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An Interview with Ernie Hensley

An Oral History Conducted by Lisa Gioia - Acres

January 25, 2008 Interview

All That Jazz Oral History Project

Oral History Research Center at UNLV
University Libraries
University of Nevada Las Vegas

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The transcript received minimal editing that includes the elimination of fragments, false starts, and repetitions in order to enhance the reader's understanding of the material. All measures have been taken to preserve the style and language of the narrator. In several cases photographic sources accompany the individual interviews.

The following interview is part of a series of interviews conducted under the auspices of the *All That Jazz* Oral History Project.

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University Nevada Las Vegas

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Preface

Ernie Hensley, an accomplished African American musician, was born in Washington D.C. on March 14th 1940, the son of Ernest W. Hensley Jr. and Gladys Barbara Hensley. Both of his parents worked for the federal government in the nation's capital. Ernest W. Hensley Jr., was an employee at the Department of Defense and Gladys Barbara Hensley mother, who was an excellent pianist and drum major, ultimately set her musical career aside to provide for her family and worked for the National Labor Relations board.

At the age of seven, after finding a saxophone in his grandmother's attic, Ernie embarked on his musical journey. He took lessons at the Modern School of Music in Washington D.C. Eventually acquired proficiency with the clarinet and the flute through long hours of practice. Ernie attended a historically black school, Armstrong High School in D.C., until he was transferred to integrated McKinley High School in 1954 following the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling. Ernie recalls his experience in a new desegregated environment.

After High School in 1957, Ernie joined the Air Force as a member of the 511th Air Force Band. In 1959 he resettled in France to play saxophone for the Air Force Band. Ernie ultimately made a career in the Air Force. He had countless experiences of performing around Europe and in Washington D.C. at places like Constitution Hall. A dream came true when Ernie was honored to become a member of the "Airmen of Note," the premier jazz ensemble for the United States Air Force. He retired from the Air Force in 1979.

Because of his distinguished career in the United States Air Force, Ernie had a number of opportunities once he retired from the military. He moved to Las Vegas in 1979 at age 39 and after living in area for just a few weeks, Ernie started working with Johnny Haig 3 nights a week. Shortly thereafter, Ernie found a long-term home working with Jimmy Mulidore's group at the Hilton for nearly a decade until 1995.

Throughout Ernie's lifetime he has been fortunate to work with notable musicians such as Andy Williams, Sammy Davis Jr., Somers, Juliet Prowse, Steve an Eydie and his good friend Sarah Vaughn. Ernie, along with his wife Carolyn, a retired UNLV faculty member, still resides in Las Vegas.

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All That Jazz Oral History Project



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This is Lisa Gioia-Acres. Today is January 25th, 2008. I'm here with Ernie Hensley for the "All That Jazz" oral history project conducting an oral history interview on Ernie.

Hi, Ernie. How are you today?

I'm pretty good. How are you doing?

Very good. Thank you so much.

Ernie, would you spell your last name for me?

H-e-n-s-l-e-y. My first name is Ernest, E-r-n-e-s-t.

Perfect. Well, we're going to talk about your experience here in Las Vegas as a musician. But prior to doing that, would you give me a small biography of your early life? Talk about mom and dad, where you came from, brothers and sisters.

I was born in Washington, D.C., on March 14th, 1940. My mother and father were native Washingtonians. They were government workers. I attended Armstrong High School, which during that time Washington was still segregated. So we had segregated schools.

And what was the name of the high school?

Armstrong High School. It was a historically black high school. Then in 1955 -- '55? -- that's when Brown v. Education struck down Jim Crow and segregation.

Talk a little bit about your elementary school experience in Washington, D.C. And what are mom and dad's names, by the way?

My father's name is Ernest W. Hensley, Junior. And my mother's name is Gladys Barbara Hensley. Her maiden name was Harley, H-a-r-l-e-y.

Are you an only child or did you have --

No. I have a sister, Barbara Hogan. She currently lives in Sparks, Nevada. Actually, she moved from Washington to L.A. then to -- what's the name of that -- Redding, California, then Sparks. She and her husband are retired in Sparks.

But I went to elementary school, John F. Cook Elementary School.

What was life like in Washington, D.C., as a young black child?

Well, you know, I had no recognition that I was a young black child. I was just a young child in my family. And my family never talked about the segregation or the situation in Washington. It was a thing that they dealt with and tried to -- I don't think -- they didn't consciously shelter me from it. But I wasn't

really cognizant of it until I transferred high schools. Then I realized what was going on, you know, because I was perfectly fine at Armstrong High School. They had a band, a big band, marching band. My mother used to go to Armstrong High School, as my father did. And my mother was the drum major of Armstrong High School.

So you come from a musical family.

Yeah. Well, she was a great pianist, excellent pianist.

Did she work professionally?

No. Because during that time -- she was a black woman -- families frowned on women going on the road and doing that kind of stuff. She did have a shot to be a pianist with the old group called the Ink Spots. But her mother wouldn't let her go on the road. She was 18 then when she got that chance. But grandma wouldn't let her.

Was her family musical?

My uncle played saxophone. And that's where I started playing saxophone. My grandmother was cleaning out the attic one day when I was a little kid. I was about seven years old I guess. And she pulled out -- some of the stuff from the attic was this old instrument, saxophone. So I picked it up and started fooling with it.

And I knew both my grandparents on both sides of my family. So my grandparents on my father's side took the horn and got it repaired, completely redone, and started me with saxophone lessons in Washington out of a place called the Modern School of Music, which again was -- director was Arthur E. Smith, who would you say was a schoolmate of my mother's. And he was in the Armstrong High School band, also. So Arthur got me started with the saxophone. I studied saxophone there for quite a few years. And then he advised me to take up the clarinet because if I wanted to work I would have to double, you know. So I took up the clarinet. And then from there to the flute, you know.

But my high school days at Armstrong, they were good. It was a good time. But when segregation was struck down, I transferred to a school called McKinley High School. And McKinley was like another world. I just couldn't believe the difference because I was perfectly satisfied at Armstrong. You know, you walk out the door and you were on the street. At McKinley you walk out the door and you're on the campus, you know. They had a separate sports facility complex. They had their own football field, a racetrack, a swimming pool, Olympic-size swimming pool and parking lots in the back

for students with their cars. I didn't know students had cars then.

