

AN INTERVIEW WITH GENE NOBORU NAKANISHI

An Oral History Conducted by Ayrton Yamaguchi

Reflections: The Las Vegas Asian American and Pacific Islander
Oral History Project

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

©Reflections: The Las Vegas Asian American and Pacific Islander
Oral History Project

University of Nevada Las Vegas, 2020

Produced by: The Oral History Research Center at UNLV – University Libraries
Director: Claytee D. White
Project Manager: Stefani Evans
Transcriber: Kristin Hicks
Editors and Project Assistants: Vanessa Concepcion, Kristel Peralta, Cecilia Winchell, Jerwin
Tiu, Ayrton Yamaguchi

The recorded interview and transcript have been made possible through the generosity of a grant from the City of Las Vegas Commission for the Las Vegas Centennial and funding from private individuals and foundations. The Oral History Research Center enables students and staff to work together with community members to generate this selection of first-person narratives. The participants in this project thank University of Nevada Las Vegas for the support given that allowed an idea the opportunity to flourish.

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. In several cases photographic sources accompany the individual interviews with permission of the narrator.

The following interview is part of a series of interviews conducted under the auspices of Reflections: The Las Vegas Asian American and Pacific Islanders Oral History Project.

Claytee D. White
Director, Oral History Research Center
University Libraries
University of Nevada Las Vegas

PREFACE

“Just love what you do. That’s the only advice I got, people. Because if you have passion, most of the obstacles will be overcome, so that’s the good thing about that.”

Jazz musician and restaurateur, Gene Nakanishi is a second-generation native-born Las Vegas. In the 1920s, Gene's paternal grandfather worked on the Union Pacific railroad between what is now Zzyzx, California, and Las Vegas. After his oldest child died from lack of available medical care, the elder Nakanishi moved his family to Las Vegas and commuted to his work site. During WWII, when Gene's father was 17, the Nakanishi family was interned at the Heart Mountain War Relocation Center, near Cody, Wyoming. After two years in the camp, Gene's father joined the U.S. Army Signal Corps and was stationed on the East Coast.

Nakanishi speaks of his childhood and schooling in Las Vegas where he was one of few Asian students and even fewer Japanese students in the area. He speaks on the influence music has had during his lifetime and how it has shaped him to eventually attend Berklee College of Music. Nakanishi then went on to pursue different professional endeavors including attending Harvard for some time, noting the rigorous course load he had experienced.

After his experiences in higher education, Nakanishi started his career as a teacher for the band program in some CCSD institutions. He enjoyed his role as a band director, mentoring some recognizable musicians during his time as an instructor. This was until Nakanishi was met with

an ultimatum of continuing his career as a teacher or inheriting his family restaurant and pursuing the restaurant business. He ultimately decided for his sister's sake, and he still currently runs Osaka, a popular Japanese restaurant in Las Vegas.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Interview with Gene Noboru Nakanishi

April 4, 2021

in Las Vegas, Nevada

Conducted by Ayrton Yamaguchi

Preface.....iv

Gene Nakanishi first opens up about his early upbringing, growing up in Las Vegas, early education, being one of few Japanese students growing up, sports, music, and his early experiences as a teacher, getting his master’s degree, and living in Boston.1-4

Nakanishi then moves on to talk about stories about his grandparents, his family’s experience in a Japanese internment camp, his father’s trauma and alcoholism following the internment camp, sentiments of dishonor, circling back to teaching, business ventures, and changing routes to the restaurant business.4-12

Moreover, Nakanishi goes on to talk about the main parts of restaurants that he enjoys, music being a focal point, his children, his early days in Las Vegas, his experience at Berklee College of Music, the desire to learn new things, health endeavors, important literature, and connections to the Idyllwild School.12-19

Nakanishi then transitions to talking about lifestyle differences between America and Japan, how Las Vegas has grown over the years, business during COVID-19, more experiences going to Berklee, the importance of work ethic for children, Christian impacts on his life, the influence of his parents’ music career, his favorite musicians, and becoming a musician now compared to in the past.20-30

Nakanishi then reflects on the upbringing of his restaurant “Osaka”, how his parents met, contentment, his mother’s instrument of choice, jazz camps, experiences in Washington and Oregon, his mentors in music, musicians he has been involved with, his experiences of playing as a musician, and impressive artists.31-36

Switching gears, Nakanishi recalls his grandfather’s experience in Zzyzx, expansion on his father’s experience of the internment camp, his father going to the army shortly after, more about his experience at Berklee and how other students viewed him, experiences going to Harvard, how his family navigates anti-Asian violence, and the many opportunities in Las Vegas.....37-43



Use Agreement

Name of Narrator: Gene Nakayishi

Name of Interviewer: Ayrton Yamaguchi
Cecilia Windhall Stephanie Evans

We, the above named, give to the Oral History Research Center of UNLV, the recorded interview(s) initiated on 4/2/2021 as an unrestricted gift, to be used for such scholarly and educational purposes as shall be determined, and transfer to the University of Nevada Las Vegas, legal title and all literary property rights including copyright. This gift does not preclude the right of the interviewer, as a representative of UNLV, to use the recordings and related materials for scholarly pursuits. There will be no compensation for any interviews.

I understand that my interview will be made available to researchers and may be quoted from, published, distributed, placed on the Internet or broadcast in any medium that the Oral History Research Center and UNLV Libraries deem appropriate including future forms of electronic and digital media.

Gene Nakayishi _____
 Signature of Narrator Date

Ayrton Yamaguchi 4/2/2021
 Signature of Interviewer Date

Cecilia Windhall 4/2/2021

Stephanie Evans 4/2/2021

Hi. My name is Ayrton Yamaguchi. It is 12:04, April 2nd, 2021. I am here with Gene Nakanishi. I am also with...

Cecilia Winchell.

Stefani Evans.

All right, Gene. Can you please spell your name for the record, your first and last name?

Gene, G-E-N-E. Nakanishi, N-A-K-A-N-I-S-H-I. My middle name is Noboru, N-O-B-O-R-U.

We're going to start off talking about your childhood. Could you tell us about your family; how you grew up; what it was like at that time?

I was born and raised in Las Vegas. If you want to go all the way to the beginning, we lived on 25th and Eastern. I was an early child. I was a second child out of three. My parents said that I was halfway out before they could reach what is now called UMC, but it was called Southern Nevada Hospital at that time. My dad went through red lights and he went all the way like that, and by the time he got to the hospital, he rushed in and told them, "My wife's already had half of a baby." They rushed out. That's why my parents thought, oh man, this is going to be a handful. I probably wasn't a handful. But we grew up in Las Vegas on the east side, East Las Vegas. There was pretty much not too much to do except for the desert. I had a brother that was a year older. For the first five years it was just him and I, and then we had a sister five years later, which is Joy Nakanishi. My brother has since passed away. He passed away when he was thirty-four.

Childhood, what was it like growing up in Las Vegas? McDonalds' hamburgers, five cents; cheeseburgers, ten cents; Big Macs, twenty cents; and French fries were a dime. That's what it was like. Our playground was the desert and all we'd do every day whether it was summer—well, usually summer because we were off in the summertime—would be either go to the public pool, which was at Roy Martin Junior High School, or we were out in the desert

catching lizards, horned toads. There was a creek that ran right out Charleston and it was called Crawdad Creek. What we would do, we'd go there and we'd catch minnows and crawdads, but little did we know that—well, at that time I'm sure it wasn't so polluted because the water seemed clean to us. But as we grew up we realized that, oh, this water may not be as clean as we thought. Unbeknownst to us, we'd be out there. My brother would find a place—we had a few friends that grew up—he would find a place where he thought the water was clean, and he was drinking it. I just never thought...he can't drink this water. But he said, "No, it's running over rocks and it looks really clear." When you're a kid and you're out in the desert and there's no water and you're thirsty, hey, this is what we do.

Growing up here, I went to Sunrise Acres Elementary School, and then I went to Roy Martin, and from Roy Martin I went to Valley High School. I guess some turning points in my life: When I was eight years old, I told my dad I didn't want to go to school anymore, and I thought this was no fun at all. He says, "Okay. Well, you feel that way, we're going to put you to work." At eight years old, he brought me here and he said, "For one month straight..." He made me wash dishes, one month straight in the summer. He said, "So you don't like school?" I said, "Yes, but you know what? I think I like school better than washing dishes." He says, "Well, guess what? This is what you're going to do the rest of your life if you don't go to school and do well in school."

I was scared straight. And I kid you not, after that experience I had straight-As all the way through elementary, high school, junior high, high school, and...well, college was pretty close. My first semester was a little rough, but other than that...I kept thinking, oh, I'm going to have to wash dishes in this place. It was probably the best medicine for a young kid, and we do that here, too, for parents. I can't tell you how many kids that we've straightened out here.

