



Interview No. SAS3.18.02

Henry Mays

Interviewer: Alex Quinones

Location: Baltimore, Maryland

Date: March 18, 2002

Edited by: Henry Mays

Q: Your complete name?

Mays: Henry Thomas Mays

Q: Today's date is March 28th of 2002. Now you're a cellist. Tell me a little bit about the cello and why you chose it.

Mays: Well, the cello has been a passion of mine for some time. My mother started me on the cello in grade school, around the 5th grade. But like a typical boy, I really wasn't much interested — preferring baseball or football or all the other things that the boys were doing.

But when I got to junior high, but particularly in high school, I had a couple of experiences that really captured my heart for classical music and the cello. The first exposure was a concert in the schools, which is why I'm really an advocate for music in the schools. I think it's really a valuable thing; it shouldn't be gotten rid of. I know, for financial reasons, the trend is to diminish school music. Even gym or physical education activities in the school have been cut back. I think it's wrong. And in my case, to get back to the point, music in the schools is one of the reasons that I was anchored to the cello. The second reason is a movie I saw in 1946. But first it was music in the schools.

The Cincinnati Symphony (I'm from Middletown, Ohio which is thirty miles from Cincinnati) visited our school. They played the "William Tell Overture." So all we young men were sitting around just waiting for the finale so that we could jump up and down on our seats and pretend we were the Lone Ranger. But there was a surprise for us; that piece opens with a beautiful, sonorous cello choir. The whole cello section plays the opening to that piece, which was totally new to me. I didn't know the whole piece, and it just knocked me out to see those cellos and hear this luscious melody introduce the "William Tell Overture."

Then I saw the cellos, all the cellos in concert—the whole cello section, all nine or ten of them—playing together this beautiful melody. And not only did it reach me (I was already studying the cello), but I remember some of my fellow students who weren't even studying music were very

impressed, which impressed me even more. And we had the old 78 records. One of my friends called me one day: Hey, Henry, look what I got. He had the big old 78 record of the "William Tell Overture." So we had a little cult thing going with William Tell. That's about all we knew. We didn't know that much about the classical repertoire. We got that bite of it, and it was really palatable. So that's one of the ways I started. I was really bitten by it.

But another thing occurred when I was a student in high school. I was in the high school orchestra (music in the schools again) and we were playing this beautiful piece, "Rustle of Spring," I believe it was, and it also had sort of a lyrical spot.

Q: Like an aria?

Mays: Melodic, yes, a beautiful melody line that sort of grabbed me. It was almost like my first acquaintance with the girls. I felt something in my chest, you know. I said, This is love, you know. It was just that same type of feeling, so I knew I had an affinity for classical music—because of that experience.

Thirdly, I mentioned this before, the movies. There was this movie called Deception. It was a 1946 movie; it starred Bette Davis, Paul Henreid, and Claude Rains. It was a love story about a love triangle: Deception. That's how the title comes about. There was a little love triangle there, but the bottom line—the underlying thing to the plot—was the music.

It was about the story of a conductor, a fabulous music leader and conductor in New York, and composer. And he had as his mistress Bette Davis. She was a fine concert pianist. She thought that during the war (in those days everything was sort of related to the war, World War II). She thought her boyfriend (they were from Europe) had been killed in the war. She's going through the concert section of the newspaper and she sees Karel Novak, who was her boyfriend, is playing a cello recital. She freaks out. She went very excited in the movie. She runs down to the concert hall, and they have this great reunion. And she says, I thought you had died in the war. But that's the plot: He's a cellist! That the point! I should have mentioned that first. Her boyfriend was a cellist.

Q: How you were inspired to play the cello?

Mays: Yes. Now the movie Deception, as I said, is one of the three things that really got me hooked as a young man on the cello. This was 1946. I was about sixteen years old and pretty impressionable and a lot more naïve than sixteen year olds are today.

Maybe I shouldn't say naïve, but it was more of an age of innocence. And it was more of an age of — there was less to experience in those days, so you got more out of what you did experience.

But you were going to ask me.

Q: Well, who taught you to play the cello?

Mays: Well, first of all, about how I got steered into the cello. As I say, this movie was a big influence. Miss Bette Davis, when she discovered her boyfriend was still alive—she thought he'd been killed in the war — he was a cellist, and so they were reunited. The plot of the movie is a love triangle between Claude Rains, who was her boyfriend or her confidant and boyfriend. She met her old boyfriend, who was a cellist. That was the love triangle; the two boyfriends and she.

The plot was the triangle, but the thing that captivated me in the movie —throughout—was the music. And there were these great scenes of her boyfriend, Paul Henreid, the actor Paul Henreid in this movie *Deception*. There were great scenes where he played the cello, and you heard this beautiful music. You heard this concerto that was written for him by Claude Rains. And it was wonderful to experience that.

