

**Music at MIT Oral History Project**

**Samuel Jay Keyser**

*Interviewed*

*by*

**Forrest Larson**

**September 22, 2010**

**Interview no. 1**

**Massachusetts Institute of Technology  
Lewis Music Library**

Transcribed by MIT Academic Media Services and 3Play Media.  
Cambridge, MA

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Transcript Editor: Forrest Larson

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## Contributors

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Interview conducted by Forrest Larson on September 22, 2010, in the studio of MIT Academic Media Production Services. First of three interviews. Second interview: December 2, 2010; third interview: December 17, 2010. Duration of the audio recording is 1:49:29.

### Music at MIT Oral History Project

The Lewis Music Library's *Music at MIT Oral History Project* was established in 1999 to document the history of music at MIT. For over 100 years, music has been a vibrant part of the culture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. This history covers a wide variety of genres, including orchestral, chamber, and choral musical groups, as well as jazz, musical theater, popular and world music. Establishment of a formal music program in 1947 met the growing needs for professional leadership in many of the performing groups. Shortly thereafter, an academic course curriculum within the Division of Humanities was created. Over the years, the music faculty and alumni have included many distinguished performers, composers, and scholars. Through in-depth recorded audio interviews with current and retired MIT music faculty, staff, former students, and visiting artists, the *Music at MIT Oral History Project* is preserving this valuable legacy for the historical record. These individuals provide a wealth of information about MIT. Furthermore, their professional lives and activities are often historically important to the world at large. Audio recordings of all interviews are available in the MIT Lewis Music Library.

## 1. Childhood and family

FORREST LARSON: It's my pleasure to welcome Samuel Jay Keyser. He is Professor Emeritus in the Department of Linguistics and Philosophy at MIT. He is a poet and also a well-regarded trombonist, and it is his musical life that will provide the context for most of the topics discussed in this interview. I am Forrest Larson. We're in the studio of MIT Academic Media Production Services. Jay, thanks so much for coming. It's a real pleasure to have you here.

SAMUEL JAY KEYSER: It's a pleasure to be here, Forrest. Thanks for asking me.

LARSON: Sure. Can you tell me when and where you were born?

KEYSER: 1935. That's 75 years ago, if you can believe that. I can't. Ah, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

LARSON: Oh. But then you had grown up in Washington, DC?

KEYSER: Yes. My parents—I was born during the Depression, and what had happened was that my father had a pretty good job in a hotel. And they had a—my mother and father had a penthouse on the top floor of the hotel, and they actually had an apartment out of town. They were doing very well. And then the depression hit, and my father—the hotel closed—my father lost his job. And so he went to Washington, looking for work. And I and my mother stayed in Philadelphia. I have only one really sort of Proustian memory of that part of my life, but most of it is just a blank. And then my father got a job, and we—he rented a room in a rooming house. And my mother and I went down. And I went there, I arrived, I guess, in Washington when I—in 1938, when I was three years old.

LARSON: Wow. Can you tell me about your father, his name, and the kind of work he was doing in Washington?

KEYSER: Well, my father's name was Abraham L. Keyser. Now, why the L? Well, he actually never had a middle name. But because he had come to America from Russia, he thought that he'd put in the L for Lincoln, because it seemed very American. He went to the—I think he took some classes at the Wharton School of Finance, and essentially was a bookkeeper. And for most of his life when I knew him, he was an accountant for an Oldsmobile concern at 20th and L in Washington, DC called Pohanka, Pohanka Olds. And that's what he did.

My mother was—my father, by the way, was born in Minsk, and my mother was born in Odessa. And they both came to this country at the—around 1900, 1903. They were escaping from the pogroms in Russia. And my mother—

LARSON: What was her name?

KEYSER: Sabina. Sabina Shaplen. And I've—I should tell you that Keyser is not the family name. Keyser is the name of the people who sponsored my father's family when they came to America. And when I asked my father what the real name of the family was, he said he didn't know. And I'm not sure I believe him. But that's what he said.

And so I don't really know what the family name is. But what's more interesting, I don't care. I mean, I've never been somebody who was much interested in roots. It seemed to me that, you know, what was really important was not what was behind you, but what was in front of you. Sort of like the way some countries rule their traffic, and, you know, you pay no attention to what's behind, and it's only what's in front that matters.

And so I've never really looked into the family history, until recently. And the reason is that my middle daughter, Beth, expressed an interest in the history of the family. So I managed to get in touch with a—the Internet is an incredible tool, and through the Internet, I got in touch with a cousin whose name was Shaplen, who sent me all kinds of information about the Shaplen side of the family. Well, my unc—my mother's brother, Joseph Shaplen, was a foreign correspondent for the *New York Times*. And he was actually [Alexander] Kerensky's secretary when Kerensky was in exile in Berlin, when he was thrown out of Russia by [Vladimir Ilyich] Lenin. He came to America, he translated several books, and was a—and has a whole canon of literature that he wrote for the *New York Times*. So it's quite amazing. I even discovered where they came from. They came from Moldavia, which is an area about 32 or 33 kilometers in from the Black Sea. So that would be consistent with my mother telling me she was born in Odessa.

But the really interesting thing is that this guy, Peter Shaplen, found a reference to a woman named Shaplen in the rolls of a obscure county in England, in the 19th century. So what must have happened is that they, for some reason, the Shaplens were in England, and went to Russia. But it was at the time of the Napoleonic wars. So it's actually, I'm talking 18th century, late 18th. And the interesting thing is, why in the hell would anybody want to go to Russia from England in the middle of the Napoleonic wars?

So it's all a mystery, but that's about as much as I can tell you about the—

LARSON: My, my. What kind of interests did your parents have? You know, your father was an accountant, but did he have other interests and hobbies, and what about your mother?

KEYSER: Well, my mother was a woman of, I thought, great intelligence and very few internal resources. I think that the tragedy of her life was the loss of a daughter, Suzanne, who was born with a leaking heart. And just at the time that my father lost his job, Suzanne died. And they had spent a lot of money trying to save her. Now they can do that. I mean, it's a hole in the heart, and what you do is you, there's an operation that allows you to attach, I think, one of the internal veins or something and plug it up, or bypass it. I'm not sure of the details. But in any case, you can deal with it now. But in those days, they couldn't. And they just spent all of their money trying to save her, and then she died. I don't think my mother ever got over that.

And that is, in fact, the subject of the first book of poetry I ever wrote, called *Raising the Dead*.

LARSON: Yeah, I wondered what was behind that.

KEYSER: Yeah, and that was basically my poor mother trying to get over something that she never got over.

My father was a very quiet man. And I think this is a common dynamic in Jewish families. My mother was very boisterous, very gregarious, very outgoing. And she was also, I think—she was also a bit crazy. But I always found it very amusing. But I think that was probably, from my point of view, a defense mechanism.

I'll give you an example. Once I was sitting in the living room of our little house that we ultimately moved to in Washington, DC. I said that when we first went to Washington, we lived in some rented rooms. Then they found a house at 616 G Street, Southeast. Right next door to the Christ Episcopal Church. The phone number was Franklin 4912 [laughter]. And my mother ran a boarding house, and my father found a job selling asbestos. And it was during the war, and so there were—a lot of the boarders were people who worked at the—workers who worked the Navy Yard, which was about five, six blocks from us. And my mother was a very tolerant landlady, except if you were drunk. She would not allow you to come in drunk. And a lot of my childhood memories are of my mother throwing suitcases down the stairs as these guys came in drunk. And she said, "That's it, that's it!" She'd pack their suitcases, throw them down the stairs, out they would go. But it must have been very hard for her.

But I remember one day, I was sitting in the living room talking to my father, when all of a sudden we heard a dish break in the kitchen. There was silence, and then my mother came into the living room. She looked around, and she saw me, and she slapped me. And my father said, "What did you do that for?" And she said, "He made me break that dish!" And my father said, "But look, we've been here! We've been sitting here, talking." And she said, "Yes, I know, but I was thinking about him." [laughter] Now, that's crazy! But it's also funny. And that's the way it was with her.

