Music at MIT Oral History Project

Jamshied Sharifi

Interviewed

by

Forrest Larson

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Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Lewis Music Library

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Contributors

Jamshied Sharifi (b.1960) received an S.B degree in Humanities from MIT in 1983. He played piano in the Festival Jazz Ensemble, directed by Herb Pomeroy, and also studied composition with Edward Cohen and Barry Vercoe. After earning a degree in jazz composition from the Berklee College of Music, he returned to MIT and directed the Festival Jazz Ensemble from 1985–1992. Currently he is keyboardist, composer, arranger and producer in New York. He has written music for feature films.

Forrest Larson, Library Assistant at the Lewis Music Library, has attended training workshops in oral history methodology and practice at Simmons College and by the Society of American Archivists, and is a member of the Oral History Association. He is also an active composer and violist.

Interview conducted by Forrest Larson on February 27, 2012, in the studio of Academic Media Production Services. Duration of the audio recording is 1:53:10.

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 musical experiences (00:13)

FORREST LARSON: It's my honor and privilege to welcome Jamshied Sharifi, a composer and keyboardist. He's MIT class of 1983, he has a bachelor's degree in Humanities. And he was director of the MIT Festival Jazz Ensemble from 1985 to 1992. It's February 27th, 2012. We're in the studio of Academic Media Production Services. Thank you very much, Jamshied for coming. It's a real honor to have you here.

JAMSHIED SHARIFI: Well, thank you, Forrest, for inviting me.

FL: So tell me where you were born and what year.

JS: I was born in Topeka, Kansas in 1960.

FL: And then you moved to Kansas City at a young age. When was that?

JS: When I was about one year old, we moved to Kansas City. Well, to the suburbs.

FL: Mm-hm.

JS: Independence was the first place we moved to.

FL: So tell me about your parents, their—where they were from, their names and their professions.

JS: My father—his name is Mohammed, Mohammed Sharifi—came from—he emigrated from Tehran to go to school, although he's originally from Khorramshahr in the south. His family moved to Tehran when he was eight.

But he came to the United States to go to college at Washburn University in Topeka and ended up meeting my mother. They became dance partners and [laughs] spent a lot of time dancing together. As I told you, he—they eventually got into square dance, which was quite amazing for a young Persian man to be—to have taken up that pastime.

My mother's name was Marjorie Hall. She was from Wichita, Kansas, and was introduced to my father through the school librarian who was her aunt.

FL: Wow.

JS: And they got married in 1960, in the year I was born, actually, and soon after that moved to Kansas City.

FL: And you have a brother? And what's his name?

JS: I have a brother, Jahangir, who's a year and a half younger. And we have a sister—who's technically our half-sister, Kimia, who's—she was born quite a bit later, in 1985.

FL: Uh-huh.

JS: And both Kimia and Jahan live in New York.

FL: Wow. I'll ask a little bit more about your—your siblings and their musical background in a little bit. So you were telling me that your father is a chemist.

JS: That's right. Yes.

FL: What field of chemistry is he in? And tell me about his career.

JS: Well, he worked for Chemagro for a while, which was a fertilizer company, but spent most of his career at Marion Labs, which is a pharmaceutical company, in the quality control department.

FL: Mm-hm.

JS: And when he left Marion, he was the head of quality control there. So you know, he spent his day making sure that the drugs were good, basically. [laughs]

FL: Uh-huh. Wow.

JS: He's—he's done some other things. When—he moved back to Iran in 1973 and, as a family, we followed. So he did a number of other things there, various business ventures, but ended up coming back to chemistry and actually still works as a chemist now—

FL: Wow.

JS: —for a chemical testing company in Los Angeles.

FL: Oh, fantastic.

JS: Yeah.

FL: So did your father come from a family that had musicians of any sort?

JS: No, there weren't musicians in the family. It was not really a path that was considered respectable for middle-class Middle Easterns, or—Middle Easterners, or at least middle class Iranians. But my father did have a passion for playing percussion and often wanted—talked about playing it on a more regular basis, or even a professional basis. But his father was having none of that.

FL: Mm-hm.

JS: So it always remained a hobby with him.

FL: So what stimulated his interest in—in percussion? Do you know how that came about?

JS: I'm not exactly sure, to be honest with you. It may have been—I mean, percussion is a part of traditional Persian music. Perhaps that was the most exciting part. I mean, I always thought drummers had a really good job description because they get to hit things for a living.

FL: Yeah.

JS: And that may have been the—the draw. I mean, often little boys, that's the first thing they do is bang on pots and pans or cardboard boxes.

FL: Yeah.

JS: It's a really visceral and—and quickly rewarding thing to do. But I'm not sure what his particular draw was.

FL: Mm-hm. Did he—has he played with any musicians or in a band or anything like that?

JS: No. Mostly my experience of him and music was playing along to records.

FL: Mm-hm.

JS: He would, you know—he had a—a small percussion set in the house. And he would put on a record, various types of music. He liked a lot of different music and—or still does. And he would play along with those records.

FL: Mm-hm.

JS: And it—it was—you know, it was always a lot of joy in that to see him.

FL: So was it jazz as well as other, like, some Middle Eastern music and stuff?

JS: He listened to Persian music, traditional Persian music. He listened to jazz. He listened to a lot of R&B or what was probably called soul in those days.

FL: Mm-hm.

JS: He was a big fan of Ray Charles. Still loves Ray, actually. So I remember a lot of different music that he was involved with. But, you know, certainly a lot of rhythmically-oriented things.

FL: Mm-hm.

JS: Like R&B, soul, jazz.

FL: Did he go to jazz clubs in—in Kansas City at all?

JS: No, I don't remember him listening to live music much. It was more an experience of recorded music.

FL: Mm-hm. Did you go to any jazz clubs in—in Kansas City?

JS: Well, I—you know, I left Kansas City when I was 18. So there was, because of the drinking age, a bit of a limit on the—on the kind of places I could go to. But when I could, when I could sneak in, I would try to hear live music whenever I could.

FL: Mm-hm.

JS: And I'd—I'd go to concerts as well, which—there was no drinking issue.

FL: Mm-hm. There's this place called the Milton Morris Jazz Club on Main Street. Did you—

JS: I never went there.

FL: Uh-huh.

JS: No, no.

FL: Did you get to know any of the—the local jazz musicians in Kansas City? There was a guy, Jay McShann, a—a pianist, bandleader?

JS: I—I know of Jay McShann but never met him.

FL: Uh-huh. Or a guy named George Salisbury or Bud Anderson? Any—

JS: No, I don't know those players.

FL: Uh-huh.

JS: Yeah.

FL: Tell me who are some of the—well, you said you'd—well I wanted to ask you about your mother. And then we'll talk about—

JS: Sure.

FL: —how you got started musically. Tell me about her—her music.