So I think I saw the movie about a dozen times. And in those days when you paid your money for the movie, you didn't have to leave. We young folks didn't have to leave after the movie. You could stay and see it a second time, or a third time. Which is what I did. So I saw it many, many times.

So that's how I really got to love the cello. And that same Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra who played that rousing "William Tell Overture," which really astonished me and got me going on the cello, my teacher, the first major teacher, was from that orchestra. His name was Victor Rice.

And he took me under his wing, and he thought, I think he thought I was pretty talented. And he got me my first good cello, which was a fine French cello by Amédée Dieudonné of Mirecourt, France, made in 1934, which was a wonderful cello for me at that time—as it was seventeen or eighteen years old.

And also it was very stimulating for me to get in on some of the symphony rehearsals. He would invite me to the symphony orchestra rehearsals. When the great Piatigorsky, Gregor Piatigorsky, would be in town to play a concerto with the orchestra, he would see that I came to the rehearsals to meet Piatigorsky backstage and get to talk with all the musicians. That was very inspiring.

Q: This was in high school?

Mays: This was when I was in high school and college. And, of course, Gregor Piatigorsky was like Yo Yo Ma today. You know, he was one of the top artists.

So that's how I got inspired to play the cello.

Q: I see. And what did you do after you had this great teacher and you had confidence in your playing?

Mays: Well, it was disappointing because I was really in academics, and my mother wanted me to be a schoolteacher. That was a fine vocation.

In those days there weren't too many good jobs for black people. In those days we didn't call ourselves black people, we called ourselves colored people or Negroes.

Q: This is the '50s right?

Mays: This is the '40s and '50s. But anyway, the good jobs, I mean, Negroes who were in the middle class or upper middle class, were lawyers, doctors, college graduates and schoolteachers. Those were the major professions. Professions were limited.

When I came to Baltimore in 1954, there were no black bus drivers. There were no black cab drivers. There might have been one or two small companies black owned, but I don't remember seeing too much of that.

Q: Well, let's talk about that for a second. What brought you to Baltimore?

Mays: Well, what brought me to Baltimore was the Army. So to back up, I'll say that I was in academics at school because my mother wanted me to be a schoolteacher. I wasn't in music; I was in academics. I was a math and English major. I was sort of divided internally. I was really sort of a free spirit — maybe you could say I was a sort of a goof off too, as a youngster.

But I wanted to play music and I didn't keep my grade average up. So we had a deferment depending on your grade average. If you let your grade average go down, even one semester, you were automatically inducted. So I knew that would happen, and I let it happen anyway.

I went in the Army and I was stationed here in Baltimore. I'd never been to Baltimore. I'm from Middletown, Ohio. I think I said that earlier. That's how I came to Baltimore. I'd never been here.

I liked Baltimore. When I was in the service, a young man in the service, I loved it. One of the things that we'll get to eventually in this interview, I suppose, is that this was the hub for entertainment on the East Coast. There was a lot going on in the black community.

The black community in those days was more self-sufficient, more of a real cohesive unit than it is today. It's all fragmented today. Integration had a backlash that wasn't too positive.

Q: Which was?

Mays: There wasn't a great advantage to integration in that we Black people don't have as much of our own, and it's not as strong knit a community because it was forced. Under Jim Crow, which is separatism, you were forced into your own area, your own turf so to speak, and your own community. It was forced on you. So, therefore, you lived as an island to yourself.

And under those conditions you naturally had your own organizations, social organizations, socio-economic organizations—all cohesive. It's all tied together. So you have your own city, you have a lot more of your own businesses. And the highlight that really got me in when I came

here in the Army was the nightclub strip on Pennsylvania Avenue. You had all the big artists coming here.

It wasn't like today. Today, you're afraid to go in a bar because you might get mugged or robbed or shot. It wasn't like that. It was a lot safer in those days. You had really genuine entertainment, because it was an industry, a moneymaking industry. It's not that way today. The music business is suffering in that you don't have the popular audience that you had back in those days.

People went there to the nightclubs seeking entertainment. People dressed up. People put on collar and tie — put on your Sunday best, and had good motivations. They wanted to go out and eat. A lot of these clubs had nice kitchens, nice food, cuisine. You socialized, you saw your friends, and people in the neighborhood community whom you knew, and you had your lady with you of course, and you saw top line entertainment.

You saw Ella Fitzgerald. Have you heard of Ella?

Q: Yes

Mays: People like that. Sarah Vaughn, everybody came here to entertain.

Q: And the Army gave you enough time to check out the shows? You were stationed here right?

Mays: Yeah, I was stationed at Fort Meade, and I came in town on leave, maybe once a week, occasionally on weekends. So that's how I got the exposure to that.