But getting back to growing up here, I think my brother and I were the only Japanese in the entire elementary school. I think there was one Korean and that was it. Growing up here, automatically they would say...there was a stereotypical racial thing going on where if you looked Asian, you were automatically Chinese. They had no idea—well, they did. They eventually found out that Japanese have multi-syllable last names, whereas the Chinese are usually just a single syllable. But it was what it was. We were pretty much told...

My mother was from Japan. My dad was a second generation from Las Vegas. We can go to him a little later. But going back to growing up here, I think we had a pretty good time. It wasn't bad then. They pretty much left me alone because we grew up in an Asian family where they said, "Listen, if you don't do well in school, people will not respect you. They're just going to look down on you. They'll treat you like somebody, not a normal U.S. citizen." We always did very well in school.

I excelled in sports. I played all the sports in junior high and high school. Then I also played music, so by the time I got to my sophomore year, the coach told me—I was pretty good at baseball, tennis. I was too short for basketball, but I played point guard. But I realized that if I'm not going to grow any taller, we better switch sports and switch the game here. By the time I got into high school at Valley, I stuck with tennis my first year and then baseball. But tennis, I gave that up as soon as I lost to—I don't know if you know Rita Agassi. Rita Agassi, she was a senior and I was a sophomore then. She hit the ball so hard, and for a female. I said, "I'm in the wrong sport here." She hit that ball harder than any of the guys. I said, "How do you expect us to feel as a male?" At that time, to lose so badly to a female who just hit that ball harder than any of us did. So I gave that up then.

In sports, we were pretty busy with music. I was a trumpet player. By the time it was the end of sophomore year, junior year, I was considered the best player in the state. But so what? It doesn't matter. Where I went to school, there were a hundred trumpet players. But I would say I was at least 90 percent better than them. I went through Valley, graduated from there, and then I went to school in Boston at Berklee College of Music, and I graduated from there. That's pretty much my end.

I taught for fifteen years here. I taught over at Hyde Park for nine and then Chaparral for six. That's when I knew that I couldn't have kids and I couldn't keep a marriage if I continued to be a band director. You're just gone all the time. Plus I was helping out here, too. If you can believe this, when I first started the job here in Clark County, my mortgage was nine hundred and fifty dollars, and the Clark County School District paid me nine hundred, so the math didn't compute there. I worked here three to five nights, well, it was probably three nights a week, and I made two thousand a month. This town has been...if you look at it, you understand why kids get a jaded perspective of what education is about because you have people that don't even go to college that make twice as much as you, and this was very true especially in the teaching profession here in Vegas. It didn't really matter that my mortgage was nine hundred and fifty and I only made nine hundred because I realized that I have to work anyway.

It's a funny thing because growing up in the restaurant business, in this restaurant, my dad never told me, but we'd work ten-, twelve-hour shifts, and it wasn't until I finished school and came back here, Clark County School District only required you for seven. I said, "What is this, only half a day?" That's what I thought. I'm used to working ten or twelve or fourteen hours because when I was in Boston...I had so much work there. And that's one of the reasons why I had to come back here. I just said, "I have to get off this wheel." If you're industrious and if you

give your boss...if he pays you ten, you give him fifteen dollars' worth, you're always going to have work; everybody is always going to want you. And so when I came back here that's why I ended up working here, too, because I realized, one, I couldn't pay my mortgage. I just taught.

I did get my master's through NOVA, and I started my post doctorate over at UNLV until...I vividly remember I was taking a class with—you might know him—Dr. Ditri, years ago. He was didactic for three hours. I sat in the back. I was working two jobs. I was working late here, so I would sit in the back with colored shades, dark shades, and I would literally sleep for half an hour to an hour in his class because it was so boring. But I read the books and I aced all the tests. At the end of the summer session he gave me a C, so I went up and approached him. I said—I knew Dr. Ditri because of his son, too. I went to school with his son, Jay Ditri. Anyway, I go, “Hey, I thought I did pretty good on all my tests and I still got a C.” And I said, “Maybe you can help clarify that a bit.” And he goes, “Yes. Lack of attentive behavior.” I couldn't say anything because I said, “You got me there.” That's when I decided that I will not attend another class at UNLV. I haven't since, but that's okay.

I've been everywhere in Boston. Before I came back I did some graduate work at Harvard for about a year. I was studying international relations there because I could vividly remember that I got off a gig in my junior year out of the Theater District. It was my junior year and it was just going into December, and I said, “Wow, man, I just worked six weeks and I made some pretty good money, but I have no idea where my next job is going to be.” That's when I said, “Okay, we're going to have to do something about that.” I applied to graduate school and I went there for one year and I studied international relations. Then I was called back here. There's plenty of work here. Besides that I was working too much over there anyway. That's how I came back here. Where do you want to go from now?

I'd like to go to your grandparents. Did you know them?

My grandparents here, yes, I did, I knew my grandmother, but my grandfather died before I was born. He was one of the first Japanese immigrants coming to Las Vegas, because he worked on the Union Pacific Railroad in 1920. They were trying to make a route to Salt Lake, so that's what he was working on, [San Pedro,] California to Salt Lake on the railroad. He was an engineer for the railroad. His points were Silver Springs, which is considered Zzyzx right now, the middle of nowhere in California. If you're driving, you'll see the sign that says Zzyzx. It's like, "Well, where is this? This road leads to nowhere," you think. This is the middle of nowhere. But anyway, he was commuting from Las Vegas to Zzyzx all the time. They moved to Zzyzx for a little while in the early '20s, because his work was closer there. It didn't matter whether he lived in Las Vegas or Zzyzx. He realized after he had his first son— There were six kids in his family, and the oldest died because he was in the middle of nowhere in Zzyzx. He was born there. He ended up with typhoid fever and he died there. Literally, they had to fill the bathtub up with ice to preserve the body to get it to either Vegas or anywhere where they could actually process it. It was a sad situation. That's why he [my grandfather] decided that they'd move back to Vegas.

My dad actually grew up in Vegas, and my grandparents did, too. He was always off on the railroad, but the family was always here. When he was seventeen or eighteen, he was interned in Heart Mountain [War Relocation Center], a Japanese internment camp. They pretty much lost everything that they had because they didn't know what was going to happen; whether they were going to be deported, or how long they were going to stay in it. It wasn't until this past summer when I actually went to Heart Mountain Wyoming. It's close to the border of Wyoming and Montana, up there by Cody. I've been up there, and I actually saw what kind of conditions because they have a model up there. I realized why my dad was so affected by it. He stayed there

for two years and then they offered him to leave if he joined the armed services. A lot of the first generation Japanese were opposed to that. Yet, he says, "I'm a U.S. citizen and I want to show my allegiance." I think it was two years later, after the war, he joined the armed services—he was in the camp for two years. He joined the service, and that's where he was actually a signal corps member there.

Getting back to the camp itself: barbed wire, just like what you saw in Auschwitz. That's literally what they did. The blame, it's not really a blame, but it was Roosevelt who actually put them in there, so he was the president who was responsible for that. But his undersecretary had a lot to do with it, and I can't remember his name right now. He is the one who suggested that we do this. But the scary thing about the whole thing is there were a hundred and twenty thousand that were interned, not just there but all across the western states. I'll just say, a hundred a twenty thousand, seventy-five thousand were U.S. citizens. To think that a U.S. citizen could be put in a prison like Auschwitz or any of the Nazi concentration camps, it says a lot about society even then, and even today. You think about it, it could easily happen. When Obama was in office, they had these camps set up ready for people that didn't really agree with his ideology and those that he thought maybe would cause an insurrection. There is still a possibility that something like that could happen, but I hope it never does happen because of what it did. All these hundred and twenty thousand Japanese that were interned, they all had property, houses, stuff like that. Because they didn't know what was going to happen...like in any society, there's people that will take advantage of those situations. They offered them pennies on the dollar for their property. Can you imagine? There were some good people. My dad had some friends in Orange County that had these strawberry farms and stuff like in Ojai and different places where a lot of them were rich because a lot of the Japanese were farmers.

My dad, living here after he got out—what happened was, as soon as he got out of camp, which is out of the army, the entire family, when the war was over, they were all released. But released with what? With nothing in their pockets. He had no choice. He had a scholarship to go to school to study medicine. He had somebody that was willing to pay his way through. He always wanted to be a surgeon. It kind of scarred him because when he got out of camp, he had to support his family because there were still four kids underneath him. The father ended up going back to Union Pacific, but he wasn't the same after that. He was... alcohol; the whole nine yards. It just got to him. I didn't understand why, until the day my dad died, which he died twenty-two years ago, that he held a grudge against the American government. I finally realized when I went to see the camp there and the conditions and what they actually did to them that this was a traumatic event in his life and it changed the course of his destiny, too, because instead of going to school, he ended up having to come back and to work to support his family. Because of that he always wanted to make sure that everybody in his family, his younger siblings went to school, which they all did. They all went and he paid for their college. It didn't matter how he worked it out, but he did.