JS: Well, she played piano and organ as a young woman and—and did some playing in the church. And she was my first piano teacher. She started teaching me from the time I was five 'til about the time I was ten years old. So I always associated her with music, just, you know, because from the time that I could remember, really, she was a big influence.

She started me on an—with another teacher when she saw that I was interested in improvisation and was trying to improvise. It wasn't anything—it wasn't a thing that was a part of her musical upbringing.

FL: Mm-hm. What—did she—besides, you know, playing at church, did she do any kind of solo playing at all?

JS: No. No, I don't—I mean, I remember her accompanying people. But no, I don't remember her pursuing a—you know, any kind of solo career or any kind of solo performance.

FL: Were there any other contexts with which she played with, outside of accompanying the choir and stuff like that? Like, any kind of smaller group stuff where she might have been working with singers and instrumentalists? Anything like that?

JS: No. Perhaps individual singers?

FL: Mm-hm.

JS: But that's—that's about the extent of the memories I have.

FL: Mm-hm.

JS: Yeah.

FL: Do you know where—remember what kind of music she did with the church choir?

JS: Well, it was a Methodist Church. So I think just a lot of classic hymns that you would hear in that environment.

FL: Mm-hm. Mm-hm. So was your family kind of a—a two-faith household? Your father, you know, being—being Persian and possibly a Muslim background, and—

JS: Well, neither of my parents were what I would describe as intensely religious. My mother, as I mentioned, grew up around the church but was—you know, I—I don't think she ever—what's the word I'm looking for? I don't think she ever adopted it fully. I think she, she saw the inconsistency that—or certain inconsistencies in—in practitioners of the Christian faith that she couldn't really tolerate.

I think she had a real resonance with the Christian message. And she often, actually, talked to us about the life of Christ. But that was at the same time, you

know, with a discussion of hypocrisies that she saw and, you know, the potential for same.

My father, as I mentioned, grew up in a house with some Muslim members and some Baha'i. His mother, in particular, was quite a devout Muslim. But his older sister was Baha'i and his father as well. So my father didn't really pick either one of these directions.

And as you may know, there's a—you know, there's a certain amount of tension in Persian culture with Islam because Islam was a religion that came to Iran well into its cultural development. And many Persians see it as a kind of cultural interloper in a way. And there's this—been this back and forth pulling between—between Islam and between a pre-Islamic sense of Persian identity.

And we see now, we're—we're in very much an Islamic phase where the, you know, Islamists have much more influence. But there's still a number of Iranians who are very conscious of the cultural life of Iran prior to Islam. So, I think my father sides a little more in that camp.

I mean, if you look at the names he chose for all of us, right? Jamshied, Jahangir, Kimia, these are all non-Islamic—well, I should say pre-Islamic Persian names.

FL: Uh-huh.

JS: So even though he has an Islamic name—

FL: Yeah.

JS: —and—and actually one of his brothers is named Mohammed as well, [laughs] so—which is not uncommon. He was very clear about reflecting Persian heritage prior to the influx of Islam.

FL: Mm-hm. Interesting. So tell me about some of your earliest memories of music.

JS: Well, it would be of listening and hearing music in the house. And those are kind of mixed together in my head, oddly enough. I do remember hearing traditional Persian music. And I do remember hearing jazz.

I do remember my mother also playing classical music. But the—the memories are not particularly distinct in my head. Sometimes they kind of run together.

FL: Mm-hm.

JS: I—I'm not sure what would be the first piece of music I can clearly remember because, you know, I think they're all kind of stirred into a broth at this point. But maybe one of the first names I was aware of in music was Miles Davis—

FL: Uh-huh.

JS: :—through my father.

FL: Interesting.

JS: And he—he was, you know—continues to be an influence. His music has been really—has had a profound effect on me for a number of years. Really my whole life.

FL: Wow. Did you start singing before you played the piano?

JS: Well, I mean, you could say babies sing all time. But no, I didn't start really singing until after playing the piano. I started piano around five. And aside from singing in school, you know, in—in normal music classes—

FL: Mm-hm.

JS:1 —the first real intense experience I had with singing was in the Episcopal Church in Kansas City, which started when I was around nine years—maybe ten years old. And that went on for four years.

FL: Right. And that was the—the Grace and Holy Trinity Cathedral Choir?

JS: That's right.

FL: Yeah.

JS: That was—that was actually a professional choir. That was kind of my first gig [laughs] because we were paid $2.50 a week for two rehearsals and a service every week. But it was a great experience, you know, because we—we read real music every day. And we had to learn to sing by sight, by reading the music. There was not enough time to learn it by ear.

And, you know, the standards were pretty high in the choir. You had to audition for the choir. And—and, you know, it was quite a volume of music going through it. So—

FL: Who was the director at the time?

JS: Oh—oh, boy—I—oh, Mel Bishop was the director.

FL: Uh-huh.

JS: And later, the organist, who—I think his name was Danny Hathaway, took over the choir when Mel left. But he was a fantastic teacher and—and a very inspirational choir director. So it was a—it was a really great and memorable experience and I think for me connected music with a spiritual experience. Even though I was not particularly religious, I oddly enough did end up joining the Episcopal Church because of the—just the—the power of that experience.

FL: Mm-hm.

JS: And as I mentioned to you earlier, I think it really caused me to fall in love with reverb. You know—

FL: Right. I'll ask you about that—

JS: Yeah. [laughs]

FL: :—in a little bit. Tell me about some of the—the music that this choir did.

JS: Well, I can't remember everything that we did. We did s—most of the hymns in the Episcopal hymn book in the course of a season, of which there are, I believe, four or

five hundred. But I do remember doing Gabriel Faure's *Requiem*, which is a really moving piece. I remember [J.S.] Bach's *Jesu—Jesu Joy of Man's Desiring*.

FL: Did you do any of the Bach cantatas?

JS: I don't think we did. Although there were—there were some projects outside of the choir that we may have done. There was—I mean, there was really quite a bit of music [laughs] that we did in those days. And as it was fairly young in my life, I don't always remember all of it. I remember the [Benjamin] Britten—

FL: Lessons and Carols [*A Ceremony of Carols*] that you mentioned?

JS: Yes, yes. That was—that was a great piece—piece that—it's basic—it's just boy singers and harp, a really beautiful orchestration. And I remember the—the choir would occasionally let out members to take part in other performances. There was a performance of the *Messiah* that we took part in.

And there was one year where we took part in a—a Kansas City Opera production of *Tosca* because there's a part for boys' choir in—in that. So we learned those parts and performed them on stage which was a lot of fun.

FL: Wow. Wow. So your mother was your first piano teacher, right?

JS: Yes.

FL: Tell me what that was like.