But see, this was not only Baltimore, but all across the country. But then with integration, all that's sort of fragmented and it just went down the tubes.

Then, in the '80s, with the introduction of crack cocaine into black communities, it's been funneling down the tubes ever since. So that's why we have such an awful social climate today. It's terrible, but what are we going to do?

Q: But when you came here, you were really impressed with what you saw?

Mays: It was a great. It was a thriving community with great entertainment. You saw top artists.

And another thing — in those days, to show you how racism and Jim Crow and prejudice sort of worked to the advantage of blacks, colored people, as we were called in those days — you saw people and you met people you normally wouldn't meet. For instance, if Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughan, Nat King Cole, or any of those great artists came here to Baltimore, you'd see them. Not only would you see them, but you would be in social situations with them because they couldn't go to any hotel. So where did they stay? They had to stay in the black community.

They had to stay at Aunt Sue's. Aunt Sue had a rooming house. So everybody knows that he's the one going to be seeing Nat King Cole because he's going to Aunt Sue's and you could go there and check him out.

Q: So it was a network of people where you could stay at, the artists?

Mays: Well, there were some. I think there was one black hotel here in Baltimore. But most of the entertainers knew people in the community who had rooms, or who had rooming houses. They'd go there. Everybody knew about the rooming houses. You could sit up and talk to Nat Cole or any other celebrity just like I'm talking to you. Whereas if it were today, you'd never see them, because they'd be down at the Hyatt .

Q: With bodyguards.

Mays: Right. Exactly. So those were different times. It was a completely different era.

Q: Whom did you get to visit? Do you remember any other visits or just any performer that you?

Mays: I met Nat King Cole that way. He was at Aunt Sue's, so to speak. This was at a college concert at Miami of Ohio, Oxford, Ohio. It was a small town to start with. So we all knew where he was and so we just went over to see him. He was just as gracious as can be because there was just one happy family. But that doesn't exist today, that type of thing.

Q: And so he did a concert and did you go?

Mays: Yes. He was playing at the college, Miami of Ohio.

There's a gentleman I want to refer you to who's done something like this for Peabody. He's a personal friend of mine. He died about a year or so ago. His name was Roy McCoy. He donated his collection of photographs to the Peabody. He was a photographer. He personally documented his whole career, and all those photographs he donated to the Peabody. They're on exhibit there I think.

Q: Well, he's part of the project.

Mays: Oh you know about that already? Yes. I just wanted to tie into him. He tells you about those time. He was more a part of that than I was, because he was an active musician on the [Pennsylvania] Avenue and other places at that time he played for. I think it's all in his documentation. He played for Lionel Hampton for a while and some other big bands.

Q: Did you ever play with Roy?

Mays: Oh yes. Yes. We were personal friends.

Q: Back in?

Mays: Back in those days? No, more recently we were friends—in the last twenty years. And we used to play little things around the community. Nothing big, you know, just little things around the community. He and some other friends, would get together and play for churches and schools

and things like that. But Roy McCoy was a very fine musician. He's the kind that you can really fall back on if you want documentation on those past times.

Q: So you mentioned earlier when we spoke that the '60s, late '60s, you were really busy, musically.

Mays: Yes. I started at the Mechanic Theater, when it first opened. The first show there was *I'm Solomon*, and it was directed I think by Ernest Gold. He was the Hollywood composer who did the music for *Exodus*. But this was his show, and that was the first show that came through Baltimore at the Mechanic.

Q: Well, Mechanic had two openings?

Mays: Oh no. This was the first one, in the late '60s.

Q: Right. It opened in '67. It was supposed to open in '65 or '66, but it opened in '67.

Mays: Yes and the first show was called I'm Solomon. Ernst Gold was the music director. I played there until recent times. Not recent times, but up to the '80s, I'd say. I didn't do much there after the '80s.

Then things changed, and they renovated the Lyric Theater, and a lot of the shows that used to go to the Mechanic played at the Lyric. Well, of course, the Mechanic was always cramped for space. The pit was very small and for the musicians, it was very restrictive.

Q: Well, actually I want to talk about that.

Mays: After it opened again, it was the same pit. All through the '70s, it was the same small pit.

Q: I was going to say so you were at the first show?

Mays: Yes.

Q: Was there a buzz everywhere in town about the Morris Mechanic because it was the first one? Because it was going to be a theater in the city.

Mays: Yes. There were other places in use too. There was — they used to call it the Civic Center. It's called the Baltimore Arena now. The Civic Center has a lot of music. Some of the bigger shows came there like Barry White, Love Unlimited, Isaac Hays. Shows like that came to the Civic Center. It's now called Baltimore Arena.

Then I played Pier Six down on the harbor. That was later. I played there in the early '80s, I guess.