So the first year -- let's see. It was '54 that Brown v. Education was passed. I spent '54 at Armstrong High School. Then in '55 I went up to McKinley. But in '54 McKinley was a hotbed of white resistance. I remember it well. The white students were lined up on one side of the street. And the fashion then was white T-shirts with a pack of Lucky Strike cigarettes rolled up in the sleeves with the duckbill haircuts and the penny loafers and jeans. Yeah. And there were on one side. And, you know, the truth is that they were -- they had weapons. They were ready to really do some serious violence there. But things cooled out after the first week. But it was like, well, we have to do this, so we'll do it.

But I had no white friends at that school. When I graduated there was no prom because the teachers didn't want black and white students mixing on a social basis like that. So we didn't have a prom.

But the interesting thing is that an old friend of mine, Joyce Ricks, we grew up together as little kids. We graduated from McKinley at the same time. And because of the history associated with McKinley in the civil rights vain, Joyce became the -- well, president of the McKinley High School reunion committee for the students of 1957.

Now, is Joyce a black woman?

Yeah, Joyce is black, of course. And this committee was made up of all former black students at McKinley. And they've had a reunion every two years since then. I've never attended one. But I talk to her and she calls me often. And she comes here and we sit and talk. And I asked her, I said, you know, during these reunions did any white students show up? And she said, you know, it was the strangest thing. She said the first four or five -- first eight years none showed up. Then they started showing up, former white students. And then all of a sudden they had a lot of white students showing up. And then former teachers started showing up.

And the principal of McKinley High School, Dr. Bish, I'll never forget him. He was between a rock and a hard place. He did not want McKinley integrated. I mean that was -- it was very obvious. But Joyce said he even showed up at one of the reunions just before he passed away. And they honored him, you know, as the principal at McKinley, and honored all the teachers.

It wasn't a bad time for black students at McKinley. It was a good time because the facilities were so much better. We had so many more tools to work with.

How about the education that you got at McKinley?

Well, the education was fine.

But was it superior or was it equal to what you might have gotten at --

I would think it was superior, yeah. Because at Armstrong I was making As and Bs. When I went to McKinley, I was making Bs and Cs. And the assistant principal was a black man. His name is Dr. Jewel. And I interviewed with him when I transferred there in '57. He told me pointblank, he said, Ernie, you're coming from Armstrong High School. He said you're an A student at Armstrong, which means you will probably be a C student here. That's how different the academic program was, you know.

Did you feel challenged when you went to McKinley?

Oh, yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

But I don't know. I was never -- I told Joyce I don't go to reunions because I never thought that I was that involved in the school. I was just there. I did my work. The thing that I enjoyed most was the band. And as soon as I graduated I got out of town in a big hurry. I mean I could not wait to get out of Washington, D.C. And maybe that's a sign that maybe things weren't as great as I thought they were -- would like to think that they were, you know.

But after high school the one thing they wanted to do -- when I was at McKinley is when I first realized what I wanted to do. And that's when the Air Force Band did a concert at McKinley High School. And this is the Air Force Band from Bolling Air Force Base in Washington, D.C., the Air Force Band. Every branch of the military has its special band in Washington. And the Air Force Band, you know, represents the Air Force, of course, like the Thunderbirds represent the Air Force. I saw that band and I said that's what I want to do.

So as soon as I graduated, I went down and took an audition at Bolling Air Force Base. And at that time I didn't know that there were only two black musicians in the entire Air Force band career field worldwide when I went in. I had no idea. All I knew is I wanted to be in that Air Force band and that was that. You know, I didn't think about color or ethnicity or anything. It's just what I wanted to do.

What happened when you auditioned?

Well, I passed the audition. And it was funny because I was never a scale person, you know. I struggled with scales and stuff. And I played mainly by ear. I could read but not sit down and just tell you what a D-flat or a C-sharp scale was or a C-sharp minor scale. I couldn't do that. But I could play it.

But anyway, I passed the audition, which surprised me. And I got started. Went to basic training

in San Antonio, Texas. Finished that. And then was stationed with the 511th Air Force Band in Edwards Air Force Band, California. And there Mr. Umland was the warrant officer in charge of the band. It was a small band. So maybe 15 of us there. But I was the only black musician there. But all the musicians, they were very good musicians and we got along fine. I learned a lot in the Air Force.

Did you have to join the Air Force?

Yeah. I was actually in the Air Force.

So did you go through boot camp and --

Yeah. Basic training they call it in San Antonio, Texas. And, plus, there's a little story there, too, because they have what they call a band flight in basic training for musicians, guys who are going into the Air Force band career field. So they have a band flight, which is basic training. But you continue to play your instruments in a musical setting, bands and that kind of thing. Well, I found out about it, but they wouldn't let me in there. So I spent 15 weeks in San Antonio. And the only time I touched my instrument is when I had a chance to go to the Airmen's Club and check out an instrument there and play. They call them TIs, the drill instructor -- wouldn't let me transfer over there.

What year did you enter the Air Force?

1957. So I spent 15 weeks without being involved in music.

And what was the reason for that?

Well, the drill instructors then, they were supreme. I mean, you know, you were at their mercy. And my opinion is -- here I am a black man, black boy, young man rather. I was only 17 years old and fairly intelligent and I had these skills. And the drill instructor was from Texas, born and raised in Texas, with the Texas drawl and the Texas look and the Texas attitude. And he just told me flat out, he said, boy, you're not going over there. He said you're going to stay right here and I'm going to work your so-and-so off. So he tried to get me to shine his shoes and all that crap. But I refused to do that. I told him, you know, you can take your shoes and shove them.

So you had an attitude. You had confidence back then to stand up for yourself.

Yeah. I learned that from my grandfather and my grandmother. My grandmother is the one on my father's side that really told me that -- excuse me.

It's okay.

Instilled in me the confidence to go on.

So I spent two years in California, '57 to '59. And I was halfway through my enlistment. I only had two years to go. So an assignment came up in Germany -- well, in France really. There was a vacancy in France for a saxophone player. And I was due up, but I only had two years to go. But it was a three-year assignment. So they asked me if I wanted to extend to go to Europe. So I said sure. So I extended. Went to Europe. Spent I think it was about seven months in a place called Evreux-Fauville Air Force Base in France just north of Paris. And there again -- throughout my career I was the only black person in the band. There were not that many black musicians in the Air Force career field.

Well, can I ask you a question, then, Ernie? What was that experience like for you? Can you describe what that was like to be one of the only or the only black person in that whole environment?

Well, you know, I think when I look back with the attitude that I had then it was not that I was black. I was just another guy, another musician.