He told me when he first got back, just to make money, over on Pinto Lane, he had a friend that had two and a half acres there, a lot of them to plant watermelon and cantaloupe, and you'd never think that in the desert. But because he had some experience in camp—in camp they were allowed to go to Idaho to pick potatoes. He had a chance to learn about agriculture and planting stuff. He figured, "Okay well, what's the best thing the hot desert could produce?" He thought, "Well, melons would be a good thing." He planted watermelons for a couple of years.

Eventually he opened, with a partner, one of the first nurseries in Las Vegas. It was right on Sahara and Maryland Parkway, but that didn't turn out. He was mainly the contractor and he

did the maintenance for all the very rich people in this town, considered well-off, Rancho Circle, and stuff like that; he did most of the houses there. Plus he did all the landscaping for them and stuff like that. His partner actually ran the nursery. But the problem was, if you're in business, the last thing you want to do is have a partner anyway, because it just doesn't work out. His partner was stealing from him and it was a big mess, so he decided he'd cut him off. He said, "Okay, forget this. We're not going to be in business together."

That's one of the influences of why I don't ever have partners. I had a partner early on in another business in this town, actually a couple of businesses. Partners just don't work. You just have to be by yourself to do that. That's pretty much the history.

My grandparents, I knew that they came from Japan. They actually eloped to America. My grandfather was a *bushido*, which is a samurai class just below the (lords). My grandmother, she was the daughter of a mayor of a small town right outside of Fukui, Japan. I went to visit that town, too, so I understand. My grandfather, being the guy that he was, he had a family there, but he eloped with the mayor's daughter because that would have never been approved anyway. The only thing he figured out he would do is he'd get on a ship and come to America. They both came to America and started another family. We all have stories and skeletons in our closet, but I can understand from the standpoint of the Japanese and how strict the caste system and the thinking are. You just don't do anything...

Even today the older people still have that mentality that you don't bring dishonor to your workplace or your family or anything else like that. A good example of that is I had this chef that worked for me. He was by himself in the kitchen over in Henderson. He was just nervous when the Health Department came and just made all kinds of mistakes, almost got us a C grade. He felt so bad that he actually quit. I said, "You don't have to quit." He goes, "No, I brought dishonor to

your business.” In the Japanese order, they would do *seppuku*. Nowadays they just say, “Hey, I’m going to leave here because I didn’t do right.” That mentality still sticks with them.

There were a few families in Las Vegas that grew up here that were born and raised here. Tomiyasus. They had Tomiyasu Lane. He was a farmer in this town, too. But other than that, that’s what happened.

Now, currently, after fifteen years of teaching, there’s no way that I could have had a family or anything else just because of the time that it takes to be a band director. The International Baccalaureate program at Chaparral, it seemed like everywhere I went people just gravitated to the program. When I was at Hyde Park, I started with seventy-five kids. I left there with five hundred. I was burned out there. I said, “I’m either going to quit or I have to find something new.”

A good friend of mine called. A lot of it in the public school system is who you work for. Larry Olsen, who was from the old school—I was hired by Frank (NAME). These are names in this city, principals and that. They were just good people. Larry Olsen called me over and said, “Listen, come on over.” I thought about that, because I went to music school, so we didn’t really do marching band, and I didn’t march here in high school. I said, “Well, if we have to do this, then let me take a stack of books like this.” I went to marching band camp. Next thing you know, we start. It’s highly competitive. We start winning everything in town. We start winning sweepstakes all through Southern California. After I filled up the whole wall with trophies over at Chaparral, then I thought, “Wow, this is a waste of time and a waste of money. Waste of time and waste of money because that’s not the true art form.” I said, “I’m not a coach.”

But I felt like a coach. But I knew I could coach because I played sports and I’ve coached teams before, and usually we always won because there’s always a formula. You just have to

have the proper technique. Knowledge is power whatever you do. Maybe that's been my problem: I just couldn't do anything halfway. If I got into something, I had to know everything about it because I did a lot of research when I was teaching high school, especially literature research and that's where the key is right there. Literature research and being competent not just on your instrument, but all the instruments, and also being confident, being a good musician, too. You can have great ears and stuff like that.

That's two things that came naturally. I figured in my life there's two things that I can really do well and that's being a band director or I can be a restaurateur. When I made that decision back then, as soon as I had my first child twenty-two years ago, I didn't know exactly. My sister was in trouble because she was building out in Summerlin. My parents said, "Listen, she's going to lose everything if you don't help her." At that time, I had different businesses going on. I had a soda business. I brought in all the [Sangaria?] that you see in this town right here. I understood import-export because I was an International Relations major. I understood business, too. They always wanted me to take over the business, but the timing was not right. At that time, she was about to lose everything, and I was pretty comfortable in the job that I had teaching.

I would have done it for free if I was a millionaire because I'd wake up every morning at six a.m.—that was our first class. I had a nationally ranked jazz ensemble back then, a tremendous group. A lot of players we sent to Berklee and different schools, a lot of kids that never would have had an opportunity to actually go to college. They come back and say, "If I wouldn't have been in your band program, there's no way I would have gone to college and no way I could have afforded it." I knew that that's what I was supposed to do at that time. Everybody has seasons, when and where they're supposed to do things. I think God gives you a

gift, and you just have to find that gift that you do really well. If you're doing what you're supposed to be doing, it's not hard. It's very simple. You will slide right through. With the restaurant business, I kid you not, that's what I was supposed to do after fifteen years of teaching. I gave up teaching, and it was pretty simple for me—well, it wasn't simple, because I had saved about four hundred thousand dollars doing other stuff, and then my parents said, "Listen, if you don't help your sister out..." She is a younger sister. "She's going to lose everything." And I said, "Oh man, what am I supposed to do?" I didn't really want to get into the restaurant business, but now it's probably time to do it again.

I came in and I gave her everything I had. Plus, I took out a loan to help her get out of debt. And I said, "You have nothing to do with the original one. Go finish your project over there." So she did. But I can tell you this. I said, "What did I just do?" Everything that I worked on—I was thirty-seven at that time. I go, "Man, I just gave away all my money to my sister and inherited something that I really thought I wasn't supposed to do." I took out a loan, also, to help her get out of debt. I said, "Okay, Lord, you're going to have to help me on this. The only thing I'm asking you to do is get me out of debt." Just be careful what you ask for, okay?

Five days later I got a call. The Bellagio was opening. They said, "We're looking for somebody to provide sushi catering." As of last year, we were doing close to three million pieces of sushi a day for the catering, which is literally two chefs, eight hours a day. But we're down to around one shift right now. We're just getting back and getting started again. I had 98 percent of the Strip. I was making sushi for 98 percent of the Strip, and I still have contracts with a major group of players, Caesars and MGM properties. We're pretty much it. They come to us for the sushi. We're just slowly getting into it, not that I like doing that kind of work, but it just kind of fell into that. That's the third part of Osaka's.

I'll tell you the main part of both the restaurants, the margins are better. It's something that I know. Catering is something that we don't depend on, but we do it to help keep people gainfully employed. That's what we're doing right now. Other than that, this business has been here fifty-three years already now. It's gotten better because we do the research. I have a house in Japan when I go there. What I try to do—I was going two or three times a year. I would be doing research there, finding small places that do specifically something really well. The thing about Osaka, we do a lot of things really well. We try to refine it all the time. I'd say our sushi is probably hands down the best that you'd be able to get anywhere. But that's just a personal opinion, not jaded, of course, by the fact that I own this place.

I would say a lot of it has to do with just being true to yourself and being black and white and doing what you're supposed to do, finding out what you're supposed to do in life, and then doing it, because everything else becomes easy. Music was one of those things that at that point in my life, I was supposed to be doing it, and so I did.

Both my kids are at Berklee right now. One is a freshman and one is graduating in July with a master's, Global Jazz Initiative. She was one of twenty recipients out of three hundred fifty to get a full ride there. But she graduated from Eastman School of Music, which only took twelve people that year in that program. She's a player, but she's more than that, a lot more well-rounded than just being a player. She understands marketing. She understands social media and stuff like that. Younger generation. Ideology-wise, we don't agree, but what do expect for somebody from Rochester? It is what it is. I'm a baby boomer, and she's two generations up, because I had my kids young. But we don't worry too much about that. Eventually they come around. It's like the old joke goes. What happens when a little girl hits the lottery? She becomes conservative.

Can you talk about what was really difficult in those early days of Vegas? You mentioned that you were one of three Asians in your school. What was that like?