Q: But tell me about that first show. Take yourself back to the day when you knew you were going to be playing that night. How were you preparing knowing that?

Mays: Well, I was excited that I was going to play there. The gentlemen who helped me when I was a young man were both named Victor. There were two and they were both named Victor, which I often think about. It's a coincidence. It's an interesting thing about things like that.

They were both white guys. We complain about racism, and we complain about being downtrodden and all that, but these two gentlemen helped me enormously when I was a little young black boy. And so what can you say? They helped me, and I'm appreciative of that.

The Victor Rice was the man in the Cincinnati Symphony from whom I had my first real lesson, and got this fine cello for me — the French cello — and invited me to the rehearsals at the music center with Gregor Piatigorsky. So that's one Victor.

The other Victor was related to the Mechanic Theater. His name was Victor Kestle. Victor Kestle must have died almost ten years ago. He taught at City College here in Baltimore. He was a fine cellist. And he was the main cellist at Ford's Theater. That was the theater that operated before the Mechanic was built. Ford's Theater was back in the era. I guess, I don't know how far back it went — probably early part of the century. And then the Mechanic opened up in the late '60s.

Q: Yeah, the Ford opened in 1871.

Mays: See. Been there a long time. Lincoln wasn't assassinated at that one though.

Q: No.

Q: Well, how did you get the gig?

Mays: I'm going to tell you. Victor Kestle got the gig for me. He was the main cellist at Ford's before they even built the Mechanic. Ford's [treatment of African-Americans] was an example of one of the aspects of this era I despised. But as I said, there were good things out of the area — namely, the cohesiveness of the black neighborhood. But most of it — I despised what was happening in those days. Namely, that the Ford's was very discriminatory. I mean, blacks had to sit in certain places in the balcony in Ford's.

Believe it or not, I hadn't been in Baltimore too long when Ford's was still flourishing. I came here in '54. I don't even know if I ever went to a show there, but I knew what the conditions were, and there certainly weren't any black musicians in the pit. Certainly there were not.

And so that's why I admire Victor Kestle. This is the way I met him: I've always looked for some place to study the cello. I came here to Peabody in 1958 and started studying cello here. But even before then, I went to Victor Kestke's house. Somehow I found out that he was a cellist here in town, and I called him to take lessons. I was out of school and I had come to Baltimore and had gotten married. So the cello was on the back burner. I was just taking cello on the side. I wanted to keep it up. I found out who was the teacher in town and so I met Victor Kestle. I called him, and I went to his house. He liked me. I liked him. He must have liked me more than I thought he did because I took lessons with him for a couple of years.

When they built this new music hall, I (mean, the Mechanic), he says: Henry you want to be my stand partner? I said sure, I'd love to Mr. Kestle. And he says, all right. So when the Mechanic was ready to start, the contractor (the boss of the theater — Fein Iula — a funny Italian name, Fein Iula) called me. So I went to see Fein. I had my cello in hand, and I was just as nervous as can be because I thought I was going to play an audition.

Fein looked at me and said, oh, Vic sent you here. You're Vic's boy. I said yes. He said: What you got that for? I said, am I not going to play? He said, I don't want to hear a damn note. Vic says you're all right. Just show up here for the rehearsal. Now remember, all the boys have got to be here a half hour early. Remember that, half hour early for rehearsal and half hour early for performance. Bye. So that's how I started at the Mechanic.

Q: That's nice. So it's pretty easy. You had a good reference.

Mays: Yes. He said, As long as I was good enough for Victor and if Victor wanted me — no questions asked.

Q: How long did it you rehearse before the show opened?

Mays: You normally don't have much time. The most I think we ever had was two days. But you might have two rehearsals in one day, and then, after the last rehearsal, you have the opening show. You have to be able to do it on two rehearsals. You're lucky to have three. But you have to be a good sight-reader.

Q: Do you remember what date it was of the show opening?

Mays: I guess '68. That would be my guess. I'm not sure. But I think I still have the program. I saved it as a souvenir. I still have it. I have a lot of old things. How old is that thing now? Over thirty years old.

Q: So on opening night, how many other musicians were in the pit?

Mays: Well, it was a pretty good orchestra. Ernest Gold was a big scale composer. As I said, he wrote the score for *Exodus*. That was a big movie in the '60s. So it was a full orchestra. Well, you couldn't squeeze too many in the Mechanic pit though. I guess we might have had about eight violins at the most — maybe a couple of violas, two cellos, and your reeds and brass, percussion, and harp. We had a lovely harpist. I distinctly remember that.

Q: And what was the make up of the audience that went to see that show?

Mays: Well, you can't tell. In that pit you can't see the audience. Do you mean racially or culturally?