Right. But society wasn't allowing --

Society wouldn't allow it. Right. Now, that didn't really hit my consciousness until the civil rights movement began. And that's when everything came together, you know. This is why this happened and this is why that happened, you know. And this is why such-and-such said so-and-so. Blah, blah, blah.

So during those early years in the Air Force, you know, I was just going along with the program. A couple of times I thought I should have been promoted and I wasn't. Another guy got promoted over me because his wife and he had a kid. It's not because he deserved it. I was there before him, but I didn't get the promotion. He came after me and got promoted.

We spent about eight months in France. And then the 17th Air Force decided to move our band from France and combine it with a band from Libya, Tripoli. We had an air force base in truly then. I forget the name of that base. But it was a strategic air command base. They moved those two bands, put them together, and formed the 17th Air Force Band. And we were at Ramstein Air Force Base in Germany.

That's when I met other black musicians. Found out that there were other black musicians in the Air Force. There were four of them came from Tripoli. And all of them were excellent, excellent musicians. Leo Johnson. Thompson. I forget Thompson's first name. Oh, my god. I can see his face. What is his name, saxophone player? Oh, man.

And they were Americans from Tripoli?

Yeah. Leo Johnson, William Thompson, Richard Clark and -- there was a drummer, but I can't remember his name right now. But all these guys were excellent musicians. I mean like Richard Clark played tenor saxophone, clarinet and bass. Excellent bass player. Leo Johnson is currently professionally still working as a jazz musician, freelance jazz musician. I hear him on the radio every once in a while. But he plays saxophone, flute and bass. And these guys played the instrument like it was their main instrument. I mean they were not shucking a job and they played, you know. So I learned a lot from them because I really had no knowledge of Charlie Parker or Dizzy Gillespie or any of these folks when that happened. That was in 1959.

So we had a bond there. But Leo Johnson and Richard Clark, they were the type of guys that would go out and hunt up environments to play. And in Europe they were just everywhere. They had what they call -- in Germany what they call jazz kellars doing the old Bohemian, before the flower days, you know. But these jazz kellars were everywhere. Just about every town had a jazz kellar. Excellent jazz musicians.

So one day Leo says, look, Ernie, he says, tonight we're going to go down to Johnny's Kellar. It was called Johnny's Kellar in Kaiserslautern. And he was an ex-patriot that stayed over there to open this place. And we're going to play down at Johnny's Kellar. And he said and you're going to come with us. I said nah; I don't think so. So pardon my expletives here. But Leo said, look, you MF, after duty you're going to get dressed. He said we're going to leave here at eight o'clock this evening. He said you're going to have your horn and we're going to go down there and play. He said and if you don't, I'm going to kick your ass. That's exactly what he said.

Now, just so that I can clarify it, what are the names of the places that you went to?

It's a place called Johnny's Kellar.

Kellar, K-e-l --

Yeah. K-e-l-l-a-r.

And why were they called that?

It's a cellar. They were downstairs.

Oh, I get it. Okay.

German for cellar.

Got it. Thank you. I just wanted to clarify.

And they were always down like -- I mean they weren't fancy places. You just go in and there was a bar there and chairs and tables, you know.

And you went.

And I went. And after that you couldn't keep me away from it. I mean weekends we were gone. If we weren't on tour or anything, we had weekends off, Friday we were gone. We would start in Kaiserslautern. Play there. Then we'd go up to Munich, Heidelberg, Saarbrücken. Do them all. Like Monday mornings at six o'clock we're beaten it down the Autobahn to make it back for rehearsal, which started at nine o'clock. And many times we'd just get back just in time to shower, shave, get in uniform and get to rehearsal.

And one time Milton Groves -- Milton Groves was a black musician, but he was a jet mechanic and a self-taught bass player. He listened exclusively to Ray Brown on recordings and taught himself bass and was a really, really good player. But one time we were beating it down the Autobahn. And he had an MG with his bass in the MG. He tied it down in the MG. And he was pulled over on the side. And we saw him over there. So we pulled over. And he was asleep. I said, Groves, come on man, wake up. And he was so tired that he had to pull over and go to sleep. So we woke him up.

Did somebody drive for him?

No. But we got back. You know, it was fun. It was really fun.

Well, you were young then and you could do it.

Yeah. Young, fun and stupid.

Did you find in Germany prejudice?

No.

Say you were trying to do cellar work out here --

No.

Yeah. It was different there.

No. There was a whole different world, Europe then. This was 1959. And I traveled extensively all over Europe with the 17th Air Force Band. I mean we went everywhere. And everywhere we went we were just greeted with open arms. Whenever you played anywhere people gave you the utmost respect. I mean they loved musicians and artists over there in Europe at that time. I don't know what Europe's like now.

But then it was heaven, really. It really was. I mean people were just incredibly gracious and they just took you in. And there was never anything that you were this or you were that. You were a musician and we were friends.

One of my friends over there, Tetteff -- awe, Tetteff. Man, I'm getting old. I can't remember. What is Tetteff's last name?

Is he a German man?

You know, I lost contact with Tetteff. But I met Tetteff at the jazz cellar in Saarbrücken, which wasn't too far from Ramstein Air Force Base. But I met Tetteff there and we became friends. His father was a doctor. And Tetteff, you know, they were fairly well-off. But Tetteff had his own apartment in this big house. So I would go to Sarrbrücken and just stay up there for the weekend and play. We'd hang out and stuff. But Tetteff was a student at the university there. He spoke five languages fluently, incredibly intelligent guy. But we had so much fun together. I lost my train of thought here.

Well, how long were you in Germany?

I was in Germany for three and a half years. And I think another turnaround in my career was we got a new warrant officer. His name was Nick Azzolino. And Nick Azzolino -- last time I heard he was in Texas. But Nick was a saxophonist and an excellent musician. But we had a large band. And I was in -- well, we called them dance bands then, big band. And we had a concert band and that kind of stuff. But I was in the big band. And that was really the biggest focus of our trips because people wanted to hear jazz. But the one thing I noticed about Nick Aslino, he played -- we had six saxophones. And I was playing tenor. He would be next to me standing and playing, you know, six saxophone parts. But the one thing I noticed about him, he never made a mistake. It dawned on me. I said, you know, this guy never makes a mistake. And I mean literally. So we had devised a thing called the "goofball." It was a ping-pong ball. And whoever made a clam, they'd get the ball. So my --

Is a clam a mistake?