JS: Well, as it ended when I was nine or ten, which is, you know, probably the point at which boys are starting to get outside of themselves, it was not a contentious situation. At least I don't remember it being—my mother may have a different memory of it. But I remember it being quite harmonious—

FL: Mm-hm.

JS: —and—and quite beautiful in a way because—

FL: So tell me about some of the pieces that you played or the kinds of pieces. Do you remember any—

JS: Well, I remember one of the first ones I played was, you know, some of these pieces were—had accompaniment that she would play. And it was a—it was an—like a Native American dance. And, you know, she had these rhythmic chords that she would play. And my part was actually playing quarter note middle Cs all the way through—

FL: Uh-huh.

JS: —with particular fingering. I think we had to switch from the right hand to the left hand every bar. There was a lot of student piano pieces like that.

FL: Mm-hm.

JS: I don't think I got into, quote unquote, real music until getting another teacher.

FL: Mm-hm.

JS: But she taught me how to read and, you know, how to hold my hands and what the fingers were and what the keys were and what the notes were. So it was—you know, it was—it was really valuable and it was also cost-effective. [laughs]

FL: Mm-hm. So she was a—a piano teacher. Do you how many students she had and what kind of students she was working with?

JS: I don't, actually. I don't think there were a lot. I don't remember a large number of people coming through.

FL: Mm-hm.

JS: I think it was just a handful.

FL: Mm-hm.

JS: But both me and my brother were—were consistent students for, you know—well, me for five years and I think my brother possibly a little longer.

FL: So with the—the Grace and Holy Trinity Cathedral Choir, how long did you sing with them?

JS: Four years.

FL: Four years. And you started as a boy soprano?

JS: Exactly.

FL: And then you mentioned moving to alto?

JS: I did, yes. My voice was just starting to deepen a bit, although it hadn't officially changed.

FL: So tell me about the—the piano teacher you worked with after your mother. And what was this person's name?

JS: Sy Dewar. He was a—he was a pianist in town, you know, who—who played, I think, mostly like lounge gigs, hotel gigs. But he—even though it was my desire to improvise that caused my mother to bring him to me, he continued me more in a classical vein, which—although he did supplement that with a discussion of chords and harmony, you know, he tried to get me an understanding of what—how to play chords and how to voice them, even though it was very preliminary.

But we started to play some—little more real music. And—I remember working on—well, we did a very condensed version of the [Edvard] Grieg Piano Concerto. I think the original is, you know, like a 65-page score. And this was like a two-page version of the theme.

FL: Mm-hm.

JS: But—but it was quite impressive for, you know, for a 13-year-old to play, at least in Kansas City. I'm sure, I mean—nowadays, there are—there's a lot more sophisticated stuff available. But, yeah. It was—was kind of the first taste of real music in a way.

FL: Mm-hm. So from your early—your kind of pre-high school years, are there any musical experiences that really kind of stand out, that kind of point in a direction that you have taken as far as that music is something really special?

JS: Well, I often come back to the—the experience of singing with the choir.

FL: Yeah.

JS: Because, you know—because of the setting, because of the association with spirituality, and because of the transcendent and really powerful nature of the music. I—I think that was a really profound experience, in a way, to—to make those associations with music at that age.

2. High school musical experiences (20:06)

FL: Were you involved in any music or groups in your—in your grade school, like the school band or anything like that?

JS: No. I sang in school choirs but didn't play in ensembles until high school.

FL: Mm-hm.

JS: And really, that—you know, that was—that was more outside of high school.

FL: Mm-hm. So in high school, were you involved in any of the school groups there? Or was it strictly out—outside?

JS: The only s—group I was involved in high school was the glee club at our school.

FL: Oh. Uh-huh.

JS: Which was a really, really strong glee club, actually. And that was—that—that was also a great experience. We did quite a bit of performing in the Kansas City area.

FL: Wow.

JS: Probably 15 or 20 concerts a year.

FL: Oh my.

JS: And—

FL: Who was—what's the director's name at that time, do you remember?

JS: Oh—now his name is escaping me. It may come. John—it—it's going to come.

FL: What's the name of the high school that you went to?

JS: It's now called Pembroke Hill School. In those days, it was Pembroke Country Day. When I went to school there, it was just a boys' school. And now it's become co-ed. It merged with a—with a local girls' school.

FL: Mm-hm.

FL: So the glee club was a—you know, was a—it's sort of on the [Yale] Whiffenpoofs model. It was a tenor, tenor, baritone, bass.

FL: Mm-hm.

JS: And that was a lot of fun. You know, they were—they were much loved in the Kansas City area. So a lot of the performances had, well, quite a bit of support, especially from alumni and parents and what have you.

FL: So how would you describe the music that that group did?

JS: Well, I—I think we did some of the Whiffenpoofs' repertoire, actually. Barbershop quartet, really.

FL: Mm-hm. Mm-hm.

JS: Yeah. And similar kinds of music.

FL: Did you sometimes break down into smaller groups and do, like, actual kind of—

JS: Well—

FL: [inaudible] kind of stuff?

JS: I remember trying once. Some other singers did it more successfully. We tried one year in our senior year to do a four-part—a four-person barbershop quartet. But I don't think it turned out too well. [laughs] I don't think we were strong enough singers at the time.

FL: So, during high school or earlier, what are some of your early interests in—in science and engineering? I mean, you—after all, you did go to MIT. So there must have been some—

JS: Yeah.

FL: —premonition of interest in that area as well.

JS: Well, I don't know whether it was through my father or—or not. But I always felt resonance with math and science. It felt like something inherently interesting to me. And, you know—and I was always pretty good at it.

But going to MIT I don't think was—well, I don't know. It—it wasn't obvious at the time. I do remember a high school counselor suggesting that I apply there because he—you know, he had taught me physics. And he said, "Given your performance in these areas, you might want to consider—and, you know, given that you're showing some interest in them."

So I did apply and was accepted but actually didn't go for another year. I—I was just telling my daughter about this, in fact. I deferred matriculation for one year thinking, well, I'd—you know, I was quite interested in music and wanted to pursue it in some way. So—so that was my intention, take a year off from school and, you know—and see what happens.

FL: Did you know about the music program at MIT before you came?

JS: I didn't, no. And I actually wasn't sure I was going to come until a friend of mine who had—who had been in the same high school class as I and went on, came back and said, "It's great. You've got to go." So he kind of made my mind up for me.

FL: Did—did he know—did he tell you about the music going on, or no?

JS: No, he just said, "You're going to love it." [laughs]

FL: Uh-huh.

JS: Because—I mean, he—he—he just said, it's a great environment.

FL: So at that—during high school, what are your, kind of, expectations as far as—or plans for—for continuing music?

JS: Well, I—you know, I—it—toward the end of high school, I had started playing in a band, kind of a fusion band that I mentioned to you. And that was an incredibly gratifying experience. We were writing a lot of our own music and—and, you know, exploring a lot of things, exploring improvisation, trying to learn how to play together, trying to learn how to play in time.