Q: Culturally, racially. What is just the high class that were able to get tickets?

Mays: It was middle and upper classes.

Q: Did they give opportunities for other classes?

Mays: In those days, I don't think they did too much of that. No.

Carol Channing, that's another outstanding actress I remember who came here for a show. She came here for Hello, Dolly.

Q: Right.

Mays: Carol Channing. They stole her fur coat at the Hotel where she was staying. If you search the newspapers around that time, you'll find an article reporting that she was really raising hell about her fur coat.

Q: Did you play in the Hello, Dolly also?

Mays: Oh, yes. I played in a lot of shows there.

Q: Betty Grabel played Hello Dolly right, the lead?

Mays: No. Carol Channing.

Q: She was the actual star?

Mays: Yes.

Q: Let's go back to *I'm Solomon*, how did it go?

Mays: That show went well. It better go well.

Q: How many runs did it have?

Mays: Oh, that show — it could have been longer, but my guess would be one week.

We did *1776* for the anniversary of the nation's 200th anniversary. It was about the Revolutionary War and the people involved in it.

Q: Where was it held?

Mays: That was the Mechanic.

Q: So Mechanic got most of the Broadway and the big production shows at that time.

Mays: Yes.

Q: Did they have an exclusive contract or was it just it was made for those kind of shows?

Mays: It was made for that. There were a lot of big shows there: Hello Dolly, 1776, Kismet. I loved Kismet. That was a great show.

Q: You played in that one?

Mays: I played in most of them .

Q: They closed the Morris because they said that the pit was small?

Mays: Well, actually they didn't close it. It's still going.

Q: They closed it for eighteen months when it first opened. Did you think the pit was small?

Mays: It was small after they renovated. It was still small.

Q: Even then?

Mays: I don't know what they did. I heard a different story. I heard that originally it was bigger. They wanted to get more seats in there, and they put in another row of seats in the orchestra. They cut the pit down to get more seats in. That's what I heard. Which really made it small.

Q: And they also said that their acoustics were not very good.

Mays: I don't know about that.

Q: It was fine when you played.

Mays: Well, we couldn't tell. When you're down in the pit, you can't tell. If you're out in the house you can tell. But anyway, it went on for years. Good or bad acoustics, it went for a while. It's still going.

Q: It's still open, but they stopped to fix the problems.

Mays: They don't have many of the big shows. The bigger shows now, with the more music, go to the Lyric.

Q: The Lyric, which had its own little problems also.

Mays: I played one of the first big shows in the Lyric in the early '80s. I'm trying to think of the name of that one. Can't think of it. It was big, and they had a big orchestra, and it went for three weeks, and they lost their shirt. So that modified the whole affair, as far as shows at the Lyric were concerned.

I don't think they'd gone on a big scale like that before. I can't think of the name of the show. It had an Asian setting. It might have been The King I, on that order — that type of show.

Was it Kismet? I think it was Kismet. Yes. The show that opened up at the Lyric, the big show, was Kismet. They had all these stars down from New York, the big actors, and all the extras. They had a big orchestra — a lot bigger than I ever saw at the Mechanic — because they had the space. It ran for three weeks, which was a nice run, but they lost their shirt.

And that was in the early '80s. They still had musicals, but they didn't want to take on shows of that scope because they don't make money.

Q: Well, tell me about the backstage action before the show. For, let's say, the Morris Mechanic.

Mays: Well, as I said, Fein Iula wanted us there a half hour early. So we got there a half hour early. If you want to keep your job, you do what the boss says. Right? That's a good policy anyway. I've adopted that for all my life, since that experience with Fein.

If you want to be a professional, you don't come to a gig ten minutes before you've got to play, hastily get your instrument out, and not have time to tune up. You don't do jobs that way.

You get there and you get your instrument out, and get it in tune. You play some scales. You warm up. Then you are ready to rehearse. That was a good point.

So you asked me how was it?

Q: So you get there. You got your cello in your hand.

Mays: So that's the scene. Everybody's back there practicing before we'd go on. I used to just play little snatches of exercises that I'd be working on my own — scale passages that I just work on for fun. I would sit over in the corner with my cello and do that. But I couldn't hear myself very well because we were in small quarters backstage, and the brass [players] are loud. The trombones and the trumpets — it seems as though they play as loud as they can. I don't know why that is. But there's no such thing as piano or mezzo forte. It's all double F. It was kind of disturbing — all that noise. You asked me what the scene was? It was noisy.

Q: It was noisy. Everybody wanted to perfect their own part, right?

Mays: Well, I don't know why they have to play so loud. But brass players do warm up, maybe even more than string players. I mean, they're really into that because with the horns, you got to get that thing warmed up or it's not going to respond.

Q: How about the Lyric? Was there any house, any theater that you preferred playing?