Mistake, yeah. So this ball, we'd pass it all around. And I said look, I'm not getting this ball. It ain't coming on my chair. So that's how I really buckled down and learned to concentrate and sight read. I think those were my biggest strengths that I could double and sight read.

From there Nick Azzolino -- I asked him if I could -- you know, my tour was coming to an end. And I asked him if he would recommend me to the Bandsman School. Now, the Bandsman School was in

Washington, D.C.

The Bandsman School?

It's the Air Force school of music. And it was a program where they prepared musicians to become bandleaders in the Air Force career field. It was basically a warrant officers' school.

So he got me assigned there and I went to Washington. And there I met a man named Al Bader. Al Bader's retired now. He's been retired for years. But Al Bader was a woodwind teacher there and played saxophone, flute, clarinet, piccolo, all the woodwinds, phenomenal, phenomenal musician. And I learned a lot from him.

Well, I got through the course and I graduated in the top five percent of the class. Well, those five percent, however many there were, I guess maybe two or three of us -- we originally were supposed to go on the list to become warrant officers when vacancies occurred, you know, as attrition you would step into those positions. Well, Department of Defense decided to disband the warrant officers' program in the Air Force. So they did away with all the warrant officers in the Air Force. So I'm sitting there thinking why? My timing is just not right.

And in place of warrant officers they came up with what they call senior grades -- senior master sergeant and chief master sergeant. Well, that's still going on in all the military services. But the Air Force was the only one that did away with the warrant officers and replaced warrant officers with these senior NCOs. All the other services kept their warrant officers and developed the senior NCOs, also.

But anyway, because I graduated in the top five percent of the class, I was promoted to staff sergeant. And I wanted to stay there in Washington. So they kept me there in Washington. And from there, from the school of music, I went to what they call the Ceremonial Band. And they basically did official ceremonies in Washington at the White House and the Capitol. And we did funerals at Arlington Cemetery and that kind of thing.

Well, I was biding my time waiting for an opening in the Airmen of Note, which was the Air Force jazz ensemble, a premier group. It's still going on today. And a friend of mine who helped me out here, Don Grossi, was in that band. And Don told me that he heard me playing, you know, just practicing and wanting to roam somewhere. And a tenor saxophone vacancy was coming up on The Note. So he got the bandleader -- his name was Bob Bunten, then -- to arrange an audition for me.

So I get this call for an audition with the Airmen of Note. And this is what I always wanted to do,

okay. I had just gotten married. In fact, my son had just been born. And I get this call for this audition. So I said, oh, my god, you know. So I told Carolyn, well, I got this -- I told her about everything. And I took the audition and passed. But the thing was this band traveled a lot. And my wife was not happy, not happy at all. Yeah. But anyway, it worked out fine.

So you took the job?

I took the job, yeah.

And where did you travel?

Oh, we traveled everywhere. We did three -- well, at that time it was four three-week tours a year for Air Force community relations and recruiting objectives. And, basically, like I said the Air Force Band was another community relations' arm of the Air Force like the Thunderbirds are. We had our own promotion system. We did not compete with other Air Force musicians. The Department of Defense -- we were a complete, separate entity from the other Air Force career field.

So it was a special, special place to be. And I enjoyed it. I learned a lot. I learned a lot there. I made it through. Became director of the Airmen of Note for three years. And then I retired and came back here.

What I find interesting is of all the musicians I've spoken to for this project, you're the first one that started his career in the military. And I think that's kind of interesting. Do you think that you progressed as a musician as a black man better because you had a military background, or do you think if you hadn't been in the military you still would have had a career that you have experience?

Well, I think if I hadn't been in the military, I would've had a career.

In the music industry?

Yeah, in the music industry. But I don't think I would have been as settled as I was because of the military. Because when I was single, I mean, I experienced everything that I could experience and did everything that I could do, you know. And if I had not been grounded in my marriage and stuff, I don't know what would have happened to me.

And how did you meet Carol?

I met Carolyn through a friend of mine, Frank Braxton. We were schoolmates. Frank was in the McKinley High School band, played trombone. And he and I became good friends. But I didn't meet Carolyn until many years later. Carolyn was Frank's cousin. And through Frank I met Carolyn. But I

was married before. And it was a catastrophe. It only lasted maybe nine months. And Frank was telling me, he said, I don't know why you did that.

Anyway, we were still hanging out. Frank was single and I was single. So we'd go bowling and stuff like that, you know. And we had a good time together. And then Carolyn, his cousin, showed up. Came there to live with his mother and father where Carolyn was his father's brother's daughter.

So I didn't know anything about Carolyn. I just decided to go over and see Frank one day. So I went over. And this very attractive, very pretty lady, young girl opened the door. And I told her -- I looked at her. I said is Frank home? And she said yes. I said, well, I'm Ernie. I came to see Frank. So I came in the door. And she said I kind of barged my way into the house because basically Frank's house was my house, you know. You know, one thing led to another and we decided to get married.

And how many children do you have?

We have two.

Any of them go into the music field?

No. My son studied -- well, actually, my son and daughter both. My daughter was a fairly good piano player as a youngster. And my son took up an interest in the guitar. But I'm going to be honest with you. I told my son, I said, you know, Darryl, unless you are a phenomenal player, this is not worth it. It's really not worth it. Thankfully, he listened to me. In fact, he studied with Hap Smith here for a few years.

And then he went in another direction. My son went in the Navy. And he got a couple of breaks in the Navy. A Commodore took interest in Darryl and recommended him for a program called BOOST, Broadened Opportunity for Officer Selection and Training -- that's what it was -- where they take enlisted people and put them in this program in San Diego and give them two years of just math and science every day, eight hours a day. And if they graduated from that program, they would receive a full scholarship at a university. But they had to give six years back to the Navy once they graduated.

But Darryl made it through the program. Went to the University of Washington and graduated from there. And went back to the Navy as an officer. And now he's getting ready to retire. In fact, he's retiring next month as a lieutenant commander.

Wow. So what year did you retire from the Air Force?

1979.

And from our earlier conversation, that's when you came to Vegas?

Yeah.

What took place there? So you were in Washington, D.C., up until 1979?

Yeah.

Wasn't it interesting early on you said you couldn't wait to get out of Washington, D.C.?

Yeah. And then I wind up back there. Right. Yeah.

Did you enjoy your experience when you went back?

Yeah. It was a whole different environment. My whole life was taking another turn, you know, because the opportunities were there in Washington for me in that venue, you know. And that's what I wanted to do. I had never thought about getting out of the military, out of the Air Force Band, because that really didn't -- well, I wasn't really interested in doing anything other than that until I began to come up on retirement.