In order to survive you had to be good at everything. Survive, meaning keeping your personal—as an Asian male, it was tough, enough because all there was were White people and mainly Whites, Blacks and some Hispanics, but not that many, but a small percent of Asians. In order to keep your self-esteem, you had to excel at everything, pretty much sports and music. I always realized that if I was good at sports and I was good at music, then there was a balance there. If you go one way or the other, for men, I think, and people in general, you miss something. If you're good at both, that was considered being a universal man; you understood the fine arts and you understood that part of humanity. Then if you're good at sports, you still have that drive and that killer instinct. When you put them both together, you probably became a human being that was okay in that tunnel vision. That was probably one of my greatest problems being just a musician was that I saw most of the musicians when I was at Berklee—they were still tunnel vision; the only thing they thought of was how good could they become? Literally, when I was there, you had people in the practice room for twelve to fourteen hours a day, and they wouldn't even eat dinner because they were calculating, "Okay, it takes thirty minutes to eat dinner and then it takes me an hour to digest, oh that's too long." They would skip meals and just be in the practice room.

But you know what? There are a few books out there, tremendous, if you're really interested in music. Coyle's *Talent Code*, if you ever get a chance to read that book, it's a tremendous book.¹ It's called *Talent Code*, and it talks about how—especially if you're an educator, I would recommend that to anybody. I still taught over at Idyllwild School of Music of

¹ Daniel Coyle, *The Talent Code: Greatness Isn't Born. It's Grown. Here's How.* (New York: Bantam, 2009).

the Arts until my youngest kid—she’s a freshman in college—I quit two years ago because as long as I taught there, they had free tuition there. It’s up in the San Jacinto Mountains. It was run by USC [University of Southern California] for a long time. I guess they’re still affiliated with that. But that’s one of the better books. There are so many books out there.

When I hit my forties, I decided that I was going to try to learn about everything. Well, specifically about staying healthy; I started that. I did that for maybe two or three years, and I had a stack of books like that that I’ve read through, naturally. After I got that then I decided—before that and then after that (death spell), I tried to read every book that I could about business, great books, like *Good to Great*, tremendous if you’re ever interested in business. I do lectures over at CSN [College of Southern Nevada] sometimes. I give them a list of books that if you’re really serious about learning about business, you don’t really have to go get an MBA to be specifically understanding, because what you learn in school is completely different to real life application; the circumstances are different, but there are some principles that are tremendous.

As an educator, *Talent Code* was one of the best. It only came out maybe a few years ago, but once I read that—it’s two books. I think it was Coyle, I’m pretty sure it is. If you’re a musician or if you’re an educator, a tremendous book. It talks about three things for musicians to excel. One, you need an ignition. It talks about all these hotbeds of places where people came from, like musicians, the Disney singers, small town in Texas, one music store that had a teacher there. Ignition usually happens when kids see somebody and say, “Oh, I want to do that.” Two, you have to have a master teacher, somebody that’s going to guide you. The third thing, which is probably the most important, they call it—it’s not dedicated practice, but it’s intentional. You have to be intentional about what you do. Tremendous book, because it tells you when somebody’s trying to find out about something, learning a new talent especially in music, the

dexterity of the muscles that are involved in it, it's a matter of training those, and the only way to train them a lot of times is if you're intentional about what you want to do. If you go from point A to point B, then you'll develop them. But it's having all three of them.

It also talks about—I don't know if it's in *Talent Code*—about all these players—no, I'm thinking about another book, Malcolm Gladwell's book. He has one that's *10,000 Hours*.² That one talks about how musicians literally if you can play ten thousand hours within a period of three or six, three years, you have to practice six hours a day, and six years three hours a day. Every single person that has made it up into the ninetieth percentile has done one or the other. Usually the younger you do it, the better. A perfect example was Tiger Woods. He literally put in his ten thousand hours by the time he was a teenager, and that's why he was so great when he came out. He spent a lot of time doing what he was doing. With a musician, the same thing. They took surveys of kids who were at, I think, Austrian School of Music. The best players reached ten thousand hours the earliest, if you had the discipline to do that. I didn't know about these books that have since come out. I know that for ten years I played at least six to twelve hours a day or six to ten hours a day.

As a jazz musician—I could have been a classical player. I was offered to play classical at New England Conservatory and stuff like that. But jazz, it felt like I could never grasp or become as good as I wanted, whereas classical music, you learn all the excerpts, you learn them well, and then what else is there to do? You just have to know the right people and play in a major symphony or something. But jazz is one of those things that doesn't matter how hard you worked and how long, it's step learning. Learning is in steps. It's never gradual. You go along like this and all of a sudden, boom, you're on the next step, and then go along. Sometimes you

² The 10,000 hours theory was presented by Malcolm Gladwell in *Outliers: The Story of Success* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2011).

go a little bit. But you keep working at it and then you go to the next level. I always felt that it was something I could never master. You're really good at it, but no matter how hard you worked... And that's what kept me from getting bored. I got bored real easy. If I learned something and I understood it, okay, what's next? Maybe that's why I read. Readers become leaders. I tell that to my kids all the time. Literally, just have a thirst for knowledge. That's what I tell these kids that I hire. But generation is different. It's easy to think about it and have that intention, but to actually do it, it's very hard.

SE: *May I ask you about the Las Vegas connection with the Idyllwild School?*

That's a huge connection there, because—I don't know if you know Zel Lowman. His son, Bill Lowman, that's where that connection happened. Growing up here, I went to the camps over there, and I also went to Bill Lowman's camp here, and then he became director of that camp. That's why I knew about it. And then being a band director, my buddy from Hemet, California, had probably one of the top programs in the entire country at that time, Jeff Tower. He ran the camp over there. Everywhere I went, whether it was in Massachusetts, where I was studying, I would always go to whoever had the best program in the state to learn from them. That's how, when I came to Vegas, I built tremendous programs. While I was here, I knew the Hemet program was an incredible program in the '80s and even the '90s while Jeff Tower was running that. I got to be friends with him. We'd compete all the time at jazz places and stuff like that. We just got to be good friends. When my kids got of age—and I had long retired, but I was still friends with him—I gave him a call and said, “Hey, listen, I'm trying to get my kids in this program. Can you help me out?” He says, “Yes, come on over. You can teach over there. I'll let you teach whatever you want.” I taught theory, I taught ensembles, and stuff like that, because he knew that I had a background. I beat him a couple of times; that's why he knew. He'll never

admit to it—well, he would, because he knows I did. He knew I had a tremendous program here. But he actually helped me out a lot.

Whatever you decide to do whether it's music or anything else, you need to go to people that are highly successful and pick their brains to say, "Hey, how did you do this? What did you have to do to do this? What does it take?" Well, the number one rule, even my kids will tell you this, is that there is no substitute for hard work. It doesn't matter what you do. You just can't substitute. I always told my kids and the kids that I'm teaching, "You've got to work smart and you've got to work hard if you want to be successful." Working smart just cuts down the time because there's a lot of things that are unnecessary. It goes back to intentional practice. You've got to be intent on what you're trying to do and then you overcome it, whatever you're trying to do.

That was the connection. They did have a camp up at Mount Charleston. It only lasted for three or four years, Bill Lowman, and then he got taken away and became the president of the Idyllwild Summer Program, and that's how that connection started. As junior high, in seventh grade, I went to that program, and I was there all the way through high school; not only that one, but the one next door to it. The summers I spent in summer camp; a month out of the summer was in camp. It helped me see where people were in California because there are so many great players there. But if you go there young, you realize. When I was at—they called it USC Thornton School of Music and the Arts—I was going to camp with people you probably don't know them, but Eric Stoltz and Bronson Pinchot, people like that, that all played musical instruments. These are all the Californians from Bel Air and Hollywood and stuff like that. Little did I know they were going to become actors. Well, they probably were, because they were clowns anyway. I was surrounded in an environment where I was able to understand where

everybody was at, what level you had to be at, at a certain age if you're going to be successful. You just have to. So that's the Las Vegas connection.

Any other questions you have? What else would you like to know?

Can you compare—you obviously went to school on the East Coast, you grew up here, and then you have a home in Japan. How do those lifestyles differ and how are they similar?

East Coast and West Coast are completely different. There's tremendous history on the East Coast, and that's why I have always encouraged my students, if you ever get a chance to study on the East Coast, do it, because it will change your life. That's why I sent both my kids on the East Coast. Much to my demise, especially the one I sent to Rochester, but that's okay. She's in Boston right now. I loved Boston as a student. Everybody loves Boston as a student. You have a town of over two hundred thousand that are transient. They come in and they go with the school season. You've got some of the brightest kids in the world there because you've got MIT [Massachusetts Institute of Technology] right down the street from Berklee, and then you've got Harvard right past there, and then on the other side you've got the Conservatory at Northeastern. It's a college town. Emerson Communication College. If you want to study and you want to be around New England, if you go straight up north, you've got Boston College, Boston University, Wesleyan. It's a college town that changes your thinking because they're old school. I went Back East, but my sister studied at UCLA. Personally, she came back plastic, no depth. You don't have to put that in there because if she ever listens to this... West Coast, they think it's cool and everything like that. But if you want to back yourself up and understand history, go Back East because you get to see things that you read in history books. I was back there last week. I saw the Plymouth Rock, the Mayflower; stuff like that. You've got the north end, where Paul Revere rode. It's just full of history. I was kind of a history buff anyway, so I enjoyed it.