Mays: The Lyric was a lot more comfortable because it was bigger.

Q: The pit and the house itself.

Mays: You're speaking of the backstage — there are more places to warm up without too much disturbance. You weren't in close quarters like the Mechanic. The Mechanic backstage was a room not much bigger than this, where the musicians stayed right before the show.

Q: This is about 20 by 15.

Mays: There was an entrance to the stage — like where this door is — and you had to crawl through some kind of a narrow passageway to get into the pit.

Q: And you can't see audience?

Mays: Not too well. Some places you can, but not there. Where could you see the audience better? I think at the Lyric. I could see some of the balcony. You can see the audience at Pier Six because you're on the stage. You're elevated and you can look off the stage and there's the audience.

Same with Merriweather Post Pavilion, in Columbia — the same type of set up.

Q: Which you also played.

Mays: You can see there very well.

Q: How about Center Stage?

Mays: Never played there.

Q: No.

Mays: I played a nice summer music theater that was a lot of fun, and met a lot of people. Painter's Mill is on Reisterstown Road beyond Pikesville. It's a little further out than Pikesville, on Reisterstown Road. That was a nice summer theater. Everybody came there. A lot of singing groups and a lot of soloists. Sammy Davis was there, Liberace, and Gladys Knight and the Pips. Did you ever hear of Gladys Knight and the Pips?

Q: Yes

Mays: Jerry Vail. People like that. Denver, John Denver, was it John Denver? The guitarist. Barry Manilow was at the Merriweather Post Pavilion. Barry Manilow was a very big star.

Q: Yeah, but this is a span of thirty years. Huge span.

Mays: Also the Carpenters. It's tragic what happened to the sister. She had some problems. But I saw her when she was in her hey-day. She was a beautiful young lady. Played the drums and sang with the Carpenters. Are you familiar with them?

Q: They were very, very popular in the '70s.

Mays: Yes, and Jack Benny and Henry Mancini. I used to like Engelbert Humperdinck. He's an English singer and Tom Jones. I played for both of them. Humperdinck was great.

At Merriweather Post Pavilion he found out from the contractor who the musicians were. He just went down the roster and got a fifth of liquor for each of us. Each bottle had a nametag and thank you. The contractor says Humperdinck's got something for you back here. And so we went back to the table, and it was all spread out, all these bottles. He's the only guy I've known to do that. We really thought a lot of that.

Q: Very nice of him. So it wasn't just that you met these people, you played with them.

Mays: Yes

Q: So being star struck, wasn't even an option. It was just a professional relationship.

Mays: Well, I don't know about that. I was a little in awe. I wasn't quite on their level, but I enjoyed it. But we weren't so enamored that we would bother or disturb people. We didn't do that. No. We kept our ground and then we talked when the opportunity presented itself. I'll give you an example of that.

The contractor, the same Fein Iula (he was not only at the Mechanic but he was also at Merriweather Post Pavilion), says, Okay boys (but not detrimentally, you know. He called everybody boy. [Laughter]), don't bother the entertainers. They had a picnic arranged. It was in summertime, of course, at Merriweather Post Pavilion. They had this picnic arranged for the principal soloists and Johnny Mathis was there.

We were getting ready to go over to the mall in Columbia and get our lunch. We had rehearsed and we were on a break. We were going to get something to eat. So Johnny Mathis sees this group of guys (there were about five or six of us) leaving together. He says hey, where are you guys going? And we said we're going to lunch. He says c'mon over her and eat with me. And we said, well, you know, we've got orders that we shouldn't fraternize with the performers. Oh c'mon over here, he said, c'mon over here. If anyone says something, I'll straighten it out.

So we went over. He says, I like to prepare foods. He says, that's a hobby of mine. He says, I like to cook and I like to serve food. He was having a good time. As long as they prepared the food, he served us. So there we are sitting out there with Johnny Mathis serving us lunch.

That was one interesting experience. Now they all weren't like that. But that was one interesting experience we had.

Mathis was having a good time! He had one of these electric go-carts that security uses to ride around the area. You know, it's a big area, Merriweather Post. He got on one of those carts, and he had an ice cream cone in one hand, and was driving around on this little electric cart, just like a schoolboy.

Q: He enjoyed his job. Well, how was it then? You said that music was definitely a much flourishing scene in that time. Was it easy to find a job?

Mays: Well, this is the way it worked. You got on a list. See, once I got started with Fein Iula (he had two theaters as I mentioned), then I got on everybody else's list. There were about five places, five venues. I was on the lists of all five of those contractors.

They had their lists. When they [the contractors] get a job, they [the show organizers] tell them what they want. You know, we want full orchestra, or maybe we want a partial orchestra. We want three cellos or two cellos, or five violins, six violins. So then the contractor goes down his list, and he calls you.