But then by that time, I had made a lot of contacts with people. I mean when I was with the Airmen of Note, we worked with everybody in the business -- Joe Williams, Clark Terry, John Lewis, Pat Williams -- oh, god, here I go again -- Oliver Nelson. All kinds of people.

So you played backup for them or you played in their orchestra?

Well, they came in as guests on our recording sessions. We used to have a program called "Serenade In Blue," which was on radio all over the country. And it was an Air Force program promoting the Air Force. But "Serenade In Blue," we provided the music. All of this recruiting thing was centered around this music program. And we would have all guest artists from -- you know, everybody that came to record with us. We became real good friends with Sarah Vaughan through that program and Joe Williams.

You know, you get to meet a lot of people and make a lot of contacts. And then guys retired from the Airmen of Note and came out to L.A. Like Sammy Nestico was in L.A. Kim Richmond. Don Grossi went to L.A. John Ozeki. A bunch of ex-Airmen of Noters started their careers in L.A. And then, you know, they branched out. A lot of them came here to Vegas because there was a lot of opportunity to play here. You made good money here during those years, real good money.

So 1979, you're retiring from the Air Force. What's your future? And how old were you in '79?

I was 39 then.

That's a good age to retire. But then what did you decide to do?

I decided to come out here.

You knew people?

Yeah. Like I said there were three -- well, three guys were out here that were good friends of mine -- Vince Sommer -- I mean all the guys you interviewed know Vince. Vince has passed away, though. But Vince and I became friends on Airmen of Note. In fact, we bought our first house from Vince' wife, Jane. She was our real estate agent. But anyway, Vince Sommer, Dave Napier, and Don Grossi.

But those three guys, I talked to them extensively before I decided to come out here to see if there was an opportunity here. And Don Grossi told me absolutely. He said there's no reason why you can't work here. So I came here in August, sight unseen, which was kind of dumb because my wife was with me. And I tell you -- you know, my wife put up with a lot with me. Came out here sight unseen. Sold our house and just picked up and came out here.

And the thing was to join the union, then go down to the union hall at night and play in what they call kicks band. So I went down and played. Next thing I know I get a call from Johnny Haig. And Johnny Haig was one of the big, big guys in town, if you want to put it that way. I mean he did a lot of work. He ran the relief bands. And the relief bands went into the hotels on the regular band's night off. And these guys played those shows, excellent musicians, sight readers, doubles, you know. They were paid the biggest scale, the highest scale here in town. Well, Haig hired me. And I worked for Haig for a little while for three days a week, just three days a week. I made twice what I was making in the Air Force. I said, you know, this is going to work out all right.

So Carolyn probably didn't complain too much?

No, because I went to work right away. I was only in town about two weeks and Haig hired me. And one thing led to another. I worked with Haig quite a bit in all the hotels here. And then Don Grossi called me and wanted to know if I wanted to come to the Hilton hotel to play with Jimmy Mulidore's band on a regular basis. And that was six nights a week, two shows a night. So I said sure. Steady work; that's what I want to do. So I went in there. And Jimmy Mulidore hired me. And I was there for ten years.

Wow. We're going to take just a real quick break. And when we come back we're going to talk about your experience as a black man in Las Vegas working because you're my first black musician

that I've spoken with. So this is going to be quite an interesting take on your experience as a musician here in Las Vegas. Okay?

Okay. We're back with Ernie Hensley after a short break. And now, Ernie, we're going to talk about your experiences here in Las Vegas. We're going to pick up where we left off.

Well, like I said a lot of members of the Airmen of Note came out here and were working here. And they had good reputations here. And I kept in contact with three of them. They told me that there were opportunities here and that if I wanted to come out, that they would do all that they could to help me out here.

So I came out. Like I said I went to work right away with Johnny Haig's band. He hired me. And from there one thing led to another. You know, you build a reputation.

And you did join the union when you first got here? You had to do that?

Oh, yeah. You had to be. You had to be in the union. Funny, I went to the union and sitting there -- what is his name? -- he was on the board there. Ah, let's see.

And this is the Airmen of Note book commemorating the 50 years.

Yeah. The trumpet player -- wait a minute. Maybe you can stop that for a minute. Oh, Jim Fuller.

Jim Fuller?

Jim Fuller was on the board of the musicians union. He was an ex-Airmen of Note. And I didn't know it. I walked in there and there sat Jimmy Fuller. So, you know, it was almost like reunion time for a minute.

But anyway, you know, you went to work. And one thing led to another. And I've worked ever since until -- worked all the way up to -- almost through '95 I guess. In '89 with the big strike, broke our union.

Right.

But I was still working. Haig would hire me a lot for stuff.

And where was it you said you worked for ten years straight, the Hilton?

At the Hilton hotel.

What was that experience like?

It was fine. Jimmy Mulidore.

Were you the only saxophone player?

No. No. It was a big band. We had five saxophones, four trumpets, four trombones and a rhythm

section.

Who were some of the singers that came into town that you worked with?

Well -- at the Hilton? Oh, Andy Williams. Andy Williams. Andy Williams. Oh, my god. Sarah Vaughan was in. I'm having mental blocks. Wait a minute. Oh, god.

Did you work with Sammy Davis Junior?

Yeah, I worked with Sammy.

Wayne Newton? Frank Sinatra?

Didn't work with Wayne. Can you stop that for a minute?

Absolutely. That was Steve & Eydie you were trying to recall.

Yes. Steve and Eydie, Suzanne Somers, Juliet Prowse. We did Liberace at the Hilton for quite awhile.

Who was your favorite? Anyone?

My favorite was Sarah Vaughan.

Because you were friends with her and she was --

And Steve and Eydie was a great act, too. I loved playing their show. Sarah Vaughan was quintessential singer. Plus I worked with Sarah a lot when I was on the Airmen of Note. She and I -- all through history together.

Arnoldo Gabriel, who was the commander of the Air Force Band, called me and wanted me to do one of his guest artists' series shows at Constitution Hall because he was going out of town. So he wanted me to do it with the Airmen of Note. So I told him okay. He said, well, you have to get your own artist; set the whole thing up and everything. So I said okay. And I sat there and pondered a bit and I thought, you know, we did a lot of recordings with Sarah Vaughan. I said let me call, get in contact with Sarah and see if she'll come out and do it because they come out and do that gratis, you know.