The culture there is different. The cultural experience I got there is invaluable because you realize there are more important things than making money. Money is important only when you need it, which is most of the time because you've got to pay bills. But being a student there, it gets you to realize that, "Hey, as opposed to here, I think there's an environment there where—I don't know now—it's a lot different." Kids are a lot different now. It's just generationally different. We grew up poor. I can't say we were really poor, because we were in a restaurant business. But it doesn't really matter whether you grew up poor. I can be happy being poor or having money; it doesn't really matter. I think it's contentment; you've got to find contentment in whatever you have and just be happy with it. Even the very rich that aren't content, they're always looking. You've got to put things in perspective all the time, family, life itself, longevity of your life. When you start thinking of how short life is. That's why I'm away usually a week out of a month, because this restaurant business, exactly what my mother told me, "If you ever get into this..." That's why I didn't get into it so much. "Your entire life will be over before you look, unless you keep everything in perspective." I don't have to make that much money, but I need to have time. You have to have time. I don't have to make that much money, but I need to have time. You have to have time.

But I can tell you this. I worked hard for at least fifteen years. When I came back here, I was a teacher, and I also worked here three to four days a week, and I had my own business. I was doing a lot of different things. But I realize that when you're young you have the energy and that's when you need to work. You work really hard so that when you get—because I always thought about that. In my twenties I said, "Man, I hope this is going to pay off." Literally my only day off was Saturday that I could sleep in, but the other days I slept six hours a day, four

hours a day. And it did [pay off], because, by the time I hit my forties, I said, “Hey, I don’t even have to work that hard anymore.”

My aunt gave me some great advice when I was in my early twenties. In this town right here, she was a multimillionaire because she invested in houses. She said, “Gene, I know you work seven days a week, so this is what I’m going to tell you to do.” This is when I got back from school and I was working. “I know you work two jobs, so you better be doing something right with your money.” I said, “Okay, give me some advice.” She said, “I’ll find a house for you. Every year you’re going to buy one house.” Back then, you only needed to put down five percent. I bought a house. She said, “Do it for ten years, and after ten years you sell half and pay off the other half and see where you’re at.”

By the time I was thirty-six in the mid-90s, I had an income of about three or four thousand dollars without working because of my house. I said, “Oh, this is cool. I don’t have to...” I could actually quit. But by then you’re making really good money. What’s really good money? It’s all relative to how your lifestyle is. But I don’t have a mortgage, I don’t have this, I don’t have that. But that didn’t happen. I had kids when I was thirty-eight. My first child I was thirty-eight and then the second one when I was forty-two. That’s why I’m still working at sixty-five. I have two stepkids that are in college, too, so I’ve got four kids that are in college right now. Personally, my two, they’re on scholarship. The oldest one is on a full ride. The younger one is 60 percent, so that was easy. Then the other two are great kids, too. They’re at UNLV and UNR. They’re in state, so it’s not that bad. Plus, they were Millennium Scholarships, too, and they had other scholarships. It’s not really bad, but I figured I’d keep working until everybody gets out of school. Right now it looks like two of them might come into the business. If that

happens, then I'll have a lot more than a week out of a month, maybe a couple of weeks, or maybe a month at a time I would like to take off, but we'll see how that's going to work out.

Japan's culture is completely different. I still appreciate Japan a whole lot, because when I first got there—the reason why I speak fluent Japanese is because I started going there at three years old. My parents would send me there for the summers every other year, so I picked up the language. I could speak perfect Japanese. I learned to read and write it in college. Since my grandmother died, I've forgotten most of it anyway, because I used to write her letters every week just so I could keep up with it. Then she died about twenty-five years ago in Japan, and I just said, "No one to write to." That was the end of that.

When I first went there ten or twelve years ago, when I bought this house, people would still—first of all, you don't see any graffiti. You don't see any cigarette butts on the floor. You don't see any litter around there, because people just don't throw things down arbitrarily. And I asked them, "Why is everything so clean?" And they said, "Why shouldn't it be? Because if you throw that piece of paper down, somebody else has got to pick it up." In a small society you don't allow people to do things that cause other people harm. The same goes for theft. It's a small island. If you think about it, it's still an island. People would leave their doors open. They left their bikes outside and stuff. I said, "Hey, don't people steal stuff if your door is unlocked or it's open like that?" And they look at me weird, saying, "Why? It doesn't belong to them." I never really understood that concept until I had a bookkeeper that was in Japan. Sometimes I'd leave a couple hundred dollars in an envelope, and she put it to the side all the time. I said, "If you would have taken that I would have never known." And she looked at me and said, "Why would I do that? It's not mine." I think to myself, "Wow, what a simple mental decision that these guys have. If it doesn't belong to you, don't touch it. It's not yours." They don't even have

that idea. Why should I take it? It doesn't belong to me. As simple as that. They're not really even a Christian society. They're actually Buddhist and Shinto society. We're supposed to be a Christian society here, but nobody really practices it. If you were, you wouldn't do harm to your fellow man or you wouldn't just take things that don't belong to you or do things that are—it goes back to being a homogenous society. Whether you like it or not, if you have a homogenous society, they can pretty much dictate the mores in the entire country, because they're all living together. But when you start—I'm not saying the U.S. is bad—when you start letting people from other countries in and everything else like that gets mixed together, that's great; it's a melting pot. You can understand that. But a lot of them do not have the same moral standards that you have. It's okay to steal. It's okay to commit crime. They come in here...But that's everybody, because we're all imperfect. But in Japan it's not okay to do things like that. It's just a moral code of conduct.

My cousin who lives in San Jose, she's an architect for Stanford University. She's been doing that for twenty years, but she's getting ready to retire. I took her to Japan maybe a few years ago. She goes, "I want to live there." I said, "Well, why?" Because everything was so organized and people respect each other, even to the point where for me it's a little uncomfortable because I live in a high-rise, a condo. Incredible view of Osaka, obviously. I told my neighbor, "Hey, man, I'm thinking about getting a barbeque and barbequing out here." She said, "Oh no, you can't do that." I said, "Why?" She goes, "Because you pollute your neighbor's air." I'm thinking, okay. You do not want to pollute your neighbor's air, meaning that they think that you're going to impose on them by having a smell going around even though it does smell good. They're that cognizant of everybody's space. They said, "We live in a small country and everybody is close together, so if we don't respect the people's space, then you're just going to

have chaos.” They look at you weird if you start doing something that’s not what they think of as being a societal norm. That’s the situation right there.

Does that kind of answer your question?

Yes. How have you seen Vegas grow? Obviously, you’ve been here and the Strip has dramatically changed. Can you talk about how different it’s looked over the years?

I can tell you with population increase comes everything else that comes with that. I remember growing up we were lucky to have two hundred thousand people in town, and now it’s over two million. I remember when it was only eight hundred thousand.

What has changed? Old school versus new school, meaning especially the Strip and a lot of the properties, they’ve all become corporations where the only thing that mattered was the bottom line. Literally, because we deal with hotels all the time, they tell me that every square foot—I forgot what the number was—but every square foot of that building has to make money, or they consider, okay, you have two hundred thousand square feet, we have to make X amount of money; that’s the way they look at. Whereas in the old days, the last of the bastion old-school places was the Horseshoe. Benny Binion would come out with a bucket of Coors handing them out to people that were gambling and stuff like that. They understood that you took care of the customers and you’d always have a full house. Nowadays, I talk to some of these game makers—they’d hate me if I tell you this kind of stuff—back in the days when it was 51 percent house and 49 percent the gamblers, you had a chance to win. Then it started creeping up and creeping up and a lot of the casinos that I deal with, I never gamble in there because they’ve tightened them all the way to 89, 91 percent. When you go in there, you realize...oh, these people. You see the difference in people. In the old days people used to be happy in the casinos because a lot of them would win and they would gamble for a lot longer. But nowadays if you go

through a casino with slots, everybody is sad and everybody is quiet and you don't hear any yelling and screaming. It's not like a party. It's serious because they're all losing their money. But these casinos, they don't get built by people winning money. It's just a losing proposition if you're on machines. We'll put it at that. People still hold out for that small chance that you can have. Growing up here, I don't gamble because we already know it's a waste of time. I could do better things with my time than gambling.

Vegas has a tendency to grow on you because, honestly, I've lived everywhere. I've got a house in Oregon, too, which I bought when I was teaching because I always thought that I wanted to be on a farm. So many times, if you're a teacher here, especially a band director, there's so much work, and when you have a break, you want to go where there's nothing to do with anything. It's in southern Oregon; I've had a house there for twenty-five years. People say, "Well, it's Vegas. Vegas is different. The mentality of Vegas is different." Everywhere else I would consider being normal. It's here that's different. People are normal everywhere else. Vegas, it's different because it's almost like people come here and say, "Well, we can do whatever we want and get away with it, and then we go back and live our normal lives." That's a terrible, terrible mentality to have, especially if you're coming to our town where normal people are trying to live normal lives because it just jades everything. I would say that's the biggest change I've seen.