So you don't really solicit or advertise yourself. Once you're established as a theater musician and everybody's got your name on the list, then you're in. When they get calls for musicians, they look on their list and pick you. Of course, it depends on how many they're using. If it's a big orchestra, of course, more people get a call.

Q: Right. So you come here in '54. You're roughly around twenty-four years old, right? And then four years later you enroll in Peabody.

Mays: Yes. Part time as a special student. I was married. I used to come here [Peabody] in my work clothes as a surveyor. I used to work outside. I would come here in my work clothes and rehearse where they have the new organ. It's what we called North Hall. It's got another name [Griswold Hall]. But it's been restored. It's on the second floor, near the beautiful [Ghiberti] gates outside. They're like something from antiquity. That's where, we used to rehearse. That was before the renovations. But they had that those beautiful gates there. They've been there as long as I can remember.

But **Elliott Galkin** (he's deceased now), was a big instructor here and the orchestra conductor. I was in the orchestra under Elliott Galkin back in those days. I'd just come for rehearsal. I would also take chamber music and cello lessons.

I studied with a lot of great cellists here. There were three or four great cellists here that I had lessons with. The one I studied with most of the time was Mr. Mihalay Virizlay. He's still with the symphony. He's the principal cellist of the Baltimore Symphony. I was with him for a long time — seventeen years or more — taking lessons every other week. Just keeping my hand in. Virizlay and I became very good friends. Well, over that length of time you have to. [Laughter] But he was a very nice guy. He'd invite me out to his house. He'd have cello parties. He'd have a lot of his students out. So it was fun.

Q: Was it difficult for you to enroll in Peabody at that time?

Mays: It was a little difficult because that was on the fringe of the prejudice and discrimination that I was telling you about.

Q: So how were you able to do it?

Mays: I got in. I auditioned for **Reginald Stewart** . Reginald Stewart was the director of the Peabody at that time. He was also the conductor of the Baltimore Symphony. By then I think he'd quit the Baltimore Symphony, and he was just here at Peabody.

To show you how times have changed, there weren't too many string players in those days. There weren't too many cellists. Nowadays cellists are everywhere. There are a lot of string players. As a matter of fact, Peabody has two full, I guess ninety piece orchestras. They use a two platoon system because they have a lot of string players.

Q: Well, that's nice in its own way.

Mays: That shows how many more people are playing that used to. Before they had enough hardly for one orchestra. So my point is, that's another reason I got in. They were short on cellos.

Q: Were there other African-Americans playing?

Mays: No.

Q: You were the only one?

Mays: Yes. In that era, though, there were some outstanding African-American seniors here: Junetta Jones and Veronica Tyler. They went on to big careers in New York and Europe. They were here about that same time. And there was also a young pianist who was there around that time, Maurice Murphy. He's still in the city here. He's doing very well. And there was Paul Brent, pianist, who was the first Black to receive a certificate from Peabody. Of course, there were others; I haven't named them all.

Q: Right. How long did you study at the Peabody? You said it was part-time so it was off and on for a couple of years?

Mays: My time there spanned seventeen years because I came for lessons with Virizlay. I didn't play in the orchestra that long, but I took cello lessons for around, off and on for seventeen years.

Q: Did you do any recitals?

Mays: I've done a few recitals, but not here at the Peabody. I've done a few recitals in the community, in churches and places in Baltimore City.

Q: So you started playing professionally in the '60s, but you enrolled in the '50s. So how was it from coming from the Army and seeing all the shows on Pennsylvania Avenue that you decided that you wanted to cross the line and join the stage?

Mays: It was just accidental. Because, as I said — you know my lucky Victors. It was Victor Kestle (he was the principal cellist at Ford's), and it just sort of happened accidentally. He just asked me one day if I might want to join him when they moved to the Mechanic. So I said yes, and that was it.

I also played with a black concert organization that used to play up and down Pennsylvania Avenue. What was the name of that group? Burman and Burman. There was a fellow named Joe Burman, who loved music and he got these musicians together, in the black community. We're all in the black thing again — I'm going back to what Pennsylvania Avenue used to be when it was all, you know, one coherent thing. So he [Burman] was a part of that. So that's how I became involved originally — even before downtown.

That's right. That's the missing link. I'm glad you brought that up.

So I was performing with Burman and Burman. They presented concerts with singers, dancers and everything. You know, it was interesting and it was a lot of fun. In those days, for us to perform in concerts or around in the Pennsylvania Avenue venues, we had to join the union.

Now getting back to this discrimination thing. There was a black union and a white union. So I joined the union back before it was integrated. There was a bar down in Pennsylvania Avenue that was our headquarters. We had our meetings there. We didn't go downtown where they had the main [white] union hall. We'd meet in our neighborhood, in our community, in the bar. And we had this shop steward — he was a bass player. I can't think of his name now.