I think the thing that you might find interesting about my father was, he was a quiet man, he collected a lot of books. I never saw him read one, but he certainly collected them. And there were books all the time in our house. And one day I decided I wanted to try to learn to play the piano, so I bought a piano, brought it into the house. And damn if my father didn't sit down and start playing it. It was extraordinary. I mean, he was much better. I mean, I didn't know what the hell to do with it, but my father was playing it. There was some popular tune, and he'd play it, only on the black keys. Only on the black keys! And I've heard that there are people who do that. So my father must have had an innate musical ability, which I think escaped me.

But I do think that the story of both of my parents were that they were both very, very—they had—they were very smart, but they had—they spent so much of their lives just trying to make a living that they had no way to exploit their intelligence. And that's what they did for me. I mean, basically what they were doing was, living their lives so that I could go to college, and be a success. And they took great pride in me.

LARSON: Did you have, you mentioned your sister who died young. Did you have some other siblings?

KEYSER: No, just— her name was Suzanne, and she died 18 months before I was born.

LARSON: So you mentioned your father played the piano some. Did he also sing?

KEYSER: Nope, just piano.

LARSON: How about your mother?

KEYSER: Nope.

LARSON: No, no. Was there any—

KEYSER: She told me—excuse me, Forrest, but you just sort of triggered something. Her mother died when she was four. And her father married a woman who had her own daughter. And her father sent the daughter to school and my mother to work. And that was a very—I mean, she told me that story many times, and obviously it was a great hurt to her. But she told me that the one thing she remembered about her mother was that she had a beautiful voice. And so that's the only recollection I have of my grandmother on my mother's side.

LARSON: Was it just a natural singing voice, or did she do any kind of singing at synagogues or anything like that?

KEYSER: No, no. That's too highfalutin' for this family. I mean, these people are working.

LARSON: Do you know of any other relatives in your family who were musical in the past?

KEYSER: No, no I don't. I, uh—But like so many children of Jewish families of the kind that I came from, our lives were in the shape of a funnel. What I mean by that is that the family, the larger family, sort of disappeared. And I have very little interaction with my family at all. I don't even know them.

I did have a cousin, Arthur Ruskin, and an uncle who was Arthur's father, Max. And those two I knew. But I think—and their—I think— I know Max is gone, and I suspect Arthur must be, too. So you see, I don't even know. There's hardly any connection at all that I have with family. Max was a sponge and chamois salesman, and he knew the phone number of every bookie in every major city in America. And he would go into the town, call the bookie, then go to a fancy restaurant, and people always welcomed him, because he tipped very well. And I remember once, when I told my mother—I was fourteen, I think, fifteen...

I used to work for my uncle during the summer, in the basement of his house in Philadelphia. I went back there recently, by the way. The woman who owned it wouldn't let me in. But there was the house, and there was the basement. I have a picture of it on my iPhone. And I would go in the basement, and I would fill sponge orders that he had gotten. And the way I would do that, is there would be a big sack filled with sponges that had been pressed flat. And my job was to look at an order, see they wanted 25 size C sponges, and I would take the sponges, and I would put them into a soapstone sink filled with water until the sponges were filled, and grew up. These were natural sponges, by the way, and so they were quite beautiful. And then I would have to beat them on my hand to get all the little shells out of them, and then I would put them into another bin where they would dry, and then I would pack them into the box and label them.



And so I worked—I had a pretty good relationship with my Uncle Max. And when I was about 15—my mother wanted me to become a doctor or something. And I said that I didn't want to do that, and she said, "But how are you going to live?" And I said, "Well, I'll go to school, I'll enjoy reading," and she said, "You won't make any money that way." And I said, "But mom, I don't care about money. What what's the big deal about money?" And she was horrified.

So she called my Uncle Max—notice, she didn't call my father—she called my Uncle Max and she said, "Max, Jay says he doesn't care about money. The next time you're in town, will you talk to him?" And Max said, "Sure."

So the next time Max came to Washington, he came by the house, picked me up, and I went on his rounds with him. And then we went to lunch at a very fancy restaurant, and Max said, "Jay, your mother tells me that you don't care about money. Well, I want to tell you something, Jay. Money is important, and you really need to care about it. And if you want to make money, become a rabbi." [laughter] So I said, "Why a rabbi, Uncle Max?" He said, "Because people, no matter how bad the economy is, people are always getting married or they're always dying." "Guaranteed income," he says. [laughs] I liked Max.

## 2. Early formative musical experiences

LARSON: Yeah. Was there on much music? Did you go to synagogue and sing, and stuff like—was there much religious, you know, Jewish music in your growing up?

KEYSER: Nah. I went to synagogue until I was thirteen, or until I was bar mitzvahed. And then I decided to stay on at synagogue, because I was thinking of becoming a rabbi, because Uncle Max said, you know, become a rabbi. But then I went to college, and I started thinking about religion, and I gave it up, you know. I went cold turkey. [laughs] I went cold turkey on religion, just the way I did on cigarettes.

LARSON: Did your parents listen to music on the radio, or did you ever—were you able to go to concerts or anything?

KEYSER: No.

LARSON: No phonograph records or anything in the house?

KEYSER: Nothing like that.

LARSON: Yeah, yeah. When did you first start hearing music, and getting an interest in—

KEYSER: That's a very good question. And I don't know. I mean, the interesting thing is, the number of tunes I know, and the number of lyrics I know—I mean, where do they come from? I haven't a clue. I haven't a clue when I started listening. In the environment that I grew up in, I sort of liked popular music, you know, the "Wheel of Fortune," you know, things like that. But I haven't a—I must have listened to them on the radio. Where else was I going to hear them?

LARSON: Was there a radio in the house?

KEYSER: Well, there was in my room. So I listened. I think I listened to some of those shows on the radio—wasn't there a guy named Cookie Lampson [Snooky Lanson]? A guy from Canada who had a musical—variety—a musical variety show? Some—I can't remember. I'm sure it's out there. If we could Google it, we'd find it. I know that, because [15th MIT President Charles] "Chuck" Vest knew him. Apparently he was from Virginia, and he'd given Chuck Vest a hat that he had autographed. And Chuck gave it to me. But I have to tell you, that the music that I was listening to, I simply listened to, sort of out of the corner of my ear. Music was not big part of my life.

And then there's that guy who knocked on the door and sold my mother a contract to study at this—some school of music up on 14th street, and sold her a trumpet. The idea was, you take music lessons and you buy a trumpet on an installment plan, and she insisted that I do it, because she wanted me to be like Harry James, and—

LARSON: Uh-huh. Now prior to that, you had played a little bit of piano, and maybe learned to read the rudiments of music?

KEYSER: No. No, I never played the piano. The piano came much later in my life. But at that time, the first introduction of music was when this guy knocked on the door, and my mother was sold a bill of goods [laughs].

LARSON: So tell me about this music school that you took trumpet lessons at.

KEYSER: All I can remember is, I mean, that's really going way back. All I can remember is, every Saturday I'd get up on the streetcar at 8th and G, and go up to 14th and G, go into this house, and play "Home, Home on the Range," and then I'd come home again. And I'd have to practice at home. I didn't play with anybody, and I didn't get much of a sound out of the horn. For some reason, I kept doing it. I think it cost two bucks an hour, was the fee he charged. Or maybe it was five dollars an hour.

Because then I remember that, for some reason, I started to play—I went to the Boys' Club of Washington. They had a band. And it turned out that they had music teachers for a \$1.50 an hour. And so my mother switched me to that. And the guy that I took lessons with then was a guy named Robert Clark. He was a very old guy—well, he seemed to my young eyes old. He must have been maybe 65, 70. Certainly younger than I am, and I'm calling him an old guy. He had a little room in the basement of the Boys' Club, and when I went there, he said, "Your lips are too big for the trumpet. You should play the trombone."

So he had a trombone there, and he said, here, "Try this." The interesting thing was that when I tried it, it was so much easier for me to play that he was right. And so I just gave the trumpet away, and I started playing trombone.

LARSON: He had a trombone to give you there at the school?

KEYSER: They loaned me a trombone. But, you know, if you're Jewish, you're bar mitzvahed at the age of 13. And when you're bar mitzvahed, the family and friends come from the synagogue. In our case, it was mostly the people from the synagogue, 'cause the family wasn't anywhere near. There were some family from Philadelphia at

that time, from my father's side. And they would give you gifts. And the gifts they gave you was usually money.