For better or for worse, being in business off the Strip, the casinos going in that direction has been good for me because I don't have to charge what casinos charge. I can keep my prices down. I own the building and I own the land of every business that I have, so I don't have to pay rent. It paid off especially when COVID hit. Because I'm not paying rent, it's not a big deal. Okay, I can close down. I never did close down, but I could close down. Like catering, I could

lose most of my business and not a big deal. We just make cuts where we have to and then we just keep surviving that way. I think the more expensive the Strip becomes, the better off it is for people like me off the Strip because people recognize value and they'll come to value.

The sad thing about it, when I was growing up musicians had it—there was so much work here. In high school I was working. There was so much work for musicians. It's funny because when I graduated and came back here, everything went to tape that year. I go, wow, that's great. But it's okay. We all adapt. The writing was pretty much on the way anyway, pretty much that it was going to go out. It's sad because live music went out with that in 1982, actually '81-82 they all went to tape. What are you going to do? You learn to adapt. You look to go into various other ways to make money. It doesn't matter. Just love what you do. That's the only advice I got, people. Because if you have passion, most of the obstacles will be overcome, so that's the good thing about that.

Any other questions?

Yes. You mentioned that your Berklee experience in a previous interview went sour. What made it so?

My previous—oh, my experience there?

Yes.

I felt bad because of the work. I realized that, okay, you know what? But I knew I was supposed to be a band director because when I was—I can't say it ever went sour there. I always thought it was cool. It was probably the place that a kid can grow up in. The environment is tremendous because, like I said, you're around a bunch of college kids, lots of ideas, lots of energy. I had friends from MIT that were just off the charts smart. They were not only smart, but they were

well-rounded, and that's what it takes to get into MIT. You can't just be smart. It doesn't matter if you're just smart. They don't want just smart people. They need people that are well-rounded.

One of my buddies, you would never know him, but he spoke fluent Russian. He was from New Trier High School out of Chicago. That's one of the better high schools. He studied four years of Russian, so he was fluent in Russian. He was studying to be an engineer. In the summers he would go back. When games [concepts] just started studying, they would hire him, back then, fifteen hundred dollars a month just to think of games; that's it: concept, game concepts. I'm sure he's doing well now somewhere else. All these guys.

MIT graduates, they're different. If you're going to school there, they're different, too. But you're around people that are incredibly smart people, gifted people that have creativity off the charts, brain power that's off the charts. That was a great thing. The city was tremendous. It got me to learn.

The only thing that soured me was my living experience there because it was so cold, the snow and the ice. I said, "Wow, I grew up in a place where it doesn't even snow or there's no ice. Why am I fighting this?" Because I was driving twenty-five miles to go to work where I was teaching. I said, "That's it." I just packed my stuff up and came back here. I knew there was work here.

You also mentioned that you wanted to help children develop an incredible work ethic.

Why was that so important to you?

I think when I first started teaching at Hyde Park, I realized even at that time, in the '80s, there were a lot of kids that parents were both working, they had no direction, and I had felt that I was supposed to be their—not on work ethic, but being a Christian, I felt that, "Hey, somebody has got to set an example for these kids. Give them something where they can feel comfortable

coming into.” A lot of them had no idea what right or wrong was. It was incredible how jaded this town can make people. Parents were just too busy working. That’s why I felt that, okay, maybe a voice of sanity in their lives, and that’s what they gravitated to and that’s why the program just grew, incredible, because they knew that I was real, I was sincere. Kids can see sincerity. They can feel whether you’re real. They know whether you’re a good person or not. They can sense it and they have an attraction towards that. That’s why.

To start going back to your music career, I read that your mom was an organ player and your grandfather was a professional violinist.

Yes.

How did that impact you with them being accomplished musicians?

Well, if they weren’t musicians, then I probably wouldn’t have got into music because they’re the ones that allowed me to. My grandfather was mainly a worship leader. He was one of the first missionaries in Japan, and that was really crazy then because they were persecuted. For him to be Japanese, he worked with American missionaries. But he played all the string instruments. My mother played organ and she played accordion. She understood that—and my dad in a lot of ways understood that the arts were important, too, because his brother wanted to be an artist, but his dad told him, “No way. You’re not going to make any money.”

When a parent actually impedes a natural gift that a child has, the child usually grows up and they’re pretty much bitter because they never did what they were supposed to do. My parents, when I started making money in high school as a musician, they said, “Well, I guess he’s going to be okay as a musician.” My dad was paying me ten dollars a day to wash dishes here. In high school I’d make seventy-five to a hundred dollars for a three-hour gig, back then, and this was pretty consistent. That’s when they said, “Go ahead if you want to do that.”

I was going to go on the road with a big band, Woody Herman, at eighteen. My teacher was going to introduce me to it. He says, "Yes, you might want to do this." Then I told my parents and they kind of freaked out, because they're education prone; they were for education all the time. And they were smart because they realized, how long is that life going to last? Because I've been on the road before. It wasn't that glamorous, once I was in college and stuff like that. Just doing one night going city to city, you just never feel right. You can't sleep. Your lips are always puffy because you're playing too much. It's one of those things that I realized. At first, I thought it was great, but then they said, "We don't care. We'll let you go to any school you want, but you get your degree first and then you can go on the road." It allowed me to grow up, going to school, and going to school in Boston helped me to see a lot of different things, especially in music. There were a hundred trumpet players there. I was hands down the best player in the state when I left here, and when I got there, I'd say I was probably in the top 95 percent because I could read anything and had good range. Even my teacher said, "Oh, Gene, you're going to make a lot of money playing." Little did they know I had different ideas. But I would say they were good with it. They had the influence that they allowed me to do what I was probably supposed to do.

My last question for you would be: Do you have a favorite musician of all time? If you do have one, why?

I listen to a lot of different people. When it comes to trumpet players, I enjoy old school, like Clifford Brown. New school, I've heard a couple of people that are absolutely tremendous, Sean Jones, he was a professor over at Berklee, and I've heard him play a couple of times at (NHA) and places like that. He's tremendous. People don't realize that when we come to musicians, it just depends on the instrument. I listen to everybody; piano players, since my daughter is a piano

player. I love Chick. I've seen Chick many times, Chick Corea. I even got to meet him. My other daughter is an upright bass player. Bass players, she likes all the younger cats. Ray Brown. I love the way Ray Brown sang. Contemporary, I like Brian Bromberg; people like that. She's into...who am I thinking about? Big Black guy.

Thundercat?

No. These are jazz musicians. It will come to me in a minute. She does a lot of transcriptions.

What I do know about now and back then is kids have a tremendous opportunity to become tremendous musicians now because everything is on their iPhone. Whereas when we were studying, it was either a 33 [RPM vinyl records]; literally we'd wear out the bands of whatever we were trying to take off, or when cassette came, that was really great. But when I was in school, it was just reel-to-reel [tape recordings] or 33s. Reel-to-reel was a lot easier because at least you could stop it close to...you'd know what the numbers were. And then when I was going to school, they came out with the half-speed. The problem with the half-speed: They took everything down an octave. It was okay. It wasn't really a problem, but it helped out a whole lot because if something is really fast and you're trying to transcribe, it's almost impossible to transcribe unless it's slowed down. Now they have half-speed at the octave where it's actually played, and they have a library of thousands with Spotify and iTunes and all those where you can find any tune that you're looking for in an instant. You don't have to go through a library. You don't have to go through a reel-to-reel to find out what number it's at, or even a cassette. You don't have to search for anything. It's right there.

They've got it really easy if you ask me. But because it's easier they can become tremendous musicians, and they don't have to work as hard as we did to get to the resources that they need to get to; and I think that's with everything now, and that's why you see in all fields

people become a lot smarter a lot quicker, because they've got the resources right in front of them. Whereas in the old school you had to go find the book, find where it's written about, and then you read it, and it's like, really? This is forever. That's why now you guys have tremendous opportunities to be incredible at whatever you do. I'm sure twenty years or thirty years they're going to come up with something different, and you're going to say, "Wow, old school way." Then, twenty or thirty years from now, all you do is think about it, but you still have to search a little bit, so that's a difference.

Like I said, if it all came down to anything, it's hard work and you have to love it. That's why it's so important that you love your work. Because if you're going to spend a lot, just love to do what you love to do and then it's not—the old saying goes, if you love your work, it's not like you work a day in your life. Anything else?

I'm going to pass off the questions to Cecilia if she has any.

Could you tell us about why your father chose to name the restaurant Osaka?