It was—it was really exciting. And I wanted to try and continue that in some way. And that was part of the reason for not going on to college right away is I wanted to stay working with those same guys.

FL: Mm-hm. And who—who—

JS: But—

FL: —what was the instrumentation of that group? And what were the members' names?

JS: It was drums, bass, guitar, and piano—and keyboards.

FL: Uh-huh. Did the group have a name?

JS: Oh, we had different names—

FL: Uh-huh.

JS: —over the years. I think for a while we were called Tala which means "gold" in Farsi. But yeah, it would—you know, the name would change with the wind, I guess, [laughs] depending on how somebody felt.

But the members were consistent for a little while. There—the drummer was Dale Vits, the bass player was Abraham Haddad. And the guitarist was Chris Millner. And as I mentioned to you, I recently got in touch with all of these guys just a few months ago. But it was—it was really a wonderful, growing experience—

FL: Mm-hm.

JS:: —for me. And I think in a large part because we were doing it on our own. You know, we were trying to write music on our own collectively and individually. We were trying to figure out what made a band work, you know, what made an ensemble sound good. And it was—it was really great.

FL: Was it all original music? Or were you doing some charts by other—

JS: There was some other music we did. I remember doing a piece—couple pieces from Jean-Luc Ponti, a piece from Al Di Meola. Wherever people's interests laid, we would try—at least try to play those pieces.

FL: Mm-hm.

JS: But mostly in the, kind of, electric jazz or fusion camp. That was where a lot of the inspiration was coming from.

FL: Now, you also had picked up guitar and some drums at that—during high school, right?

JS: Yes. I—well, actually, I started playing guitar around the time I was ten.

FL: Uh-huh.

JS: And think—I mean, I—you know, it's just—I mean, it's such a compelling instrument, and especially growing up in that time. I mean, that would—that would have been 1969, 1970. The guitar was an iconic instrument.

My brother had started playing drums. And that made me be interested in, you know, trying to figure that out as well. So drum instruction I didn't do very long, probably less than a year. Guitar I studied for about four years. But keyboards, piano, that was really always the main thing and still is for me.

FL: So who did you study guitar with? And how—how did that work?

JS: Jan Carlson was the guitarist's name. He was a pretty young guy. And mostly it consisted him of—consisted of him teaching me chords and teaching me songs. Whatever songs he happened to know, he would teach them to me.

FL: Uh-huh. It was mostly jazz?

JS: No, it was more pop, folk, rock influenced. A lot of humorous songs. But, you know, it's—I mean, guitar is such a different physical thing because you're wrapped around the instrument. And—you know, you feel the vibrations of the strings. It's a more—it's a more visceral experience, I think, than playing the piano.

FL: Mm-hm.

JS: So it was—it was really a lot of fun. I still, you know, I still play and—and use a guitar for a lot of projects that I do, for a lot of recording projects. There—there's something about it, the way that it makes—even an electric guitar, the way it makes sound from a string and, you know, you feel the string on your finger. It's—has such an organic, beautiful quality.

FL: Did you do any singing while accompanying yourself on the guitar? I mean—

JS: Yeah. Some.

FL: Yeah. Mm-hm.

JS: Not particularly good, but—[laughs] but I did.

FL: Mm-hm. So in high school, were there any, like, science projects that you did that are engineering, kind of, related things that are memorable, that—

JS: Well, nothing out of the ordinary. You know, it was—I remember doing a science fair project on the Bernoulli principle and—and how airplanes fly. That would have been junior high school, actually. But no, I—I don't remember having a—a deep interest in science the way I did in music.

FL: Mm-hm.

JS: It was more that I had an aptitude for it. Or, you know, I could do it. It kind of came naturally in a way. But—but music was more of like a crazy thing that I had to do.

3. Student years at MIT (29:49)

FL: So when you came to MIT, did you have a major chosen, or were you kind of just seeking out what was going on?

JS: I definitely did not have a major chosen and didn't—didn't actually know how I was going to make MIT work with the interest I had in music. I knew that there was some music going on there, but I didn't know what it was. I had a thought that I would, you know, certainly investigate electronic music, because I'd really been fascinated by synthesizers ever since I'd seen one, you know.

And in fact before getting one, I—I remember buying a book on synthesis and reading how it's done and what a filter was and what an envelope generator is and what an oscillator is and what the signal chain is and how you modify sounds. So there was that—I mean, you could look at that as kind of a—a ground in which the two met.

FL: Mm-hm.

JS: Because it is a—it is a very technical undertaking, but I never felt it as being a technical undertaking. It seemed like just another way of making music.

FL: Mm-hm. So what synthesizer did you first get?

JS: Minimoog.

FL: Oh, wow.

JS: Yeah.

FL: Wow.

JS: I always—that was the one to get, right? [laughs]

FL: Yeah.

JS: And, you know, because of that book—I wish I remembered the name of it. It was, like, *Basics of Synthesis* or something like that—

FL: Mm-hm.

JS: —I—I knew how to operate it, like, almost immediately. It was like, okay, there's the oscillators. They're right over here. And here's the filter. And here's the envelope generators. Oh, this one doesn't have a sustain level—or it doesn't have a separate release from the decay. Oh—you know, it was—it—Minimoog's a little bit different than the ones in the book. But soon you figure out how it works.

FL: Right.

JS: So I was able to make sounds on it really from the get go. And it felt like such a liberating thing, in a way. You know—or such a creative thing in the sense that you are making the timbre that you're playing.

FL: Yeah.

JS: It's almost like being an instrument builder in a virtual way.

FL: Right, right.

JS: So I always had a—a kind of visceral connection to synthesis and to electronic tools for music making. Even though they are at one remove, there is something about the ability to shape sound and build your own sounds that was really compelling. I know you can relate to that.

FL: Yeah, I'll pick up on that with some later questions.

JS: Yeah.

FL: So when you came to MIT did you—what was the first musical group you played with? Was it the Festival Jazz Ensemble or did you play with Everett Longstreth [Director, MIT Concert Jazz Band, 1968 – 1995] first?

JS: No, I didn't. I actually didn't join the—I mean, I investigated the jazz ensembles but didn't join until my junior year. And I—and I joined the Festival Jazz Ensemble.

Partly I—you know, I was a bit overwhelmed by the course-load at MIT, [laughs] as many students are, and just felt like I kind of had to get through this. So yeah, I didn't do—really, the first two years outside of the band that I was still maintaining in Kansas City—I would go home for the summers and work with them, the—you know, the same group that I mentioned earlier—I—I didn't do music at school.

FL: Mm-hm. Did you take a—well, you—you got a humanities degree. Was it a—an emphasis in music? So you had to take—you probably took some music courses?