Well, Sarah said fine, of course. So she came out. During the rehearsal -- rehearsed a couple of hours before the program at Constitution Hall. During rehearsal lines were forming outside Constitution Hall all the way around the block to get into this concert. It was incredible.

And you set that up?

Yeah. Yeah. And we did the concert. I mean Constitution Hall was packed. Packed. And it was a great, great, great concert. Plus then you go back and look at the history of DAR Constitution Hall, you know, and in retrospect black people weren't allowed to perform in there. What's her name? Can you stop it

again? Mahalia Jackson -- no, not Mahalia Jackson. Who was it? Yeah, you can stop it again.

But she wasn't allowed to --

I think Franklin Roosevelt was President then.

And she wasn't allowed --

Marian Anderson.

Marian Anderson was not allowed to play at Constitution Hall during the Roosevelt Administration.

No. At any time. Because she was black. And the Daughters of the American Revolution were not going to have black people performing at Constitution Hall.

But anyway, after this concert -- when I walked out on stage at Constitution Hall, I said, wow, you know, this is really something.

History making.

This is really something. But, you know, nothing was made of it. Nothing was mentioned in the papers about it or anything. It was just kind of not noticed.

But in your heart.

Yeah, I knew.

And in the heart of the audience I'm sure.

Yeah. Everybody knew what was going on there. My mother and father were in the audience. So it was a great experience.

But anyway, to get back to what we were talking about, I worked with a lot of people. Gosh. I mean just about everybody in the business I guess.

What was your favorite venue? Was it the Hilton because you worked there for so long?

Here in this town?

Yeah, in Las Vegas.

My favorite venue? I don't know whether I had a favorite. You know, it became almost like it was a job.

Did you travel or did you stay --

No. Just stayed right here in Vegas. I traveled once. We got a band together from Las Vegas to go to Banff, Canada, for an IBM convention. And that was a good experience. It was a great band. A lot of really fine musicians from Vegas were on that band, Fred Hollard and Joe Lano and a bunch of other

guys. We had a ball up there.

Where did you live when you first got to Vegas?

What do you mean? I bought a home at Rancho and Alta.

Oh, nice area.

I'm still living there.

Oh, wonderful.

Same house. Yeah, we didn't move. We thought about it. But when we came here in '79, the houses -- of course, the housing boom hadn't started then. So we moved into Rancho Vista Drive and been there ever since.

Speaking with the other musicians I did bring up was there any sort of, you know, black-white issues among musicians? And across the board every one of them said there was no color.

No. That's truth.

We all were just musicians and just got along. And you felt the same way?

That's true. Yeah.

That's good.

I had talked to other black musicians here, Rudy Aikels and Pat Sherrod and Joe Williams. And Bob Bailey, he's not a musician, but he was one of the black movers and shakers in Vegas years ago from way back. And Bob is still alive.

What was his name again? I'm sorry.

Bob Bailey. But it wasn't -- because I called DeMita, Joe, told me to call Bob Bailey before I decided to come out here and talk to Bob Bailey. So I called him and asked him. I said what is the scene in Las Vegas for black musicians? He says well -- he really couldn't give me a yes or a no. He didn't say don't come; he didn't say to come.

So that's true. I think the issue was that -- in my mind after talking to other musicians, black musicians that worked here that the fact is that black musicians did not have the skills necessary to work here, not all black musicians. But those who did come out here or were considering to come out here did not have the skills to play here, the doubling, like saxophone players.

And that's all I can talk about is saxophone players because I got a couple of calls during my time here from other black musicians. I mean they made no bones to let me know that they were black and

wanted to know what the opportunities were here. I said, well, you know, the thing is do you double? Do you play clarinet, flute and piccolo, alto flute or whatever? They didn't do that. I said, well, don't waste your time because you're not going to get hired here. If you had those skills, you could come out and take a shot. But they couldn't double. So I told them, well, if you can't double, there's no sense in coming out here. They were jazz players. I said, well, Las Vegas is not really a jazz town per se. There's a lot of jazz musicians here, but they don't make their living playing jazz. They make their living playing in the casinos in the shows, the show bands. And then on the side you have jazz venues. But they don't make their living per se playing jazz.

But all the other musicians were right. There was no black-white thing. It's either you can play or you can't play. That's all there was to it. If you could play, fine; you made it. And if you can't play, you're not going to make it.

Las Vegas has always been known as a juice environment.

A what?

Juice.

Juice?

See. Now, you're the first person -- I didn't know what they meant either. But you know somebody to know somebody to know somebody.

Oh, yeah. Yeah, sure.

Did this idea have any significant relevance in the work of musicians obviously?

For me, yeah, absolutely.

You had to know people.

Without Vince Summer, Don Grossi or Dave Napier, you know.

So you enjoyed a window of ten years of real steady work from '79 to '89. Then the writers strike.

Then what happened for you?

Well, after '89 like I said, you know, the musicians union could not come to agreement with the Nevada Resort Association. And that's when a lot of the bands were let go out of the hotels. And then they started taped music and bringing in production shows and tapes. And that was basically the end of career in Las Vegas to make a decent living at it. I mean guys are still working, but it's a struggle. Basically, I've been out of the business for a while. To be honest with you, there are very few musicians I even talk

to in this town anymore. For instance, when Johnny Haig died no one called to let me know. But, you know, the people that I'm associated with now are the musicians that work with me on Don Rickles show.

So you are working currently?

No. I work Don Rickles. That's all I do. Once in a while a couple of -- Temptations or something. But, basically, I work Don Rickles when he comes to town. And that's not often. My next gig with Rickles will be in April at The Orleans.

So I'm fortunate in a way that I have retirement. I have two retirements, the Air Force and the musicians union. And I have other income. So, you know, it's not a big deal for me.

So you can pick and choose your --

Yeah. I mean I want to work. But no one calls. The people that I knew are gone. And it's a whole new thing out there now. And I really don't want to be bothered with it.

Do you play just for fun now?

Yeah. I play at home all the time.

Do you?

Sure. It's part of my life. But, you know, if I get called I'm ready to play. I play as well as the rest of them.

When you get calls now, are they for night jobs? Is that difficult for you to work nights? Are they long hours?

No. I don't work long hours. The show is an hour and a half, an hour and 40 minutes. That's it. In and out. Do a rehearsal a couple of hours during the day. You come back and do the show. And that's it. I mean it's not like a six-hour slave-driven thing. I know when I came here lounge acts worked six hours a night. No. No. I'll never do that.

And you did work the lounge experience for a while?

No. I never worked --

And you didn't miss that?