Actually, my mother is from Osaka and that's why. It's the second-largest city in Japan. That's where she grew up. She's the one who actually started the restaurant, my mother did. If you want to know the historical background of my mother, she worked at the first Japanese restaurant in the United States, which is Kawafuku. She emigrated from Japan to here because right after the war everybody was so darn poor, and, literally, they were eating grass and a handful of rice for five kids in Japan. She felt that she had to do something. She had a friend in Colorado that invited her to come out. She came out. Then she realized that the Japanese community was the largest in L.A. at that time, so she worked at the first Japanese restaurant in L.A. in 1953 or '54; somewhere around there. It was called Kawafuku, and they were famous because they brought chefs from Japan and they also made the food for Japan Airlines and stuff like that.

That's how my dad met her, because he realized that if he was going to find a Japanese wife, he had to go to L.A., so he frequented that restaurant almost every weekend. He was talking with my mother, and my mother just joked with him because he said, "Why don't you come to Las Vegas and marry me?" She said, "The only way I'd marry you is if you bring me a big diamond ring." Guess what? He got her a big diamond ring. Then when she got here, she said, "Why in the world did I come to hell?" Because she thought this was hell back then. After she had some kids, she was too busy raising her kids, so it was fine. Things work out the way they're supposed to, eventually.

Younger kids, what I worry about them, is they worry too much about everything. They're just a little bit too sensitive about everything. But I think that's our educational system. I blame that on that. Also, just society in general. Not to get in the weeds or anything, but things work out no matter what happens. You as an individual decide whether you're going to be happy or not. Contentment is the most important thing. Just be content with everything you're doing at this time. You never know what the next day is going to bring and it should be an adventure to you. You shouldn't be disappointed or sad about anything. Sometimes we do feel bad. I'm not saying—we all feel down sometimes. But, hey, you know what? We're alive. We can move. We can eat. The alternative is that we're six feet under smelling the roots and not the roses, correct? I'd rather be smelling the roses than smelling the roots.

SE: *You talked about your mother playing the accordion. Why the accordion?*

Because it's very similar to the organ because, number one, the keyboard. But she realized that she couldn't take an organ with her everywhere, so she bought an accordion and she could always take it wherever she wanted to. That's why she got into that. That's one of the instruments that I can't name two people—I'm looking at them right now—two jazz accordions

that are tremendous right now, and I can only think of one of them right now. But organists...I don't even know them. There are a couple of organists that are tremendous, and one is actually coming at the end of this month, and it's Akiko Tsuruga. She's Japanese. She's going to be with Jeff Hamilton Trio, him and Graham Dechter, the guitar player. Akiko Tsuruga, she's from Japan; she's Japanese, incredible jazz organist in the vein of the greatest organist that I can think of right now. I can't think of any right now. It's a mind block of who I'm thinking, but I can see him because I've heard him play. There's only two that are just tremendous that I know of, and she's one of them. At the end of this month, she'll be over at Stoney's. (Indiscernible) That's because I'm friends with the Lowdens in LVA [Las Vegas Academy of the Performing Arts]. My kids both went to LVA, so there was a connection here, too. Did you grow up here?

No. I grew up in Washington state.

Yes, yes, Port Arthur, there's a jazz camp over there. My kids went to that one, too. I used to compete with Roosevelt High and all those, a few of them. He was the top guy up there, but his problem was that all he did was swing. I can't say that was a problem. He had a good program up there. Washington is a great place to play jazz if you're a jazz musician. Actually, one of the trumpet players from Rochester moved to Washington. I can't even think of him right now, but I can picture him. That's a cool place to grow up, in Washington. My kids like it. I don't like the rain.

Neither do I.

That's why I live in southern Oregon where there's 50 percent less rain, right in Grants Pass, right outside of Medford. It's still beautiful, but you don't have the rain there. I think it's a little depressing every day to see rain. I've had enough dark winters in Boston to last a lifetime. My

kids like Portland and Seattle. I don't know why. They're both dumps. Sorry. That's a personal thought that I had there, which you guys can probably cut that.

SE: *Ayrton asked you about your favorite musicians in general. I'd like to ask about some of the local mentors that you had in music.*

One of the best teachers that I had in town, he played with a group called Chase years ago; it was five trumpet players. He was the secretary of the union here. His name is Allen Weir. To this day he had a lot to do with me even going to Berklee, because that's where he went. But he's the one who probably straightened my honorship out, and he spent the time to make me a great player. Actually, I did it, but he would be what I'd call the master teacher in *The Talent Code*, Coyle's *Talent Code*. Ignition was seeing all the great players. Growing up here, they'd have these, they're called kicks bands at the union, big bands, and fifteen- and sixteen-year-olds, seventeen-year-olds, we were able to sit in especially if our teacher was somebody that was involved in it. That's how. I guess that could be what we call an ignition because you see...there are a lot of great players that came through this town. Alex Acuña, drummer. What do you play?

Saxophone.

Sax? Joe Riggs was out of North Texas. Sax players...Charles... and not Charles Moody, but James Moody. James Moody was here. These are all kids that came in—Alex Acuña, they all came in and played with my high school group when I was growing up here. The drummers, like—well, not Santo. Santo Cervino was a drummer here, too, but we're talking about...he was a drummer for a guitar player on the Strip. Santana. Who am I thinking about? The Rays, father and son, grew up here. There were just a lot of great players that came through here and they were old school, too. A lot of the great sax players out of North Texas—Joe Riggs, I remember him—just players that played with Woody and Buddy and stuff like that. Don Menza was here

for a while. I grew up with him. He ended up going to Europe. He's passed away. All the old school people that I know have also passed away now for one reason or another. They just got old. There's a sax player in town that's from Washington that was teaching and taught my kids, Darren Motamedy. He's a smooth jazz player. He was number nineteen on the charts a few years ago. He still goes back to Seattle and plays all the time. It's hard to find gigs here. It's one of those times.

SE: *What's one of your earliest memories here of you playing for an audience of any size?*

You know what? We played so much here. I had a general business group that played covers. Growing up in high school, all the all-state groups and stuff like that. We just played. We just had fun. I played in a big band, a professional big band. If you're a musician here, you just played everywhere; all the time you tried to play. There's no opportunities like that right now for a lot of musicians. It's pretty much dried up, and with COVID it really did dry up. It's really sad. Other than that, I can't remember.

I remember seeing some of the greatest jazz musicians playing in, for instance, Paddy's Pub, trombone player. Who am I thinking of right now? He was playing in a trio there. That's one of the world's greatest jazz trombone players playing to an audience of five. There's something really seriously wrong with this town, I was thinking back then. It will come to me. He was a big German guy, just an incredible player. Carson—no, it wasn't Carson Smith. It will come to me. There were a lot of great players that came to this town. Richie Cole was here for a while. By the time he got here, he was all washed up. A lot of players have come through thinking—well, there was a lot of work at one time. All the great musicians, a lot of them went to Branson and they went wherever they could continue to work. A lot of them just started doing something different, completely different, which is fine, too.

Most instrumentalists...trumpet is a hard instrument. If you don't practice every day for three to five hours, in three days you're considered a fraud. It's one of those things. That's why I don't play anymore, because I don't want to be considered a fraud. You've got to practice, there's no two ways about it. My assistant when I was teaching, one of the reasons why I had such a great program was I had a sax teacher that also went to Berklee; his name was Jimmy Higg. He taught all the top players in the entire state. They would all come down to study with him, and he'd just fire you right away if you didn't practice. He was blind, but he played. Every one of his players, just monsters, developed monsters. Those are things that I remember in town. There's hotbeds everywhere.

I studied in—it doesn't even exist right now. It used to be called Vesely's Music, Ted Vesely. You remember that? If you've been here for a long time, you'd know that. That's where I met Allen Weir. I had a few teachers, but he was the most influential of all my teachers that I had. I studied with some great players and great teachers. Players and teachers are a little different. Teachers know how to explain things to you and they can understand what modality you're actually learning. Everybody learns in a different mode. Some people have to be shown. Some people need an explanation. Some people, they just need to visualize it. You just have to find out how you learn. If you want to be a great jazz musician, find the players that you like the most and just start taking off their solos and stuff, and you start developing your ears, and after a while you realize, oh, I understand what they're doing. Great young saxophone players, one of the best ones I've heard lately, if you've even heard of him, Joel Frahm.

Yes.

Incredible. The guy is a monster. I heard about him in New York. I heard him here when he came. Bob Mintzer was great, too, in his prime. There are a lot of them that have come into this town.

SE: I'd like to shift back a little bit. I'm curious, was Las Vegas actually in the zone for the camps?

I don't know. I thought, yes, they were. But because my grandfather was working on the Union Pacific Railroad.

He was mobile.

Sure. He was in and out. His route was Zzyzx to Vegas all the time. He was an engineer, so he was going back and forth.

With Zzyzx, that put him in California.

Yes. He could have been there, because I know after the war I knew for sure he was here, but he was going back and forth because [the job] was there. My dad used to say that we moved out in Zzyzx because it was too small and if somebody got sick you couldn't help them, so that's one of the reasons why.