JS: I did. I—I took several music courses. I also took some courses at Berklee [College of Music] that I transferred back to MIT. So yeah, I took Ed Cohen's counterpoint course. I took harmony. Those were incredibly valuable courses. Really, really high level, in a way.

In fact I was—it was interesting, because, I took one semester of counterpoint and one semester of harmony in MIT. And when I was at Berklee after that they—those were required courses. It was required that you take two semesters of each. And I asked to take the exam and was able to pass out of two semesters of each from the courses that I had taken at MIT.

FL: Wow.

JS: So they're—they were definitely high level. Well, I mean, like a lot of stuff at MIT—[laughs]

FL: Yeah.

JS: —it moves pretty fast. And those courses were no exception.

FL: Did Professor Ed Cohen—did he know about your—your kind of jazz background? And did you know that he also played jazz?

JS: I didn't know he played jazz. But I think he knew because, you know, I mentioned that I was—well, let me think about that. He eventually knew about the jazz background. I—I'm thinking that the courses—the first courses I took with him were in my sophomore year. So that was before I was in the jazz band.

I don't remember. I don't remember when I made him aware of, you know—of other things that I was involved with.

FL: Mm-hm. I found it interesting talking to him that he felt that [W.A.] Mozart was kind of the—the ideal. And when you're listening to his music, it's very, you know, atonal—you know, modernist, you know, in a very tightly constructed way.

JS: Uh-huh.

FL: But it struck me that he found in Mozart kind of a musical ideal. Did he talk about that in the class to you? And how did that resonate with you?

JS: Well, I don't remember him—I don't remember him citing Mozart as an ideal. Although I'm sure he talked about Mozart's work. But it doesn't surprise me that you say he would have one ideal and then create music that was different. Because it's not always clear that we can choose the music that we make. You know, sometimes it kind of finds its way through us or we have things that we like but we end up doing something a little bit different or even completely different because—excuse me—it's a little—it's sometimes hard to understand that creative path.

FL: Mm-hm. So Ed Cohen was your thesis advisor. And you wrote a—this big 40-minute suite.

JS: Right. Well, I actually had four—I—I had three people involved in the thesis. But Ed was probably the most involved. Herb was also—Herb Pomeroy [Director of MIT jazz bands, 1963-1985] was also a thesis adviser. And Marvin Minsky [Professor of Media Arts and Sciences] was an advisor.

FL: Interesting.

JS: Which—[laughs] yeah, very much so. I was—well, I—I was lab partners with his son. And that may have been the connection. But, you know, it was—it was gracious of Marvin to be a part of it. But yeah, Ed was the most day-to-day person in terms of keeping track of what I was doing and making sure that I was getting it done.

FL: So, how did it work with, you know, the—there's a—a definite, you know, kind of jazz fusion, kind of rock element to that.

JS: Yes.

FL: And how did Ed Cohen work with you, kind of, on that? And you also, in your introduction state that you were interested in—in really learning about writing for a—an improvisational ensemble, you know, and tackling that—that whole subject of how do you write with improvisation in mind?

JS: Right. Well, you know, at—at that—at the—the point that I wrote the piece, it was the last semester of my senior year, which was kind of a crazy semester. I ended up taking six classes plus the—plus doing the piece. So I—you know, I'd spent three semesters with Herb at that point.

And Herb talked a lot about Duke Ellington and about the—about the challenge of—of composing within an improvisational setting, right. How do you make it so it's—how do you make it so it retains the—the freedom and the wildness

of a—of an improvising ensemble and yet still has enough rigor or structure to engage the—you know, all the players involved?

And I—Herb, I think, felt that Duke Ellington had done a much better job, or at least a more sophisticated of job, of that than any of the other Big Band writers. And he was always a champion of Ellington's music.

So I was hearing these discussions in rehearsal and, you know—and Herb's love for Duke. So the—I think more than anyone, Herb probably planted that question in my mind. Like, what does it mean to write for an ensemble that has improvising elements but also has composed elements?

FL: Mm-hm.

JS: I think in—you know, at the time of writing that piece, especially given the time constraints, which was that I'd set out to write something 45 minutes long, and in the midst of all these classes was trying to get it done. My f—I'm—I'm sure I—you know, I used quite a bit more of improvisation as an element in the piece than I would, say, if I were to write the same thing today.

FL: Mm-hm.

JS: But at the same time, you know, the advantage of using improvisation or putting improvisation in—in a piece is you essentially engage a collaborative composer, right? You get someone's—you get the improviser's ideas added to whatever you've laid out in the piece.

FL: Right, right. So working with Ed Cohen, who was, you know—was writing in a fully notated style but he also had this jazz background, how did—how was that working with him on that—on that project?

JS: Well, Ed was—was—was very—he was very encouraging and not overly—well, I would say he—you know, he tended to, with that piece, and with me, anyway, take more of a hands-off approach, to kind of let me find my own way.

FL: Mm-hm.

JS: And fortunately it didn't turn out horribly. [laughs] So—

FL: Mm-hm.

JS: You know, it was—it—it worked out for all of us. But—but I also—I mean, I have to credit him for that because the—it can be hard to oversee someone working on a creative endeavor. You know, you want to keep them from making mistakes. You want to make sure they're making good decisions. You want to make sure the outcome is good.

But at the same time, you got to let them make mistakes, right. You got to let them find what it is to handle a piece of music or to write a piece of music. So I—I—yeah, I—I really thank him for that.

FL: So in that piece, you also had some—some pre-recorded digital sounds that you had created at the—the—

JS: At the—

FL: —MIT Experimental Music Studio.

JS: Exactly. In the last piece, there's about a three-minute section that includes—well, that is primarily a pre-recorded element that I'd done in Barry Vercoe's [Professor of Media Arts and Sciences] studio.

FL: Mm-hm. Did you work much with Barry on that?

JS: Well, I took a couple classes with him.

FL: Mm-hm.

JS: And—but the—that component of—of it, I really did on my own. It was actually based on a piece that I'd done with my band, the band—the Kansas City group—and adapted for that—for that medium.

FL: Mm-hm.

JS: But I mean, I—I thought Barry was a fantastic teacher and really, you know, he was—he's so deep into synthesis and—and—I mean, he introduced me to a lot of techniques that later became part of the language of synthesis. For instance, FM and sampling, which didn't exist in a commercial form at the time that I took those classes.

But he—you know, he thoroughly understood and taught extremely well. In fact, there are some FM voices I know in that—in that segment you're referring to.

FL: Yeah.

JS: I mean, that was—that was immensely valuable later on when those things became available in commercial form because, you know, I had the background to be able to use them and to actually use them for music making and not just kind of noise makers.

FL: Right, right. Who were some of the other music professors that you're—that you studied with?