But he was the liaison between us and the people downtown. We'd have a good time and socialize and talk about whatever union business we had to talk about. He'd collect the dues, and he'd take the dues downtown, to the white man downtown. That's the way it was back in '60, mid '60s.

Q: The unions combined later on?

Mays: Later on they combined but that's the way it was when I got in the union. So I was already in the union then when Victor asked me if I wanted to come down to the Mechanic. I'd been in the union just a few years. Because just before that I had been playing with Burman and Burman.

Q: And they [the union] met in bars around the city?

Mays: No. One bar.

Q: One bar?

Mays: That was our headquarters. No. That was our office. You know, but everything in the black community either revolved around the restaurants or a church or a bar. And bars in those days weren't a bad thing. Bars were a lot nicer then than they are now, as far as what went on in the bar and the caliber of the people who went in there. Because everybody went in the bar: middle class, upper middle class — you didn't have as many of the lower class as you do now.

Q: Do you know the name of the bar?

Mays: I've often tried to remember. I can't remember what the name of it was now. I know it was down off Pennsylvania Avenue.

Q: And so another big part of your music life is chamber music.

Mays: Yes.

Q: Tell me a little bit about that.

Mays: Well, the quartets I play with started fairly recently. The Umoja has been together four years. We were together a year or so before that with another member. We changed violas. So if you add it all together, we've been together around five or six years.

Now the Amistad, the other quartet I play with, has been together not quite a year. We've given one concert already. But we've only been together about a year.

Oh, I was playing chamber music before then, but just for fun. You know, you get together with friends. Oh yes, wait a minute, in the '60s I played with a trio. We called ourselves the Romero Trio, a piano trio. That goes back even earlier, to '62 or '63.

Q: So these musicians pretty much knew each other, right?

Mays: Yes.

Q: And so whenever someone said, hey, let's start a band.

Mays: Well, there were others. There were standing groups. One other group I didn't mention goes back around the time of Burman and Burman in the mid '60s. They'd been around a long time before I came to Baltimore. It was called Rivers Chambers.

Have you heard of them? I think my friend, Roy McCoy probably mentioned them. Rivers Chambers Orchestra was one of the big society orchestras. It was all black and they played for everybody, for the governor, etc. There have been articles in some of the papers. I think I have some articles at home.

I also have some articles about one of the major nightclubs on Pennsylvania Avenue called the Sphinx Club.

Q: Well, tell me about one of these clubs.

Mays: Well, I started to tell you about Rivers Chambers, the society orchestra. They played everywhere and I played a few jobs with them. Their white counterpart was Meyer Davis. That was a great society orchestra that was white.

But Rivers Chambers did equally celebrated gigs. Meyer Davis did gigs for people like the Dupont's or the Fords in their big mansions. The ballroom in their home has a big balcony, and the band would be in the balcony. That was Meyer Davis and Rivers Chambers. They did those kinds of jobs.

When I came her around '55 through the '60s, I played a few job with Rivers Chambers. He passed in the '60s and his wife continued the business. It was so well established, you know, and they kept getting calls. So she continued long after his death.

Q: You were saying that the bars in that time were different.

Mays: There was more work for musicians. There was more live music then. Live music has, pardon the pun, gone in the can. Really, there's no spot for live music. They're trying to keep it alive, but it's difficult. With electronics it's getting more and more difficult. Then you have these synthesizers and there's not as much work for musicians as there used to be.

But back in those days, even if you didn't see a big nationally famous artist, you could see good local artists at some of the clubs.

Q: When do you think it was that?

Mays: I'll give you an example. I remember when I first came back to Baltimore in '55 or '54 (I was here in the Army earlier, around '52 or '53,\), on my first date with my future wife, we went to the Phil's, located at Mount and Mosher Streets. I think it might still be there. It was great. Now see, I'm courting. This is my lady. I'm not going to take her to any dump. So I took her to Phil's and we had dinner. They had a magnificent kitchen (they were known for their kitchen). And not only that, as we dined, there was a piano trio and a darn good one, made up of local musicians.

One was named Donald Bailey, the bassist. He might be in some of Roy McCoy's material. He was a very fine bassist. He was about my age. He passed about three or four years ago. I always admired him. He was a great bassist. He was playing the piano trio. So as we dined, we had this beautiful piano trio in a nice atmosphere. That's the way the bars were. But I wouldn't necessarily call it a bar. I'd call it a club.

But that's the way they were in those days. Now see, that wasn't the only one. There were a lot of them.

Q: So there wasn't any problem of segregation in Pennsylvania Ave.

Mays: Right — we were all black there.

END OF INTERVIEW