And I remember sitting at the—I mean, I remember that the day of the bar mitzvah, which was, you know, like confirmation, and I remember people giving me envelopes. And I would look in the envelope, and I would see how much money was there, and then I would take out a three by five card, write their name and how much they gave me. The point being that when I wrote them thank you notes, I wanted to be able to say, thank you for the \$5. Thank you for the \$10. And I got about \$200.

And I went to a music store in downtown Washington and bought a trombone. It was a Conn, student model. Lousy horn, but what did I know. And so I used that horn from then on.

LARSON: Now this teacher, Mr. Clark, was he a brass player?

KEYSER: Yeah. He was—I never had the pleasure of listening to him, but he came from a very, very distinguished tradition. He was a member of the United States Marine Corps Band. And he played in the Marine Corps Band.

LARSON: Now this would have been with John Philip Sousa?

KEYSER: Well, I don't think he—you know, he may have played with Sousa. I don't know that. But it's interesting you would mention that, because John Philip Sousa's house was about ten houses up from where I lived at 6 and G Southeast. The marine barracks was at 8th and G, and there was a house there with a plaque, this was where John Philip Sousa lived. His sisters lived across the street from me, and they were—I never saw them. They were always moving around in their house like ghosts, but I never saw them. They never came out. And their—the blinds on the windows were always drawn. But they were John Philip Sousa's sisters.

Well, I used to go up to the Marine Corps on Sunday morning and listen to them do their parades. And they were—you know, it was a great band. Really great. And there were some great players. There was one player named Robert Isele, who was one of the monster trombone players, you know, of the Marine Corps history. I don't know if anybody ever remembers him now, but—except for professional musicians, you know, who care about that. But I'll bet you, if you would ask some of the—like, for example, one of the monsters in town is Phil Wilson. I wonder if he's ever heard of Robert Isele.

LARSON: I'll have to ask my trombone buddies, too, about this.

KEYSER: Yeah. But Robert Clark, I think, was one of them. He must have been a monster. Because when I heard was that—he must have told me this—Robert Clark was a master of multiphonics. Do you know what that is?

LARSON: Yeah. You might want to explain for people—

KEYSER: Whoever's watching, or will be watching. Multiphonics is when you play into the horn, you play a note, and you sing a harmonic. So you might sing a fifth above. So for example, you play an F, and you'll sing a C. And what you'll do is, if you're good at it, you can get a whole chord. So the trombone, you can, by playing one note and

singing a fifth, or a third, or whatever, you can actually give the effect of several trombones playing, if you're really good.

And what I understand is that Robert Clark used to, when he gave public concerts with the Marine Corps, he would stand behind the curtain when his number came, and he would play. And people would think it was a trombone quartet. And then he would step out while he was playing, and a huge gasp would come up out of the audience.

Well, you know, there's some great jazz multiphonics players. Albert Mangelsdorff, a German trombone player, who was a multiphonic master. And he died recently, I think within the last four or five years. But he made a career out of that. And I think that's what Robert Clark was famous for.

LARSON: Wow. We think of that technique as kind of an avant-garde thing, but here it goes back to—

KEYSER: Oh, yeah. But there's nothing new under the sun. There really isn't.

LARSON: Yeah. So with this Boys' Club of Washington, what kind of music did the group play?

KEYSER: Just marches, Sousa marches and things like that. And then there's a guy named Gardell Simons who wrote a piece for—that featured the trombone called *Atlantic Zephyrs*. [sings] That sort of thing, right? And we did that once. I was the—I played first trombone in this band.

And the reason why I played first trombone was, I was a good reader. I could read. And Robert Clark had gotten me to the point where I was first trombone in a band with fifteen-year-olds. And so we used to give concerts around Washington, and I once played at the Capitol, and I did the solo. I did Gardell Simons's *Atlantic Zephyrs*. So I thought that, boy I must be pretty good, to be able to do this, you know? This was a very important lesson.

So one day, while I was basking in my own glory, a little kid comes into the band room. He's introduced by Mr. Boudreau, who was the band leader. His name was Walter Smith. And he was maybe ten, maybe eleven years old. And we sort of, you know, sort of snickered at this little kid, that he was going to come in and play third, fourth chair, or something like that. But then the kid sat down and started to play. He played like an angel. I mean, he had fantastic chops. High chops. Great tone.

And that's when I learned that no matter how good you might think you are, forget it. There's always somebody better. And so the only thing you can do is be as good as you can be, because you're not going to be better than anybody else. And if that's what you want, go move to another planet.

Walter Smith, I never heard from him. I lost track of him. And I gather that his father was something of a martinet, and wanted him to study classical trombone. And Walter wanted to be a jazz trombone player. And so I think he just stopped playing.

LARSON: Oh my. Did the group do any kind of ragtime pieces or anything?

KEYSER: Nothing like that, no.

LARSON: So when did you first hear any kind of instrumental jazz, and kind of have a notion of that as something out there?

KEYSER: The trouble with trying to answer these questions, Forrest, is that the early part of my life is really very foggy. I mean, I can't really—I really can't remember. I do remember that I must have liked jazz when I was 15 on. But most of the people that I hung around with were sort of college intellectuals, quote unquote. And they didn't like jazz. I mean, it was considered low rent. So whatever jazz I listened to, I usually did it on my own. But it certainly must have started at the age of 15.

And I have, I can remember at the age of 18, going to JTP concerts at the National Guard Armory in Washington. Jazz at the Philharmonic. I heard Illinois Jacquet and Flip Phillips. I heard Stan Kenton. And I heard some really great, great trombone players that nobody ever heard of anymore. Tommy Turk, for example, was one of the—is a name that you pluck out of obscurity. I think he was from Pennsylvania. Great, great player.

I just recently wrote a blog. The reason is that uh, uh, the music of Clifford Brown had come up in a conversation with a friend here at MIT, a guy named Arnold Henderson who is very much into jazz, and he sends me a lot of CDs and things, or files, or references to jazz players. And I told him a story about Clifford Brown. And the story was this. That Clifford Brown was a great trumpet player who died at the age of 25, or maybe 27, I'm not sure. But very young. Do you know the name Clifford Brown?

LARSON: Yeah.

KEYSER: Yeah. It's amazing the number of people that he has influenced, you know, even with such a short life. I think he only did 20 CDs.

Well, the point was that I went to hear Clifford Brown at a nightclub in Washington, DC the night he died. And he had come to town with a quartet, and I think that—I can't remember, the name of the nightclub where he was playing had "Silver" in it. Silver Fox or Silver Dollar, or something. And I remember going there, and the person that I remember seeing there was a woman who served the meals behind the counter in the cafeteria at GW [George Washington University]. And we said hello to one another. I knew her, and she knew me, but it was always just idle chat, you know. And then we listened to the set, and then Clifford left town, and he was traveling with Nancy [Powell]—there's Bud [Powell], Nancy, and I think—Rich Powell was the piano player, and his wife Nancy, and she was driving. She must've fallen asleep. And she—the car went over an embankment and all four of them died.

Well, the next morning, the next day, I happened to be at GW, and I went into the cafeteria, and I saw this woman, and she looked up at me, and she burst into tears. I was really—now what's going on? And I said, "What's wrong?" And she said, "You haven't heard?" And that's when I learned that Clifford Brown had died.

So that was, at that period of my life I must have been listening to, and actually going out and listening to jazz players. I wasn't really playing jazz myself, but I was listening to them, and I really liked them.

And then I remember when I went to England, in 1956. I was there for a year. I was there for two years, but I came back after the first year. And I always traveled by ocean liner. I really liked that way of going, because I didn't like the—moving from one continent to another was for me, required a leisurely transition. To get in a plane in America and get out of a plane in London, you know, in Heathrow, that was just too big a—I needed time to sort of decompress. Well, I remember coming back and going to—landing in New York, and before I went down to Washington, I wanted to stay in New York for a bit.

And I went to the Five Spot. And I heard a group playing, Charlie Haden on bass, Ornette Coleman, you know—on saxophone, and Don Cherry on pocket trumpet. And I remember listening to these guys and being thunderstruck. This was not like any jazz I knew. I mean, this wasn't Lee Konitz, this wasn't Lennie Tristano. What the hell is going on here? And I thought, "This is really weird." And then I noticed that they all stopped together. And then I thought, "Well, whatever's going on, I better pay attention, because obviously they know what they're doing." And that was when free jazz and the kind of wild music that Ornette and company were playing, the first time I heard it. So obviously, I was seeking out jazz venues.