You mentioned that your dad was lucky because he knew people in California who had land.

But what happened to the family's property when they had to go into the camp? Did somebody buy it for pennies on the dollar?

That's exactly what happened. The neighbors saw it and they said, "This is our chance; we can steal this property." That's pretty much what they did. But you had some good neighbors that said, "Don't worry about a thing. We'll take care of it until you get out because it's not going to be forever that you're going to be in." These were U.S. citizens that were going into that camp, lost everything they had. Okay, we can talk about it now, but big deal, it didn't affect me? Well,

it did affect me because it affected my dad, and it affected my dad's attitude towards everything. He was bitter until the day he died, and I told him that too. I said, "Listen, you've got to let go of this, because that is the stuff that causes cancer." Being bitter, holding onto a grudge, stuff like that just eats your insides, and that's pretty much what I think happened to him.

How old was he when he went into the camp?

He was seventeen. Just as he was finishing high school and getting ready to go to college. It was a sad thing that happened. That's history.

Here is a desert kid all of a sudden up on a hot mountain.

It's cold up there, snow, everything. If you ever get a chance, it's a great museum to go to, and it took me sixty years to get up there. But if it wasn't for COVID, I would have never went up. I was in Cody at the time and my uncle—he's still alive; he's the youngest out of the siblings; he's eighty-six—he said, "Hey, you're up in Cody. You're only twenty minutes away from Heart Mountain. You've got to go see it." And I said, "Oh, it is?" That's what happened.

How did you feel when you first saw it?

I said, "Okay, he has a right to feel the way he did." Because it was literally you get off the train and into a barbed wire camp, is what it was, and the barracks were all wood and they were cold because, obviously, there is little insulation and it gets really cold in the wintertime. But they made do. They did whatever they had to do. They were only allowed to carry what they could carry in one hand, one suitcase. That's why a lot of them sold their property and their houses really cheap. My grandparents did the same thing. They didn't know what was going to happen. The neighbors around them pretty much said, "Hey, listen, if you don't sell this for this much, you may not get anything because it may be gone by the time you're back." That's a terrible thing to say. Your house and everything else like that. It was a travesty, but it's something that

should never be repeated, but it happened, so what are you going to do? They didn't know any better. My dad was seventeen. The whole world was his oyster until then. They were thrown in the camp. They allowed them to get out and work in the Idaho farms, pick potatoes for a little better than the pay that they were getting in the camp, which is nothing anyway. That's where my dad said, "Okay, I'll go there." He earned extra money there. But when they gave him the opportunity to join the army, he did that right away.

Was he in army intelligence?

Signal Corps. Operator and stuff like that. They never asked him to do intelligence work. They wouldn't because they didn't trust the Japanese. They only trusted him on the Eastern front, so he worked European front, so that's what happened on that. It's too bad because...it's something you just shake your head over. But you're talking 1940s, but still you would think...just a frenzy that happened. That could happen here, too, anytime. Look what happened in Georgia and stuff like that, where the Asians were targeted because of the Wuhan flu. You just don't know people, and a lot of that has to do with upbringing, maybe just ignorance or a lack of knowledge of understanding people; that everybody is different and where they actually come from. What are you going to say? It is what it is.

SE: When you were at Berklee, did people disrespect the place you were from, Las Vegas?

No. They knew because a lot of good musicians were out here at that time. They knew that was a place where a lot of good musicians would go to work, so they figured, okay. A lot of Berklee musicians were in Vegas playing at that time, so it wasn't like...Tremendous players. One of the greatest musicians that already passed away here, his name was Dick Wright. I don't know if you remember him. But he had ears down to the ground. He would listen to something—I would still think that even in the '80s, Boston was a town because there were a lot of educated people and

there were people from all over the country going to that school, Berklee. There were at least maybe a couple hundred Japanese going there at that time. It was one of those things that great players, like—I don't know if you've ever heard of (Makoto Ozone), piano player. He's tremendous. If you ever get a chance, look him up. He was going to school then back there. Tiger Okoshi, a jazz trumpet player. Sadao Watanabe was a Japanese sax player that graduated. He's a lot older than all of us. He's one of the first pioneers of Japanese jazz, then jazz saxophone was made in Japan coming out of Berklee. There's a list of them. I think music is probably one of the only things where there's not too much—they respect you more than they respect your race where you have a chance to...they respect your ability.

SE: How about at Harvard?

Harvard was a tough place, because what they did was they cured all the classes to the top students. If somebody was really, really smart, they would push the class so hard that they'd be like, oh man, you've got to be kidding me. I mean, the class that I thought would be the easiest was one of my hardest, mechanical Japanese. They had some guy just pushing that thing so fast, because they didn't care if you were at the bottom or anything else like that, but if you were at the top, they would push the classes as hard as the top student was. That's why you see a lot of people drop in that class. I stuck it out and I ended up with a C. I was just happy to get a C in that class. I was working there and I was going to school and stuff like that still. But it took me thirty minutes up and thirty minutes back every day, and I'd be playing a cassette tape. You'd have to learn one cassette a day at least, so you'd have to practice that too. It was what it was. If I learned anything going to school in that kind of environment it's that everybody is different. As a musician, when you get in a situation where there are a whole bunch of people just as good as you, some that are better, some that are not, you don't even worry about that. You find out where

your weakness is, and you work on your weakness yourself, and you should be your own judge, not anybody else. If that's not good enough, then it's not. But you should know yourself where you need to work and practice. Sax players, there's so many of them, especially when I was going, you don't think about who is better or anything else like that. You just had to think about, okay, where do I need to go? How do I need to improve? Where am I going to go from here to here? Be intentional and you'll be fine. You never worry about where you're at. As long as you know that you're working hard and you're going where you want to be, you'll be fine.

Emotionally musicians are very vulnerable in that area.

SE: One more question. You mentioned your uncle is in his eighties, and I wondered about your elderly relatives right now and what steps they're taking to stay safe.

Well, he was the Parks and Recreation director in Culver City. He's retired. He's pretty much in his house all the time. But I think they've gotten their shots. It is what it is.

I actually meant not from the virus so much as from the anti-Asian violence.

It doesn't really matter. There's going to be violence everywhere all the time. I think as long as you—I always told my kids, “Just don't stick your head out. Just lead a low-profile life. Do what you have to do every day, and not worry about anything else.” Sometimes they listen; sometimes they don't. What are you going to do? You just lead a low-profile life and you do what you have to do every day. It doesn't matter whatever you're doing, go with the flow and be cognizant that there are people out there that are probably uneducated and they want to blame somebody for this virus and they want to do something. But that's totally ridiculous. If they came to my house, it's the wrong house to come to. I've got dogs and I've got guns. That's baby boomer talk. I taught my kids how to shoot a gun, too, but they hate me for that too. They're both girls. I told them, “You only need a gun when you actually really need one. That's the only time when you

need it. And then if you don't have it that's when you're going to really wish you did have it." Because you never know. People are crazy nowadays. But I'm not going to go looking for provoking anybody or anything else like that. But if they come to me, then it's something to really think about. What are you going to do? But I don't think it's ever going to get to that point because being a man of faith, I just think if you depend on the creator of this world to keep you safe, you're probably going to be safe. You are going to be safe if you believe in a higher being. To each its own. But I've seen enough in this world to really realize that there is somebody else in charge and not me. I'm not in charge. Just be on the right side of it; that's what I'm saying. If there is a creator out there to protect me, I'm going to be on his side; that's it. I'm not going to be on the other side because I've seen enough in sixty-one years where I cannot deny it that there is something higher out there. If you're a Christian, obviously you believe in God and Christ. That's where I come from. I'm not ashamed of it. I'm just telling you why I am the way I am. I've just seen enough.

Any other questions? Okay.

SE: *Thank you so much. This was wonderful.*

Hopefully it is something that you can use because there's not too many of me here, because Asians growing up in Las Vegas are a rarity. Most people have come from somewhere else, but I actually grew up here. I never thought I'd live to come back here, but I ended up in the golden handcuffs. Golden handcuffs meaning, honestly, I was on my way to Japan to play in the studios there, and then my buddy offered me the job at Hyde Park, so I took that. Then I was working here, and I started making a lot of money and I realized, why am I going to go to Japan? I can make plenty of money here. That's how I got stuck back here. I can't really say it's been bad. It's been really good here, because anybody that wants to work, the opportunity is here. If you guys

are ever looking for a job, I'm always hiring, bus service, servers, any position. If you want to make some side money, those are great positions to have especially if you're a student. You work very short hours and make good money. I have a few UNLV students right now. That's a plug for Osaka. I prefer that you know Japanese food if you work for me or else you'll stay as a busser until you learn it. Okay, are we good?

SE: *Thank you so much.*

Nice meeting you guys.

[End of recorded interview]