JS: Stephen Erdely [Ethnomusicologist; Professor of music 1973-1991]?

FL: Yes.

JS: Yeah, yeah.

FL: Yeah.

JS: Yeah.

FL: Which courses did you take from him?

JS: Well, let me think. I believe it was a course on [Bela] Bartok's music.

FL: Cool.

JS: Yeah.

FL: He was a Bartok scholar.

JS: Yes.

FL: Yeah—or still is. So fortunate he's still with us, but—

JS: Yeah. And I th—I—I thought he was a great teacher.

FL: Did you—

JS: Really great.

FL: Mm-hm.

JS: I mean, really funny guy also, like, with a very reserved and droll sense of humor. But a—but a really passionate advocate of that music.

FL: Mm-hm. Did you take any of the—the ethnic music courses that he taught?

JS: No, I didn't, unfortunately.

FL: Uh-huh. Or how about his—his sight singing course?

JS: No. That would have been immensely valuable.

FL: Yeah.

JS: Although, you know, in later work with Charlie Banacos, it—he kind of got my ear into better shape.

4. Herb Pomeroy and the MIT Festival Jazz Ensemble (43:44)

FL: Mm-hm. So tell me about joining the Festival Jazz Ensemble. What was the audition like?

JS: Scary. [laughs] Well, the—I do remember—you know, I mean, yeah, it's scary because the—the band is there when you audition. So you kind of feel like there's all these heavy guys around you and you've got to do the best you can. And I remember at the audition feeling—god, I think there were three pianists auditioning. And I remember one of them being more—certainly more knowledgeable in jazz—well, in—in the language of jazz than I was. And I think he had a better harmonic understanding.

But when I talked to Herb about it later, you know, as to why he picked me over this guy who, to my ears, clearly knew jazz better—and to other players' ears as well—he said, "Well, I thought there was something in your improvising that was actually, like, searching or investigating. And, like, you didn't really know any licks, which was, I thought, a good thing." So that—that was Herb's reasoning. [laughs] But yes. How was the audition? It was scary, like any audition. [laughs]

FL: Mm-hm. So tell me about the—I mean, it's—it's—we could spend hours, I'm sure, talking about playing in the group with him and the things that you learned. Some of the—the core principles, things that you've taken with you over the course of your—your career.

JS: Well, a lot of—you know, a lot of people who worked in Herb's band will say the same thing about him, that he was such a loving and patient and big-hearted human being, that that was the lesson that you came away with more than any other. He—he—you just trusted him, you know. He—I mean, music making can be a difficult

thing, because you're kind of putting yourself on the line, right. You're—you're putting yourself in front of an audience or you're putting yourself in front of the band or what have you.

But Herb always made people feel like he had their backs, like he believed in them and supported them and—and would be your sup—you know, your—your supporter or your champion regardless of how things went. He was not the kind of bandleader to, like, whip your fingers for a missed note, you know.

That was—I mean, that's—that's a lesson that I think all of us that knew Herb tried to live in our lives every day with—you know, with only limited success because it—it's a very, very difficult lesson to be that large hearted and that—that loving, really.

FL: Mm-hm.

JS: Mechanically, there were a lot of good things that Herb talked about. You know, he—[laughs] he used to say, "I hate big band." And then he would explain what he meant, you know, even though he was running big bands at—at MIT and Berklee. What he didn't like was the kind of balls to the wall, playing loud, trumpets as high as possible, mad drumming, big band style that a lot of people associate with big band.

What he really loved was the more orchestral or fine approach that he heard in the music of Duke Ellington. And he strove for in his bands to achieve something like that—

FL: Mm-hm.

JS: —both in terms of the way he interpreted pieces and in terms of the pieces that he would commission or ask people to write. So, Herb—if there's, you know, a lesson besides a lesson of love and humanity that I took from Herb musically, it's to—to not—don't feel the need to go for the obvious, you know. It's okay to go for the more subtle approach.

And Herb, as I became involved with Herb as a writer, you know, for both bands at Berklee and the MIT band, he really encouraged that aspect of my writing. And, you know, it was a—it was a great thing because if you think about the marketplace of music, it tends to reward the obvious. And, I mean, that's just the way it is, you know. The—the things that we can apprehend quickly, the things that—that have everything right in front of you, they tend to be noticed.

FL: Mm-hm.

JS: And Herb fostered the belief in his students that it didn't have to be that way. So I would say that's one of the main messages I got from him. There were a lot of rehearsal techniques. I mean, I remember one thing—excuse me—one thing he said was, when you're rehearsing a piece for the first time, play it through, top to bottom. Don't stop, you know. It doesn't matter how terrible it is. Just play it through without comment.

And then play it again. And then you can begin. But he said, "Basically, trust the players. Give them a chance to sit with it for a minute. Give them a chance to interpret it. Don't feel the need to dominate the situation."

And—and Herb lived that to a fault. I mean, he would—he was so good at getting people to play beyond themselves. So, you know, those of us who are his children, in a way, strive for that. I don't think—I don't know if any of us will—will reach the level he did of bringing more from people than they thought they had in them.

FL: So obviously there's a—there's a—a humane process that he brought to music making. But there's also a kind of discipline that he brought that allowed you to play, you know, beyond—or some people even maybe beyond what might seem like their capability.

JS: Yes.

FL: Tell me about what that was. Because those are some intensely challenging musical things.

JS: Well, Herb in the process of rehearsing, especially with the MIT band, where I think he had a greater luxury of time than with the bands at Berklee—because I played in one of his bands at Berklee as well. With the MIT band, he—he was not afraid to take apart the smallest musical moment, really break it into its components, listen to the components, let the players listen to the components, and, sort of, put it back together. He would dissect voicings that were tricky to hear and put them together one or two or three notes at a time until they were all in place and let the players hear what the relationships were between the notes.

Because especially with some dance—dense jazz voicings, if you just have the whole ensemble play them, sounds like this big cloud of god knows what.

FL: Mm-hm.

JS: But Herb would take them apart in a way and say, "Okay," you know, "bass trombone, third trombone, second trombone, give me your notes. Play them and let the players hear how these notes related to each other." He would show kind of the inner—the inner method to the madness of the larger voicing. And I remember him taking apart basically every piece that way, especially pieces that had thorny voicings. You know, let's understand these voicings from their simplest components.

FL: Mm-hm.

JS: And it will make us—it'll help us play them truer. He was meticulous for balance. And I remember—this was an experience at Berklee but often repeated at MIT—him bringing in a piece that was pretty well written and just—not adjusting pitches, not adjusting anything, just the balances between voicings. And then playing the piece again. And it was like layers of crud had been scraped off and the inner beauty was shining through, just by adjusting levels.

And that's—you know, he had an ear for that. He had the—he had the relationship with the players to do that, to get them to trust him, you know, to play even quieter than they thought they should, to let some other element poke through.