And again, on one of the trips to New York, I went to the Metropole. I heard Cozy Cole on drums and Big Chief Russell Moore was playing trombone. You ever heard of him?

LARSON: Vaguely.

KEYSER: Big Chief Russell Moore, he was a Indian. And they played the Metropole, they played up on a—they played above the bar. I mean, there was a long bar, and then there was a bandstand above the bar. So you'd go and order drinks, and you'd look up at this band. Big Chief Russell Moore played the trombone out of the side of his mouth. Like that. I don't know how he did it, but he was a great player!

So clearly what I had—and all the time that I went to these, I have no recollection of going with anybody. I'm sure I did, but it wasn't as if I was with a group of people, and we were all jazz aficionados. But these were highlights of the kind of jazz that I was listening to.

LARSON: Mm-hm. Did you ever hear the Duke Ellington band?

KEYSER: Uh—Not when the Duke was alive, but I did hear the band once. In Crane's Beach, up in the North Shore. There was a concert on the lawn of a fancy estate up there. Do you know which one I'm talking about?

LARSON: Uh, no.

KEYSER: I guess it was the Crane estate, I guess that's right. Crane made toilets. That's what he made his money in, toilets. And I remember, he built a big mansion up there, and I think that mansion became public property, and is a venue for concerts. And I went once went to listen to Duke Ellington's band. But I think it was under the baton of Mercer [Ellington] at the time, but I'm not sure.

LARSON: Because he was from Washington DC, I wondered if you had [indistinct] with him before. So, uh—

KEYSER: Charlie Bird, I used to listen to Charlie Bird. He played in a nightclub up near Columbia Avenue, way up in northwest Washington. That was one of the other players—major players that I would go listen to. Guitar player. Great player.

LARSON: Now you were still playing music through high school. Were you taking lessons still, continuing?

KEYSER: No, I stopped when I went to college. And I actually didn't play much. And then there was a band that a guy who worked in the government put together. I've forgotten his name, and it's one of those names which if I get hit on the head in just the right spot, it'll pop up again. But he was—worked in the government, and somehow or other, my mother, who worked in the government, she was a secretary, and she must've mentioned to him that her son played trombone. So he asked me if I'd like to play in his band. They did occasional gigs, you know, maybe once a month—dances and things.

LARSON: And this would have been when you were in college?

KEYSER: When I was in college. And so I was still playing the trombone, but not very seriously. Nowhere near as seriously as I am now. And then, again, I was able to play first chair, because I was a good reader. I remember once he asked me if I'd like to improvise. And I said I'd try it, but I really screwed it up. I just didn't know how to improvise. I just didn't know how to do it. I didn't have any natural talent for it. I mean, I just didn't know what to do. And—

LARSON: Did this group have a name?

KEYSER: I'm sure it did, but I can't remember, you know. It would have been something like Charlie Barley and his Night Riders, or the Moonlighters, or something like that. From then I remember once that I did do one solo. Do you remember the tune "[The] High and [the] Mighty"?

LARSON: No.

KEYSER: Well, it's the theme song of the movie of the same name. You're young, Forrest. How old are you?

LARSON: I'm 52.

KEYSER: Mere child. Well, if you go listen to *High and Mighty*, there was a theme song, and the theme song was whistled. And so we did the theme from *High and Mighty*, and the band leader asked me—I said to the band leader, you know, I could whistle that. And he said to me, well, that's a great idea. Why don't you come up and whistle it in front of the band when we do the tune? And I would do that. And the thing is that whenever I did that, there was always some drunk in the crowd who would come up to the bandstand and look at me, and start eating crackers. The idea was to see if he could get me to screw up the whistling! [laughter] Yeah.

LARSON: Wow. Now did this group play for dances, or—?

KEYSER: Just dances for the, I mean, maybe some department of the government. You know, something like that. Or maybe at a country club. We did country clubs. I remember we did country club dances, that's right.

LARSON: So was it mostly swing music, or was there some Dixieland stuff as well?

KEYSER: Strictly dance music. I mean, that was the whole point. Strictly dance music.

### 3. Literature studies

LARSON: When you were in high school, did you start writing poetry then, or did that come later?

KEYSER: Later, later.

LARSON: So what literature were you reading? There must have been some books that really fired your imagination.

KEYSER: Well, I think that I was very deeply into Russian literature. [Nikolai] Gogol, and [Fyodor] Dostoevsky, [Leo] Tolstoy. I liked Stendhal. I read—I liked very much Bernard Malamud. Do you know where he's buried?

LARSON: No.

KEYSER: Mount Auburn [Cemetery].

LARSON: Really?

KEYSER: Yeah. I read that recently. I ought to go look for his grave—he's buried in Mount Auburn. And, I guess—oh, another writer I liked a lot was Nathanael West. Do you know him?

LARSON: I know the name, but I really haven't read him.

KEYSER: Really, I mean, he's a very, very good writer. *Miss Lonelyhearts*, a great book. He used to write scripts for B movies in Hollywood. And he wrote *The Day of the Locust*, and he wrote *Miss Lonelyhearts*. Of course, I liked *Catcher in the Rye*. I really did. I mean, I thought that was really a great book. I read a lot of Booth Tarkington when I was a kid.

And I also read, when I was young, around ten, I really loved fairy tales. And I remember, one summer, I went on a fairy tale binge. And I went to the library and took out three—they'd only let you take out three books—I took out three fairy tale books, that thick. You know, each one was maybe 350, 400 [pages]. And I would read them in a day, and I would go back to the librarian, give her the three books, and come out with three more. So the third day I did this, she said to me, "What are you doing with these books?" And I was shocked, because, what do you do with books? I said, "I'm reading them." She said, "No you're not. You couldn't possibly be reading them." I said, "I'm reading them." So she just gave me the books, but she never believed me.

And I didn't really like that. I never got even with her, you know what, somehow or other doubting me. I guess that's one of the unfinished pieces of business that will remain unfinished when I die.



Ah. There was another one, too. There was a teacher in the sixth grade. And we took an examination, and I got 100. And I was the only one in the class that got 100. And she accused me of cheating. And I said, "I didn't cheat." She said, "You were sitting next—the answers were all on the board next to you." And I said, "Sure, but you had pulled down the map, so that we couldn't see the answers." And she said, "Well, you must have found a way of looking behind it." So that's another piece of unfinished business. [laughs]

LARSON: So at George Washington University you studied English literature. You had, obviously, broad literary interests. Why did you choose English literature?

KEYSER: Oh—I just liked to read. And I thought that this was really a cool racket. I mean, for four years society would consider me to be gainfully employed if I went to school every day and read! [laughs] I said, "Wow, this is great." So I got a scholarship to GW, and I just spent four years reading whatever the courses were. You know, Romantic literature, I read Anglo-Saxon, I read *Beowulf*, [Geoffrey] Chaucer, and I read Jane Austen, whom I really liked. I really liked Jane Austen. And I just read everything, because I just enjoyed it. And I remember, many the time I'd be at home doing, quote, homework, and thinking, "Boy, this is fantastic. I'm sitting here and they think I'm working!"

LARSON: Wow. Were there any particular professors that left an impression on you?

KEYSER: Yeah. There was a—there were—John Gage Allee, John Gage Allee, Jr., taught me *Beowulf*.

LARSON: Were you reading the original?

KEYSER: Yeah. There was just a handful of us who did this, you can imagine. In fact, I think it was just me. Maybe it was just a one-on-one course. But he was very, very engaged in Anglo-Saxon, and he was willing to teach me *Beowulf*, and I enjoyed that.

The other one was a much wiser man, a guy by the name of Ernest Shephard. We used to call him "Shep." Shep lived in Falls Church, Virginia, taught at GW, and he taught Victorian literature. And there were a small number of us in the class who really cared about the literature, and it was easy to pick us out. And he would invite us to his house on the weekend for lunch. And we'd go there, and Shep would—you know, we'd have really nice lunch on this beautiful wooden table, in this house which was in the middle of a lot of houses, but you wouldn't know it, because you had to go down a small driveway to get to it, and it was surrounded by a yard, and huge trees, so you felt as if you were out in the country. And the lunch would be salad, you know, and cheese, and a glass of wine. And he was treating us as if we were adults. And I very much appreciated that.

