. Or maybe you try to learn how to write until you're eighty years old. People will be buying your stuff and be in newspapers and magazines, and all this kind of good stuff, man, and you'll never be satisfied. Because once you become satisfied then you're finished. Amen.

Say Amen.

Q: Amen. Sounds like a good place to stop.

Wells: Huh?

Q: Sounds like a good place to stop the tape. Thank you very much.

Wells: I know you got tired of hearing me talking, didn't you?

Q: No. I didn't get tired.

END OF INTERVIEW