I didn't want to do it. I never did it. So it was nothing to miss. It was never anything I wanted to do.

How about your parents? Did they ever come see you in Vegas?

No. Well, my father passed away before I left Washington, before I retired from the Air Force. My mother moved out here with my sister in L.A. to live with my sister. She became very ill with cancer.

And I was trying to get her to move here with us, but it didn't work out. She passed away in L.A., but she did come here. And she did go to the Hilton to see a show there. But at that time it was a production show. I was working the band then. It was called -- what was the name of that darn show? It ran for three and a half years. I mean I can't even remember the name of the show. But it was centered around a circus theme and they'd bring in guest artists -- Suzanne Somers, Juliet Prowse, and all those kinds of people -- to do their thing in the show.

Did you find that your parents had a pride in you because you kind of carried on the family tradition of being a musician starting with --

You know, my mother -- to be honest with you I got most of my encouragement from my grandmother, my father's mother. My mother -- I think she was very frustrated because of her not fulfilling her desire to be a professional pianist and because the children, my sister and I, we came along. And, you know, you have kids and you've got to look out for family. So you take a government job and that was it.

And I did find that interesting. What government job did your mom and dad have?

She worked in the federal government in Washington, D.C., for the National Labor Relations Board for years.

Did either of them find it difficult to secure those jobs?

No. My father worked Department of Defense. And my father's very talented, too. He and his friends, my grandfather tells me, were young engineers during that day. My father's very talented in math. And he was interested in electrical stuff. He was always working on radios and televisions when it came out and all this kind of stuff.

But, again, you know, family responsibilities and lack of opportunity I think precluded them doing what they really wanted to do and doing what they had to do, you know. So I was lucky to do what I wanted to do and was able to have the opportunities available. And those opportunities came about because of the generations before me who laid the groundwork for it.

How do you feel about the generations that are coming after you as far as their opportunities and kind of specifically the music industry?

I don't know. I don't have a clue. It's a funny thing. When I came out here, I still had the GI Bill. So I came to UNLV because I got a notice from Department of Defense -- you're going to lose your GI Bill if you don't use it. So I enrolled here at UNLV. But I didn't study music. I studied criminal justice because

I was torn with the idea of becoming a lawyer. And I graduated here with a degree in criminal justice. Well, it served me well because in '89 when everything crashed here, I went into Nevada State as a parole officer. Lucky enough, I had a clean job. I was not dealing with the criminals. And then I went into the federal office of investigations. And that career went pretty well. I moved all the way up to a GS-11. And then Clinton did away with the entire agency, fired everybody. So at that time I just said the hell with it; forget about it.

But for music I don't know what the venues are now. I went back here and started my master's program for music. And I studied with Richard Soule, flute with him. Then I said well -- I see all these young people, you know. And I just said I don't want to do this. I've had enough. So, basically, that was the end of music for me.

Other than just for pleasure.

Just playing. Yeah. Yeah.

And I know that your wife works here at UNLV.

Yeah. She's worked here for years. She was an English teacher. She taught English here for a long time.

Did she get her degree here at UNLV?

Yeah. Her bachelor's and her master's. And she was going to get her Ph.D. But then, you know, you get tired after awhile. And she said, you know, I really don't want to do this, put the time and all that into it. Plus when she was teaching it was like a 25-hour-a-day job. It was not easy.

Right. And what grade did she teach?

She taught here.

Oh, at the university. Very good.

Yeah. And she taught European literature and black literature here. And she wanted to pursue her Ph.D. in black literature. After a while I think it takes -- I don't know. Circumstances pave the way for what you want to do. But we just got tired. After a while you get tired.

So what's your future?

I don't know.

Are you going to travel?

I would like to. My wife and I would like to.

Visit some of your old haunts in Germany?

No. You know, I thought about that. But I don't think -- Europe is not the same Europe that I was exposed to. Europe has changed a lot. And I don't think it's as open as it was then. With the increase of population, world population, the decrease in resources and opportunities, that always lays the groundwork for civil unrest.

And will you stay here in Las Vegas?

Probably. I really don't know what's going to happen. I don't know.

Nothing wrong with that. Is there anything that we haven't talked about, about your music career that you'd like to share that I might not have asked a question about?

I don't think so.

Overall, looking back, how would you talk about your career? You had said you were very lucky. Are you happy that you made the choice to be a musician?

Yeah. To be honest with you, sometimes I have mixed emotions about it. I'm not completely happy here in Las Vegas anymore.

What's changed?

The town has changed tremendously. There's too many people here. When I came in '79, believe it or not this was a friendly town. It was a really nice town. I mean you put aside the Strip. People are very friendly. Now Las Vegas has become like any other big city, like a rat race. There's an absence of empathy for other people here. Everybody's out for themselves and the hell with you, you know. And you can see it in -- I see it in a lot of ways especially the way people drive here. They're very selfish people. I'm being very critical and honest. This is my opinion. Very selfish people here. Very self-centered people.

And the fact is that I don't have any friends here per se, I mean real friends. I have one real friend Paul Balfour and Deanna Balfour. The musicians that I work with are very nice guys. I mean we're not friends to the point where we go out together or socialize together. We see each other on a gig, period. The guys that I've worked with over the years, I don't even see them or hear from them. And to be honest with you I know that they associate together. I know that for a fact.

So you feel somewhat excluded.

Yeah.

Do you need to reach out to them? I mean --

I've reached out. You get to a certain age. After a while you just say the hell with it. I'm not reaching out for nobody. I don't need to reach out and I'm not going to reach out. But then it's not about me. That's the way the world is. You're lucky to have one good friend in this lifetime. So I've had several. The town has been good to me and my wife and my son and my daughter. They got a good education here.

Where did they graduate?

My son graduated from Clark High School. My daughter graduated from Clark High School. My son went to like I told you University of Washington. He graduated from there. My daughter graduated from UNLV. And then she went on to law school. Graduated from McGeorge School of Law in Sacramento, California. She passed the bar here. So, you know, it's been a good ride. Yeah.

I always conclude my interviews with asking my informants what's your philosophy in life?

Philosophy of life. I don't know because I've been struggling with what life means to me now. I haven't really come up with an answer. Louis Armstrong says -- the saying goes never look back 'cause something may be gaining on you, you know. But I have this thing right now, right here in this junction in my life where I look back, constantly looking back at things and what I should've done and what I did and what I should've done, that kind of thing. On one hand, the town has been good. On the other hand, it hasn't been good. But I guess that's the way it is. You can't have it all. It's the good with the bad.