I commented one day on the furniture, which I said was really beautiful. He said, "Oh, yeah, I made it." And my mouth dropped open. I had no idea that he was a woodworker. So I asked him if I could hire him to build me a cabinet for a stereo system. In those days, it was called hi-fi. And he said, "Sure." And so he built me a cabinet. And the cabinet was this wide, and the speaker on the right was a Helmholtz resonator, the design was a Helmholtz resonator, which I got out of a magazine. And he had cut the thing just right, you know, and it was really a pretty good hi-fi set, for

the time. And I really regret, when I was divorced, I was so—I just left everything in the house to my ex-wife, I just left the house, and I left that piece of furniture there. And I regret—I bet it's still alive, somewhere around. But Shep was another one of those guys.

LARSON: You received your bachelor's and master's degree from Oxford University. What years were you there?

KEYSER: I was at GW '52 to '56. I was at Oxford from '56 to '58. And what had happened was that I got a B.A. from Oxford in '58, but if you stayed on the books long enough, they gave you a master's. So you didn't have to do anything to get a master's from Oxford. All you had to do was just keep your name active on the books. And then, in '58, I went to Yale. And I was at Yale from '58 to '62.

LARSON: Okay. So at Oxford you were studying English literature?

KEYSER: Yes. Course 1 of the Honors School of English Language and Literature. That was Icelandic, Germanic, Anglo-Saxon, and Chaucer. It went from the Germanic languages, and up through and in English, it went from *Beowulf* through Chaucer.

LARSON: So was it there at Oxford that you got interested in linguistics, or how did that come about?

KEYSER: Well, my study at Oxford was philological. And what philology means, you study the past stages of a language through the texts. You read the texts carefully, and a lot of philological research depends on trying to produce the best possible text. And then you do that by, suppose there's some damaged portion of a manuscript. A lot of philologists spend time trying to figure out what must've been in that space that was damaged, you know, to try to reconstruct the best manuscript from past pieces of literature. None of it was really linguistic at all. But I actually felt that I wasn't really interested in doing that kind of work.

And I applied for a scholarship to Yale in linguistics. And that was—I was going into linguistics not so much as an outgrowth of Oxford, but rather as a response to Oxford. I didn't really like that study of language, and I thought, "Well, maybe if I do linguistics, it'll be more interesting."

You might ask, why didn't I go into literature, you know, as a critic, for example? I didn't like that. And one of the reasons why I didn't was because I thought that literature was—literary criticism was just too imprecise. Basically, what I saw it as was a—the work that people did in literary studies was, for the most part, just a display of sensibilities. This is my sensibility toward this text. And that's fine and well and good, but it didn't interest me. I was more interested in something that had theoretical legs. And so I thought, well, maybe linguistics will enable me to use what I had learned at Oxford in some theoretically interesting way.

LARSON: Now, had you had some linguistic courses prior to that?

KEYSER: No.

## 4. Linguistics

LARSON: So how did you discover linguistics as a field?

KEYSER: Well, it was in the air. I mean, you remember, [Noam] Chomsky had written *Syntactic Structures* in 1957, which was right in the middle of my two years at Oxford. And I'd heard about the book, and I—I'm not sure when I first read it. I think I probably didn't read it when I was in England. I think I must have read it in—when I was at Yale. But it was basically through the publication of that sort of thing that I'd heard about linguistics, and thought it might be interesting to try it.

LARSON: Mm-hm. So when you went to Yale, were you originally planning on doing linguistics, or did that change after you read Chomsky's book?

KEYSER: The truth of the matter is that when I went to Yale and I studied linguistics, I came to the conclusion that it was trivial. That it was really not much different from philology. It really wasn't anything theoretically interesting here. Again, it was taxonomic. I mean, it was sort of like categorizing. You'd learn a language, and then what you'd do is you'd come up with labels, and then you'd put the labels over pigeonholes, and then you'd put the various bits and pieces that you learned into the pigeonholes. So it was like being a—being a good linguist was like being a good cataloger. And so I was actually thinking seriously of leaving the field altogether, and going to New York, and trying to get a job in publishing.

I'd always been interested in literature, though, and I had wanted to become a writer. Uh—and what happened was that at the end of my career at Yale, I think I was in my third year at the time, a colleague, a friend of mine, a guy I'd gone to GW with, mentioned me to Noam Chomsky and to Morris Halle. I didn't know these people at all. I just knew their names.

And I believe in 1959, while I was in my first year as a student at Yale, a graduate student in linguistics, 1959, I went to New York to a meeting of the American Mathematical Association to listen to Morris Halle talk about—uh—basically, Indo-European sound change. He was talking about some very well known sound changes in the field, Germanic sound changes, Werner's Law is what it's called. And this was something that I knew about from my Oxford studies. And I thought, well, I'll go listen to Halle, and see what he has to say.

And he talked about these laws in a way which was so completely different from anything I'd ever encountered, and really interesting. I mean, all of a sudden this looked like a science. And I was really flabbergasted, I was taken aback. I mean, this is—maybe there's something here after all. So after Morris's talk, I thought I'd go up and ask him some questions. But Morris was surrounded by a bunch of people who were there before me, asking questions. And their questions were very hostile. Because what Morris was essentially saying was that, you know, if what he was doing was right, then everything that they were doing was wrong. [laughs] And they were hurling these hostile questions at him, and he was fielding them like a samurai swordsman. I mean, he was just, it was just amazing how—you know, and he was

just answering, and they weren't touching him, in other words. There was no way that they could touch him.

But I wasn't going to get into the middle of that, because I thought, you know, he's not going to differentiate between a friendly question and a hostile one, because the atmosphere was very hostile. So I just stood on the periphery and listened, and then I went to lunch with a friend of mine who was a graduate student with me at Yale, and we talked about it. And I began to see something going on up here at MIT that might be interesting. My friend, his name was Paul Postal, actually began a correspondence with Morris Halle about Morris's dissertation. And it was through Paul that I learned what was going on in linguistics outside of Yale.

So in my third year, after I finished my third year of graduate study, Morris and Noam invited me up to MIT to talk to them about possibly working with them. And I remember coming up in the summer. Morris was in the west coast, at the Institute for Advanced Study of Behavioral Sciences at Stanford. And I met Chomsky.

LARSON: What year was this?

KEYSER: This was about 19—this must have been 1961, something like that. I met Chomsky on the steps of Widener.

LARSON: That's Widener Library at Harvard.

KEYSER: Widener Library, that's where we agreed to meet. And there was a coffee shop across the street called Needick's, and we went across there, and I remember sitting down opposite Noam, whom I'd never met before, and he said, "Morris and I are writing a book called *The Sound Pattern of English*. And we have a theory of how phonology works, which is the theory of the sounds that people make, and the way in which those sounds are stored in the mental lexicon, in the lexicon in your head, where you remember words, how they must be—the structure of those lexical entries." And he said, "But we don't know anything about the history of the language. And we're told that you know something about the history of the language. And we wondered if you'd like to come up here for a year, and sort of advise us, look into how the history works. First of all, learn what we're doing, and then see how it works historically."

And when Noam talked, I realized that this was a different ballgame. I mean, I'd never heard anybody talk about language as cogently and as interestingly as he did. And I thought to myself, "Geez, I've got to do this. I mean, I can't leave the field without giving this a try."

So I came up here. And basically, what I did when I was up here, was I would spend my weekends writing my dissertation at Yale, in the Yale model, but Monday through Friday, I was learning the new linguistics. And I never looked back.

LARSON: Now, according to research that I did, that when you were at MIT, you were formally in the Research Laboratory of Electronics. Is that correct?

KEYSER: That's where I was hired. They hired me in RLE. And the reason is, because originally Noam was hired in RLE.

LARSON: Oh really?

KEYSER: Yeah, he was hired—and the reason why he was hired there, was because Morris Halle was in Foreign Language and Literature. Morris was hired here to teach German. In fact, [14th MIT President] Paul Gray took a course—took a German language course from Morris.