FL: Mm-hm. How did he talk about phrasing? You know, leaders, you know, all have very different ideas about how you—how you phrase things.

JS: Right. Well, mostly, it—he would show people how to phrase things by singing the phrase to them with the different durations. And he might explain what his singing was. He—he might say, you know, "This is a short like this," like a—"It's not a *bap*, it's a *BAHP*!" Right.

And—and people would understand what he was trying to say. He would also sing phrases in relation to a pulse, say, by clapping his hand to show where the time should lay. Because a lot of proper jazz phrasing is manipulating the time, which is to say playing at a certain placement at the time, maybe not dead on it but slightly behind it, especially for horns.

And—and a lot of those were like—I would listen to him sing the phrases in relation to time and I'd say, "He can't possibly mean that. It's so inaccurate." But when people would execute it, it would sound so fat and real and alive.

FL: Mm-hm.

JS: But, you know—I mean, one of the tenets of line writing, which was his first class at Berklee—I took all—I was, you know, fortunate to take all three of his classes. But one of the tenets of line writing, which was a technique he developed, was never write a line that you can't sing. And that referred mostly to the melodic curve of it, but also to its duration and—and to its—you know, to the phrase markings, to the shorts and longs and what have you.

FL: Uh-huh.

JS: So I would say his—his way of teaching phrasing was to express it vocally.

FL: Mm-hm. Did he have to deal much with, you know, the way things are written using, kind of, standard, you know—Western notation that comes from—really from the classical tradition—

JS: Right.

FL: —but how jazz, kind of, has taken that? Did he—did he have to deal with much, kind of, getting beyond the notation? Or was that—were people pretty comfortable with that by the time they got to the band?

JS: Well, most people had some experience playing in jazz ensembles. So they knew something of what swing meant, right. I mean, as you know, in swing notation, a—a line might be notated with eighth notes which would imply *dot dot dot dot*. But it's interpreted rhythmically with a longer first note and a shorter second one: *dah da dah da dah*.

But Herb was always fine tuning that. And each piece would, you know—would have perhaps a different interpretation of swing, more or less—more or less of the shortening and lengthening of the component notes. But, you know, in—in his teaching of—I mean, one of the limitations of jazz notation is—is the notion of time and simultaneity and what—where things should actually happen.

Because a lot of horn phrasing in jazz tends to be on the backside of the beat. There's—I mean, if you wanted to notate that for real, it would get extremely finicky.

It would just be pointless. So that has to be something that's learned by ear and by rote and by listening and by, you know, just repetition, really.

So the—the—yeah, the limitations of Western notation for—for any music really, but certainly for jazz, are—the—they're there, but they're well-known and understood. And it is understood that players have to educate themselves about the music outside of the notation to make it all work, just to understand what time feel is and what groove is.

FL: So was Herb Pomeroy influential in your decision to pursue a professional musical career?

JS: Well, he was very encouraging. And—and—but I think by the time I met Herb, I was already thinking about it. So, yeah, it's hard to say. I think the—the dec—well, I don't know if there ever was a decision. You know, I—I think I wanted to do it, and I just kept trying until—well, I'm still trying. [laughs] Right. But he was very, very encouraging.

FL: Mm-hm.

JS: You know, and it was a big vote of confidence from him whenever, you know—whenever I worked with him. Whenever—I mean, taking his classes, being involved in his bands and ultimately running the band. Those were, you know, very, very encouraging.

FL: Mm-hm. Did he encourage you to—to do further study at—at Berklee after MIT?

JS: Yes.

FL: Yeah.

JS: Yes, but I—I was already there, [laughs] you know.

FL: Mm-hm. What about some of the other students in the—the Festival Jazz Ensemble who were musically accomplished? Did he encourage them to continue to play after they finished MIT? Did he talk about that much with students?

JS: Well, I—I mean, Herb knew as well as anyone how difficult an actual, you know—a—a life in which you're trying to make all your money from music is. So I think he encouraged everyone to continue playing.

FL: Mm-hm.

JS: Because he knew how—how much it meant to the people in the jazz band. And he knew how much it meant to himself. And I don't know if, you know, I mean—as he was a teacher himself, I don't know if he made such a huge distinction between playing for fun and playing for money. I mean, a lot of times, some of the most rewarding things we do in music are not the ones that pay the best. And I think he would be all for choosing those which are rewarding.

FL: Mm-hm.

JS: So in—in some ways, I think he saw that a—a life in which—in which you did more things than music might be a good way of doing it. I mean, some of the people that he worked with—he always used to tell us that his second trombone player in his big

band was a dentist, which, you know, to him, I think, made a lot of sense. Because then you could liberate the pursuit of music from the need to make money.

FL: Mm-hm. Mm-hm. Did you play in any other MIT musical ensembles?

JS: No, just the jazz band.

FL: Mm-hm.

JS: Which, in terms of time commitment, was enough.

5. MIT faculty and student musical influences (59:25)

FL: Mm-hm. So, courses outside of—of music, were there any courses and professors that left an impression on you?

JS: It's funny; I was just talking with Fred Harris [Director, MIT Wind and Jazz Ensembles] about this. Probably the biggest impression of a non-music course at MIT was Amar Bose's acoustics class.

FL: Uh-huh.

JS: I mean, for a lot of reasons. One, because he actually made you learn the physics and calculus that you thought you knew, [laughs] right? Two because he's an incredibly energetic and passionate person and, you know, just knows so much about so many different things.

And also I was impressed with the fact that he was a musician and that that always, you know, informed his work as a maker of—of tools for reproducing music.

FL: Mm-hm. So what kind of musician is he?

JS: I believe he's a violin player.

FL: No kidding.

JS: Yeah.

FL: I didn't know that.

JS: Yeah.

FL: Wow.

JS: But I never heard him play.

FL: Uh-huh.

JS: You know, I don't know whether he's a serious amateur or what have you. But—but that was a great class. It was one of the hardest classes I took at MIT but a really wonderful class.

FL: Mm-hm. Tell me about some of the musicians in the—the Festival Jazz Ensemble when you were playing with that kind of stand out for you and some of your memories of them.

JS: Well, the—you know, the most obvious would be Dave Ricks [MIT 1983].

FL: Uh-huh.

JS: Dave and I were not only good friends but continued to work together and still connect with each other. I—in fact, I saw him, when was the last time—I—I saw him in March, in DC, when I was playing down there.

Dave was a really great improviser—still is a great improviser. But I mean, thinking of the time of the band, he was, you know, one of the best improvising voices we had in the band.

FL: And he's a trumpet player. Yeah.

JS: He plays trumpet and flugelhorn.

FL: Yeah.

JS: And a—a very—a real individual, you know. He—he has—he—he's-- if—if you know him, you—he's just—he's just himself, which I really love.