It sounds like you had not only a wonderful career, but you made I feel a great contribution to the career that you chose. After speaking to you it sounds like you made a great contribution.

Well, thank you.

It's something that you need to be proud of.

Thank you. You know, in a way I feel that the Air Force thing -- of course, I'm always tied to that because that's what got me started in all this. The 50th anniversary was good. But when I look at the Air Force Band now, I still don't see a great amount of diversity in that band. This is 2008. And sometimes I want to write to them and say, you know, what the hell is your problem? What is going on? I mean they have a few, one or two. It's always one or two. Like the old saying goes there's always one. But there's never a significant number.

And I imagine it may be because -- because I talked to Joyce, a friend of mine back there. And I said, you know, Joyce, all the time I was in Washington with Air Force Band we did all of these concerts -- Constitution Hall, here, there and everywhere, all the universities. I said I never ran across one

person from McKinley High School, not one. I said not even you. She said, well, Ernest, black folks don't go to those things. And I said, well, you know, you're probably right. You're absolutely right. I told her I lived here in this town from -- let's see. I came back from Europe in '63. From '63 to '79 -- '63? From '62 to '79, I never ran across one person that went to McKinley. But you know I did run across one person in Europe, in Marseille, France. I walked into a bar -- and this is the God awful truth. I walked into the bar and there sat Antonio Avalino was his name. He was in the Army.

Were you able to talk with him?

Oh, yeah. I saw him and I said -- both of us were just flabbergasted. Couldn't believe it.

Small world sometimes.

Small world, yeah. From McKinley High School.

Ernie, I have totally enjoyed this interview. Thank you so much. And I hope you got as much out of it as I did. And this is going to be going into the archives at the university. And I just think like I said you made a great contribution. Any student that researches this whole era, I think they'll find a lot out of your interview.

Yeah. Thank you. This book -- I have to order another one. This is the only one that I have. Yeah. The Airmen of Note.

I see Bill Clinton's in there. He played saxophone.

He sucked as a saxophone player. Pardon my language. He was a terrible player.

Saul Miller is a tenor saxophone player on the Airmen of Note. His brother is NBA basketball star. What's his name?

Well, you're asking the wrong person on that.

He plays -- anyway.

Show me a picture of you in this book.

Oh, yeah. Well, this is the band. This is me.

Airmen of Note in rehearsal for an NBC Tonight Show performance.

Johnny Carson Show.

And that's you right here on page 3?

Yeah.

You are third from the right.

I was playing lead alto then.

Very good.

Yeah. We did The Tonight Show.

Very cool. Sounds like you had a great career.

And here they give my history.

Oh, they do? I'd like to make a copy of that if that's okay.

Sure. Yeah.

All right. I'm going to conclude this.

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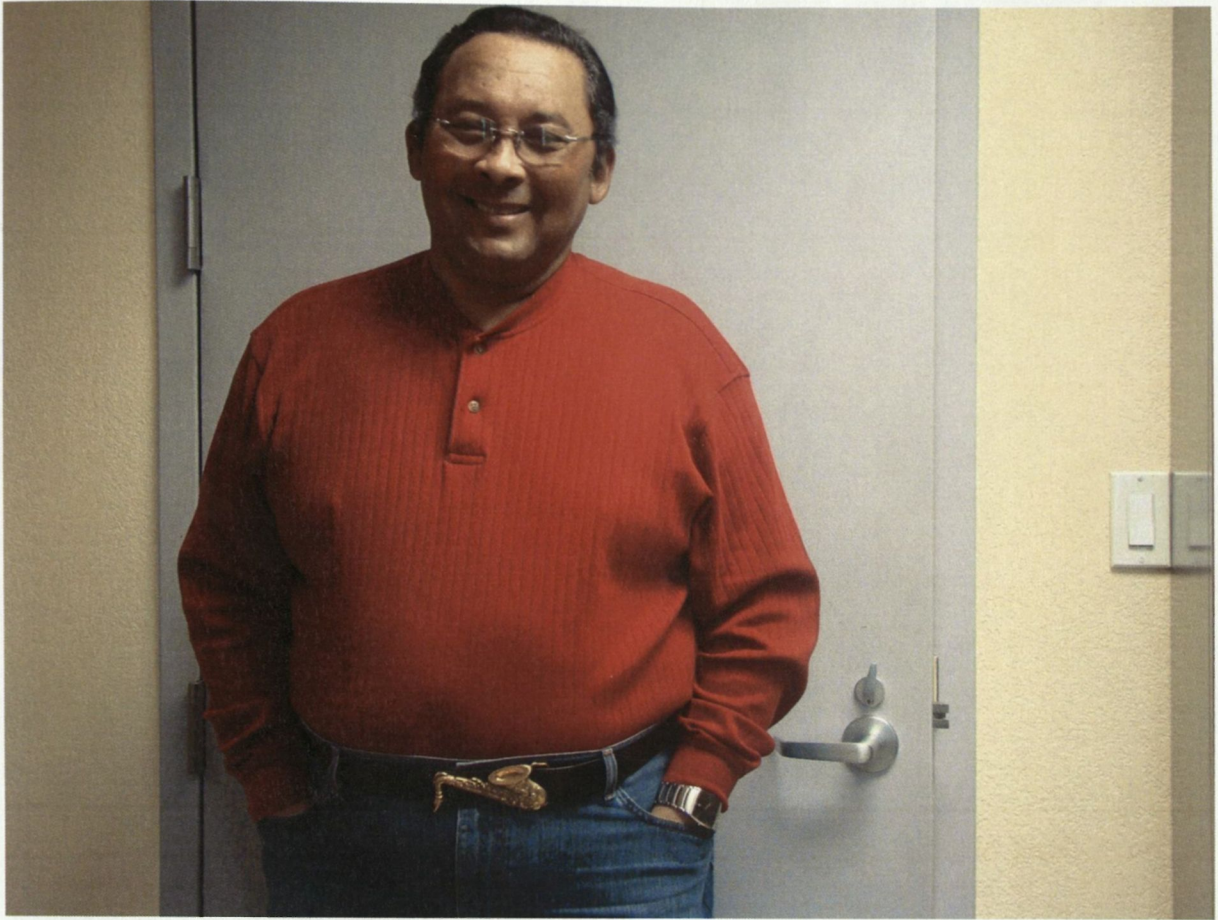
Three photos of Ernest Hensley: 1976, 1984, and 2008



1976



1984



2008