LARSON: My. So why was this under the auspices of the Research Laboratory of Electronics?

KEYSER: Because of [13th MIT President Jerome] "Jerry" Wiesner. Jerry Wiesner had a huge vision of what Research Laboratory of Electronics ought to study. I mean, it was everything from, you know, from very large-scale systems, from—to communication. And he had a very broad umbrella. To speech recognition, for example. His umbrella was very large, and when Morris discovered that Chomsky was looking for a job, Morris went to the head of RLE at the time, which was Jerry Wiesner, and said, hire this guy. And he did. And it was—you know, everything else was history. Then with Noam here, his work was absolutely—uh— seminal. I mean, it was—just completely shifted the way in which we thought about language. And that lead to—ultimately, to a Department of Linguistics and Philosophy.

The interesting thing is that since 1965, linguistics at MIT has been number one in the country, but there's never been a linguistics department here. And when it was first noted that it was number one, I believe it must have been in some poll, you know, the kind of thing that you read in *Newsweek*, it was reported in the *New York Times*.

And Howard Johnson was the [12th] president of MIT at that time, and he was flying to New York for a meeting. And a colleague that he was flying with read it in the Times, and turned to Howard and said, "Look! Linguistics at MIT is number one." And Howard said, "I didn't know we had a linguistics department." [laughs] Well, that's the story I heard. So I asked Howard once if the story was true, and he said, well, he didn't really remember it, but it was the kind of thing he would have said. [laughter]

## 5. Music and writing

LARSON: My, my. So we're going to go back a little bit in time. When you were at Oxford, you played in a band there, and there was a place that you played at called the Oxford Jazz Club?

KEYSER: Yes. Well, I have to tell you about this. When I went to Oxford, I didn't bring my trombone with me, because I really never considered myself a trombone player, you know. I mean, I really didn't. It was just something that I happened to be doing because my mother wanted me to be Harry James. So I left my trombone at home.

And in conversations I had with students at Oxford that first year, somebody asked me if I played an instrument, and I said, "Oh, yeah, I play trombone." And they said, "Who do you like?" And I said, "Well, I like J. J. Johnson. I really like him." He was just coming on the scene, and he was turning the trombone into a bop instrument. He was making the trombone viable in a bebop era.

So this guy must have gone to somebody else and said, "I just met a trombone player who plays like J.J. Johnson." [laughs] And that guy mentioned it to somebody, "Hey, I just met a trombone player who cuts J. J. Johnson." [laughs] So the word got back to a bandleader, who called me and said, "I understand you play trombone like J. J. Johnson. Would you like to play in our group?"

Well, I made the mistake of believing the propaganda about myself. That was another life lesson I learned. From that point on I never—but then I did. So I asked my mother to send over the trombone, and she did. And I played in this little jazz group. Bass, trombone—it was free jazz, really. But we were not very good. And there was a jazz club. And we would go to the jazz club and play.

Now, what would happen in this jazz club was that various figures would come in and play from time to time. Well, one of the regulars was Dudley Moore.

LARSON: Oh, my!

KEYSER: Yeah. And it was—it turned out that we played after Dudley Moore. So Dudley Moore would go up and do his thing on the piano, and he was a great, great player. And the audience would be enthralled. And then we'd get up, this little quartet or quintet, drums, bass, trombone, clarinet. I don't think we had a trumpet. And the audience would leave. They'd go across the street to get a beer, and then they'd come back for the next act.

Well, one of the highlights of my Oxford career as a trombone player was when we were playing a last tune, and the next group up after us was a small group with a trumpet player named Dickie Hawdon who was—had played with Johnny Dankworth. It was very good. Very good trumpet player. And so he jumped up and played with us. And I remember doing a solo, and doing some figure, and at the end of my figure, Dickie Hawdon picked up the same figure and went with it. That was a great, that was probably the highlight of my jazz career at Oxford.

And then when I came back to America and went to Yale—remember, this was in 1958, this had happened around 1957, '58—when I went back to America, I put down the horn and I didn't play it for 25 years. I spent my time doing linguistics and literature. I founded a literary magazine called *The Fat Abbot*. And I called it *The Fat Abbot* because I liked the slogan, "Make *The Fat Abbot* Your Reading Habit." I thought that was really pretty good.

And I also was writing novels. I'd written one novel. And I sent this novel to a literary agent in New York by the name of Diarmuid Russell. Diarmuid Russell had an agency with a man named [Henry] Volkening. Volkening and Russell, it was called. No, Russell and Volkening, Russell and Volkening. It was just a few blocks' walk from Grand Central Station. So I would take a train to Grand Central, and just

walk around to see him. I sent him the novel. He wrote me a letter, said, "I really like this novel." He says, "I'd like to talk to you about it." So I went and I met him.

Now, Diarmuid Russell was the son of the famous Irish poet who published under the name of AE. And if you know Irish literature, you'll know AE's poetry. You know, fine poet. So obviously at this time, I was interested in literature, and I was interested in linguistics, and I had put music aside.

So Russell tried to sell my book. And he couldn't sell it.

LARSON: So what was the title of this novel?

KEYSER: It was called *Hotel Delambre*. I think it's probably a lousy book. But I'm glad he tried to sell it. Then I wrote a second novel. When he couldn't sell that one, he said, "Are you working on anything else?" And I said, "Yes, I am." And he said, "Well, why don't you send me that, when you finish? Maybe we can sell that, and then we'll sell the first one." So I sent him that, and he said to me—he sent me a note and he said, you know, this has real possibilities, but there are some problems with it. And I'd like you to come down to New York and talk to me about it. And I said, I'll be glad to. To me, it was a big deal, going to New York and talking to your literary agent, you know.

Every agent I've ever had has always been a failure for me. So I think that's going to be the story of my life. I've had a bunch of agents that haven't been able to do anything for me. But they've tried. But they haven't. The amazing thing is, that doesn't stop me from publishing books. But I'll tell you about that in a minute.

But it was not—so the day I was supposed to go down to New York, I woke up with a fever of 102. I was sick with the flu. And there was no way I was not going to go to New York, because this was so important to me. So I went down to New York with this fever, I made my way to Russell's office, and he said, "We'll go out to lunch, and I'll tell—we'll talk about the book there." So I had a notebook and I had a pencil.

We went to a little French cafe. I remember, it was very nice. I can remember, we sat against a wall, and that it was just one of those cafes which was long, like a railroad car, and there was only room for tables on each side and the center aisle, but it was very nice. A lot of white linen, you know, flowers, that sort of thing.

And Diarmuid ordered a double martini. He said, "What'll you have?" Well, I said, "Well, I'll have the same. Because what did I know? And I didn't want to seem unsophisticated. So he had a double martini, and I had mine, and within ten minutes I was completely drunk. I mean, I was using all of my—I mean, I'm burning up, I'm drunk, and I'm trying my damndest to stop my speech from slurring! All my mental energy is focused on trying to appear not drunk!

So he starts talking to me about the book, and so I start taking the notes, very carefully, "Uh-huh." And I write everything down, and then I say, "I've got it. Thank you. I will try to rewrite the book." We say goodbye outside the restaurant, he goes to his office, I go back to Grand Central Station. I go home, I go right to bed, and I'm well about five, six days later.

I look at my notes. They're completely unintelligible. Illegible. I can't read them. I haven't a clue what they have to say. And I can't remember a word that he said. So now what am I going to do? Am I going to call him up and say, "Mr. Russell, I can't read my notes and I was drunk when you were giving me?" That's what I should have done. But in fact, what I did was, I said, "Well, what would he have said if he was reading this book?" And I tried to imagine that. And I rewrote the book, sent it to him, and he said he would try to sell it. He said, "This is much better. But he couldn't sell that either."

It was about that time that Morris Halle said to me, "Are you working on another novel, Jay?" I said, "Well, I was thinking about it." He said, "Well, look. I have to tell you something." He said, "In this world, there are very few people who can be really good at two things at the same time. Chomsky's one of them. He can do linguistics. He can do politics." He said, "But Jay, you're no Chomsky. You're going to have to make a choice."

So I chose linguistics. And for the next twenty, thirty years, I did—I made a career in linguistics. And then, at the end of my linguistics career, I decided—what had happened was, I was department head at MIT for seven years. Then I was associate provost for nine years. And in 1993, I think it was, the then-provost, Mark Wrighton, said to me, "Jay, you've been associate provost now for nine years, and it's time to think of a change. What are you going to do?" I said, "Well, geez, Mark, I don't know, but let me give it some thought."

That was at two in the afternoon, and at six o'clock that night, I called Mark on the phone, and I said, "I know what I want to do, Mark." He said, "What's that?" I said, "I want to retire early." And he was shocked. I mean, he thought I would maybe look for another job in administration, maybe go back to the department, but I said, "Nope, I want to retire early." And he wanted to know why. And I said, "Well, because I want to become a writer, and I want to become a jazz trombone player, and I don't see how I can do that unless I retire early."

So that's what happened. So things that I had begun at the beginning of my life, I put on hold. I had a career as a linguist. And now, at this end of my life, I've published a book of poems, *Raising the Dead*; I published a children's book, *The Pond God and Other Stories*, which won a prize. I published a book just now, on my own, on Amazon, and also at the Harvard Bookstore, called *I Married a Travel Junkie*. And MIT Press is publishing a book, a memoir, of my life as an associate provost at MIT called *Mens et Mania: The MIT Nobody Knows* [laughter] So that's, really, that's my life.

## **7. Becoming a serious musician**



LARSON: Mm-hm. One more question about your time in England. Did you get a chance to hear jazz there, and go to clubs and hear folks, and get a sense about what was, kind of, in the air at the time? No?

KEYSER: I remember when I was in England, most of the jazz that I heard, I heard on the radio. Willis Conover, *Voice of America*. Remember that?

LARSON: Uh—no.

KEYSER: These are really—I mean, these are bits of Americana that ought not to be lost. Willis Conover was the MC for jazz, and he was probably one of the people responsible for making American jazz known all over the world. He broadcast *Voice of America* jazz programs, and he broadcast the best. And I would pick it up on my radio, and I can remember listening to it while I was working.

But I worked hard at Oxford. It was a very hard place to be. I worked ten hours a day, seven days a week, for about nine months. I mean, you know, you didn't have any—it was—the Oxford that I knew was a take-no-prisoners place. I worked with a man named Geoffrey Smithers, and you had tutorials, and there were three of us in this tutorial. And if you came into the tutorial and didn't know something, he'd kick you out. It was like being kicked out of a class. I remember that, he kicked out one of the—there were three of us, he kicked out one of us. Because he didn't know how to conjugate some noun in Old English. It was terrible. Very strange, very strange, really weird society, that.

So he would, without even thinking about it, he would assign articles for us to read in Dutch. Well, I never read Dutch. I didn't know Dutch. So I had to buy a Dutch grammar and a Dutch dictionary and read the article, word by word, until I could understand it. So you didn't have time to go to a jazz, you know, I really literally worked—because I wasn't going to let him kick me out of that seminar.

Smithers was a weird man. But I learned once—he invited me to his house, and there was a piano there. And I saw a record, Earl "Fatha" Hines. And I said to Smithers, "Is this your record?" He said, "Yes." And I said, "Do you play the piano?" He said, "Yes, I play—I play Dixieland piano." But he wouldn't let anybody in the college know it, because they would laugh at him. So he was a crypto piano player.

So I went back to America that summer, and I came back with five Earl "Fatha" Hines records that were hard to get. And when I went to see him for the first time—I mean this guy was a martinet. He was kind of a guy, who—I was walking in town once, and I saw him and I said—across the street, and I waved, and I said, "Hello, Mr. Smithers!" And he ignored me, and walked on. And the next time we were in the tutorial together, he said that it was inappropriate for a student to acknowledge his tutor in the street the way I had, and would I please refrain from doing that. I mean, this was just one of many stories about Smithers to show you what a martinet he was. But I can also, I can tell you why he was that, but this isn't about Smithers.

But in any case, when I came to see him, I said, "I brought you some records you might not be able to get over here." And he said, "I can't take these." And I said,

"Well, you know, Mr. Smithers, either you take them, or I'm going to break them over my knee, right now." So he took them.

LARSON: My, my. So tell me about picking up the trombone after this long hiatus.

KEYSER: Well, I refer you to my commentary on NPR. Did you ever hear that? That's really basically what it's about. My marriage was a 30 year marriage, which I think was a pretty good marriage for 15 years, but then it went bad. And there was just, I mean, neither of us was able to provide the other with any kind of emotional comfort.

Well, I wrote about this somewhere, I can't remember. But I remember what I'd written was that when a marriage goes bad, some men womanize, some men drink, I play the trombone. [laughs] I took up the trombone. I didn't drink, and I didn't believe in—you know, you're married, so you don't have affairs. It's just not done. So I started playing the trombone. I started playing here, at MIT, at Senior House. And I did it for emotional comfort. And a friend of mine, who was a linguist, who lived in Paris, but he had connections with the department here, was also a very good saxophone player. And he said, "Jay, you know, you can't just noodle like that. You need to—"

LARSON: What was his name?

KEYSER: Richard, "Dick" Carter. His name was Dick Carter. I've lost contact with him, but I think he must still play in Paris, somewhere. But he said I ought to get a teacher. So I called Herb Pomeroy.

LARSON: So you had known Herb at some point?

KEYSER: I just—I knew him because we both were from Gloucester. So he lived in Gloucester on, what's it called, Rust Island? I think that was it, Rust Island.

LARSON: And you were living in Gloucester at the time?

KEYSER: And I'd lived there, too, and so I knew him. And also, I remember at one graduation, when I first came here, I went to graduation. And after the graduation, there was a Dixieland band playing. And it was run by a guy named Roy Lamson, who was in the English department. Steve Pratt was on bass, a man by the name of Al Littlefield [Art Lichtfield], I think that was—I think it was Al, I'm not sure, but Littlefield was his last name. And he was a drummer. He was—worked in Physical Plant. And I'm not sure who the piano player was. I think the piano player—

LARSON: Was it Warren Rohsenow?

KEYSER: Warren Rohsenow played piano, that's right. And he was a, you know, great engineer. And there's a laboratory here, now, named for him. Warren played piano, and then Warren begin to develop a—an illness, an ailment, that froze his spine. He couldn't move his fingers. And so he switched to vibes so that—of course, you don't need your fingers in vibes, you know, he could just—And he was great vibes player.

Well, I heard these guys playing, and I thought, "Geez, why can't I do that?" I think that's what really turned me on. It was at that moment, that graduate—when my desire to play came back. When I heard those guys playing. So I got the horn, and I started to play. And then I—this guy told me I need to get a teacher, so I called Herb

[Pomeroy], and Herb said that he would recommend Phil Wilson. And so I studied for Phil Wilson for three years, and then I studied with Tom Everett at Harvard for another three years.

And Phil had told me that I really needed to learn to play in a band. That I really couldn't play—you just can't play alone. So MIT had a concert jazz band. It was run by Everett Longstreth. For a good period at MIT, the jazz program here was run, a two-level, two-tier program. Herb Pomeroy was hired. Klaus Liepmann was in the Music department.

LARSON: Right, he was the Director of Music, as they called it at the time.

KEYSER: Yes, the Director of Music. And the kids wanted to play, they wanted a jazz band. They put together their own jazz band. And they invited Liepmann to listen. And Liepmann thought that they were terrible, and said, "This is no good. You need an instructor. And I'm going to get an instructor, and either you'll sound better, or you're going to get rid of it." So he called Herb Pomeroy, and Herb agreed to do it. But then Herb had this idea of having two tiers. There would be a Concert Jazz Band, where the students would first come, and they'd be assessed for their level of playing, and the better ones would go into the Festival Jazz Ensemble. Herb ran that, and Everett ran the Concert Jazz Band. And after—the idea was that as you got better in the Concert Jazz Band, you'd go up to the Festival Jazz Band.

Well, that program flourished. And we had a jazz band—we produced jazz bands here that were winning awards at Notre Dame. It was a first-rate jazz orchestra, really good. So that program was in place when Phil Wilson told me that I needed to play with somebody. So I called Everett Longstreth up. I'd never met him. And I told him that I was on the faculty at MIT, and that I was playing trombone, and could I join the band. And he said, "Well, you know, the band is only for students. It's really not for faculty. But as it happens, I need a trombone player this semester. So we'll try it out for a semester." So I played with Everett for a semester, and I never stopped.

The thing that I think attracted Everett to me was that I was really serious. I mean, when he would tell us how to play, it was obvious that I was listening. A lot of the students, this was just a way of letting off steam. And so all they wanted to do was to play. They didn't want to play better. They just wanted to play. And that's perfectly understandable. I mean, it didn't have to be a career for them. But I was really interested in getting better. So when Everett would talk about long and short, and how you've always got to play, and you've always got to count, even in the rests, you know, and that you've always got to hear the melody, even in the rests, how you have to listen to everybody else, got to know how the whole thing sounds, it's not just your part, but it's you as part of everybody else, all of that, I was just really listening. And how to play longs and shorts, and how two eighth notes tied across the bar are always short, unless somebody tells you otherwise. Stuff like that, that you have to know if you're going to read big band charts properly.

And so I stayed with Everett and the Concert Jazz Band as long as it stayed on, which was, I think, another ten years. And then, because of budgetary cuts, they got rid of the two-tiered system, and now there's just the Festival Band.

LARSON: So when you were working with Phil Wilson, was there any things that kinda stay with you, that you particularly remember? Things that he taught you? What kinds of things did you work on with him?

KEYSER: Well, we worked on improvisation. And we would—he would play a record, and then we would change—we would exchange choruses. You know, there would be some Jamey Aebersold. But the thing is, Phil Wilson's a monster. I mean, he is, I mean, one of the great players of the 20th century. I mean, you know, I'm sure there are a lot of them. But however big the list is, Phil is there. His—I mean, as a tour de force, his duet that he did with Makoto Ozone, which is on CD, and I think they're about to reissue it. "Blues My Naughty Sweetie Gave to Me," it's a Dixieland tune. [sings] "There are blues that you get from swimmin'," or something like that. "There..." you know—But the last tune there is a tune that was written by John Coltrane called "Giant Steps." And to listen to Phil and Makoto Ozone play that, I mean, it's just a tour de force. You just wouldn't believe anybody could do that on a trombone.

So the point of my telling you this is that the fact is, Phil was too—I was not good enough for Phil. I don't mean that he thought that. But as a student, he was so far over my head that it was as if some high school kid was taking a course at MIT taught by Alan Guth. You know, it was just, I just wasn't—so what I learned from Phil was just how good somebody could be, but not me.

And I think that when I moved to study with Tom Everett, what Tom taught me, I could tell you. I can really answer your question there. I can't answer it with Phil. But with Tom, what he taught me was, he taught me how to have a good sound. He taught me how to breathe, and how to tongue, and how to have a good sound. And with Tom, I worked with him for two years on that.

And then he said that he's taught me everything he could, and he thought that next I ought to study improvisation with somebody. So I started studying with another trombone player, a guy by the name of Ernie Clark, who was a local trombone player, who was great. Dixieland player, really great. And, fabulous player. And I studied with him for about six months, and then he left town. He took a job out in the western part of Massachusetts. And that's the last time I took lessons.

LARSON: Now there's a quote on Everett Longstreth's website where he's selling his jazz theory book. There's a quote from you about what you learned from his books. Can you talk about that? Because the books are on jazz arranging, but you were making the comment that you learned a lot about improvisation from this book.

KEYSER: Yeah. Because there are certain parts of the book that focus on things like guide tones, and they tell you how, if you have a sequence of chords, what the—what might be the viable line to follow as you go from one chord to the next. And the book was very good at teaching me to look at a chord sequence in a tune that I knew I was going to improvise on, and then it would help me say, well, that's where I'll start, that's where I'll go. But—and Everett's book on arrangement, I think, is an absolute must for anybody who wants to be a big band arranger. He himself—have you ever heard his arrangements?

LARSON: I have not.

KEYSER: He's really good. I mean, he's really good. The Airmen of Note did a selection of his arrangements.

LARSON: That's the Air Force band?

KEYSER: Yeah. And I've listened to—Everett has never written anything that doesn't swing. I mean, he just knows how to do it. He—not too many notes, not too busy. He just—and the chording is just right, you know, he's just really a good arranger. And this book lays it all out. He goes into the kind of detail that I would never go into, because I don't want to be an arranger. I mean, I would have to devote a lot of my time to it, and I just don't want to.

LARSON: Have you done any arranging at all?

KEYSER: No, never did any. See, the thing is that I just like playing. And it gives me pleasure to play in a group. I like making other people sound as good as they possibly can be. And I like it when they do the same for me. I love to improvise. It's a mode of expression for me. And it's a way of saying things that I don't have the words for. And so, in a way, if you think about music and writing as simply ways of giving voice to things that you feel internally, when writing fails me, the music supports me, and vice versa.

LARSON: Mm-hm. So as an improviser, what are some of the guiding principles that you kind of work from? I know it's hard to talk about those things.

KEYSER: Well, I think—first of all, I don't really have—I guess what I have to tell you is this. When people tell me that I'm a good trombone player, I am really always surprised, and I really don't believe it. For me, I feel about playing the trombone the way I felt about sailing. It was—it always scared me, and in fact, I sold my boat to buy a trombone at one time, because I was always afraid that the boat was going to tip. Well, the thing is that whenever I have to do a solo, I'm just—I'm just not confident. I just don't have the confidence. Now I've played with players who have confidence. In fact, I think the really great players all have that. It never occurs to them that they might screw up. Whereas for me, it never occurs to me that I might not.

LARSON: Well, it doesn't come out when I've heard you take solos. That great solo that you did on Mark Harvey's Christmas album, that New Orleans version of "Jingle Bells." That's just, it's full of life and confidence, and—

KEYSER: I hear you say that, and I appreciate your saying that, and I'm not trying to denigrate. But I don't feel that way at all. I mean, I'm just surprised that anybody would think that. I don't know—I mean, that's I think that's a chapter out of my biography, it's just who I am. And I just don't think that I'm ever going to get beyond that. I don't think I'll ever be able to say, "Hey, I'm really good, so step aside." I mean, whenever I get up to play, there's always trepidation. There's always, I'm not going to do it. I'm not going to do it right this time, you know? So I just—I do it in spite of that, you understand?

The other night—I want to tell you that one of the great, for me, great musical achievements at this end of the game is that Everett has put together a rehearsal band.

LARSON: This is Everett Longstreth?

KEYSER: Everett Longstreth has put together a rehearsal band, something that he normally wouldn't do. But times are bad. You're not getting much work for big bands now. And whenever the economy's down, music suffers. And there's a lot of really great musicians here in the Boston area, who are first-rate musicians. And so they are willing to play in this band so they can play.

And Everett asked me if I would like to play in this band. And I said, "Yeah, I'd love to." So I'm playing third trombone. I'm not there because I'm in their class. But I'm there because I can read, and I'm going to be there every rehearsal. And he's not going to have to worry about calling me. So I'm now in a band where I'm playing with really good musicians. So that band that I'm playing in, our first reading of a chart sounds like the tenth reading of other bands that I've played in, you know what I mean? The band—these guys are good.

The jazz trumpet player in this band is a guy named Dave Burdett, who, in my opinion, is one of the top players in the area, and in fact, anywhere. Dave is a real musician. He's really good. The other day I went to rehearsal and he said, "You know, Jay, Al Ehrenfried sent me a CD of a concert that he had recorded at a church in Concord with Jimmy Mazzy." Basically, it was featuring Jimmy Mazzy on banjo. Sid Barbato was on clarinet, and I was a trombone player. And Dave said, "You know, your work on that was really excellent." He said, "You are really good."

Now, this is Dave Burdett, who's one of the best, telling me that I'm really good? I don't believe it! And I said, "Dave, are you sure it's me you're talking about?" And he thinks that that's just me trying to deflect praise, but it's not. I mean, I'm going to go back and listen to that, to hear what he—so that's, so that's who I am. And I don't think I'll ever be able to get beyond that. I feel, when I play trombone, that I'm like a tightrope walker crossing on the Twin Towers, from one tower to another, on a cold day in winter, when the tightrope is covered with ice.

[End of Interview]