FL: Mm-hm.

JS: He introduced me to a lot of interesting music and especially a lot of music outside jazz. He was the guy that introduced me to Jon Hassell [trumpet player and composer], who's been quite an influence.

FL: Mm-hm.

JS: And, you know, he'd caused me—forced me to listen to pop music that I, like a lot of jazz snobs, thought that I was above, you know. He helped me correct that little flaw. [laughs] But yeah, Dave was, I think, the most—most influential, the closest friend of mine.

FL: Mm-hm.

JS: But there were—there were several. Frosty, Forrest Buzan [MIT 1989].

FL: Mm-hm. Oh, you called him Frosty? Oh really?

JS: We called him Frosty then. [laughs] Yeah. Now he's Forrest.

FL: Uh-huh.

JS: Frosty played in my thesis, as did Dave.

FL: Yeah.

JS: Charlie Marge [MIT 1984]—

FL: Mm-hm.

JS: —who also played in my thesis. You probably know, Charlie's father was a great studio musician in New York.

FL: No, I didn't know that.

JS: Yeah, George Marge. He—he worked on a lot of—you know, he was a multi-reed player. And—I think he—he's the English horn player on Madonna's "Crazy For You," if I'm not mistaken. But, I mean, he did a ton of studio stuff.

FL: My goodness.

JS: Charlie was—I mean, he introduced me—got me thinking about the bass clarinet and about the oboe and about—

FL: Mm-hm.

JS: — some of the nonstandard jazz woodwinds.

FL: Wow, wow. When you were a student, did you use the Music Library at all?

JS: Yeah, sometimes. I mean, we needed it for certain classes.

FL: Mm-hm.

JS: Sometimes I would listen to music there. But I'm sure I under-utilized it, in retrospect.

FL: Mm-hm. Any—any particular memories of the Music Library or just—it was just kind of there and you used it?

JS: Well, I do remember listening to [Maurice] Ravel's *Concerto for Left Hand* there—

FL: Mm-hm.

JS: —and being really, kind of, freaked out by that piece, [laughs] right? I mean, I—I couldn't believe the pianist was playing it with his—his left hand. I was like, "I'm not sure I could do this with both hands." And yeah, that was—that was a pretty remarkable—pretty remarkable experience, actually.

FL: So with your humanities degree—did you have any, kind of, concentration on either an engineering or science field?

JS: The concentration was on electrical engineering, which was perhaps arbitrarily chosen. You know, I thought it was relevant because of my interest in synthesis. In retrospect, perhaps more—being more on the computer side would have made—would have made sense. But I think in those days, I didn't anticipate how thoroughly digital synthesis would become.

FL: Mm-hm.

JS: You know, because—I mean, in—in our early days, analog was—was what it was about. So knowing how circuits worked was more relevant.

FL: Mm-hm.

JS: But Barry [Vercoe] gave me a glimpse of the future.

FL: So then at Berklee what was your area of concentration?

JS: My major was jazz composition and arranging. But I was a declared film scoring major for several semesters because at Berklee, you can't take film courses without being a film scoring major. But yeah, I—I finished as a jazz comp and arranging major.

6. Studies with Pomeroy at Berklee College of Music (1:05:20)

FL: Mm-hm. So I want to ask you a little bit more about Herb Pomeroy's ideas about harmony and arranging.

JS: Mm-hm.

FL: When I interviewed him, he was talking about the idea of harmony coming from color and not chord function.

JS: Right.

FL: And when you listen to his music, you wouldn't necessarily think that, because people oftentimes who talk in that way are kind of more in the avant-garde realm. But it really says something about the way his mind was working.

JS: Yes. And—and you know, having taken the line writing course—it's—I mean, there's a number of things that it emphasizes. But one of them, in constructing vertical structures or chords, the thinking was about the intervals in the chords, not about the function of the tones within the chords.

FL: Mm-hm.

JS: And his—his—the essential thrust of it was the points of emphasis carried the most dissonance, in other words, had the most half steps. And points of less emphasis had fewer. So it was a way of making the harmonic tension within the chord match the—the curve of the line.

So his first step was to analyze the melody and determine what is the—you know, what are the—what are the points of emphasis? What do you want to point to? Okay, hang those chords first. And make the highest point of emphasis have the most dissonance. Make the points of lesser emphasis have less dissonance.

And then write lines between these vertical structures that you've made. So it—it was kind of a two-part process, one to build chords that were—I—I mean, I think he objected to the notion of: Okay, the root needs to go in the bottom and then the fifth and then the third and then the seventh and then the ninth and you know, stacking them up that way, which is a very typical way of writing voicings.

His thinking was more: (a) where is the distance—dissonances, and how many of them do we have? If they're lower, they're more powerful or more biting, as it were. And secondly, what are the intervals in the chord? How do they—how do they stack up? And those determined for him—those determined for him what the colors were.

FL: Mm-hm.

JS: The second main thrust was that the writing should be as linear as possible. So after putting the vertical structures at the points of emphasis, all of the other voicings were made linearly, not by—you know, not by then making a sequence of vertical structures, but by writing the second line, writing the bottom line, writing the third line. And then checking those intermediate vertical structures to make sure they didn't violate your desire to have the maximum tension at your emphasis points.

FL: Mm-hm. And then—did that influence also the—the choice of instruments as opposed to by—by choir, but more by—

JS: Well, I think a—a lot of Herb's ideas for line writing—I mean, as he told it—came from investigating the music of Duke Ellington. And one thing that Duke did was take a more orchestral approach to instrumental combinations, which is to say he wouldn't always have the trombones playing as a section and the saxophones as a section, and trumpets. I mean, he would use that if that was a desired technique.

But Herb was also very much interested in the combinations of single instruments within a section or—he was also—also a fan of unusual alignments where the writing might be sectional, but the instruments weren't in their normal order. So, you might have a voicing in the saxophones, for instance, where it's alto, baritone, tenor, alto, tenor. So getting some inversion—getting some of the instruments into the extremes of their register to get unusual colors out of those instruments.

7. Succeeding Pomeroy as Director of MIT Festival Jazz Ensemble (1:09:20)

FL: Mm. Interesting, interesting. So, you succeeded Herb Pomeroy as Director of the MIT Festival Jazz Ensemble. How did that come about?

JS: Well, Herb told me that he actually had another person in mind, someone—one of his peers. And that that person was actually not interested in doing it. And he thought about it some more, and he—I—I remember him asking me, "So, what are you doing after school?" [laughs] Right, like what—because I was just about to graduate from Berklee at that point.

And I said, "Oh, I'd given some thought to living in Los Angeles and living in Paris but I wasn't sure yet." And then some time later, he asked me to—to conduct the band, which, you know, was a huge leap of faith on his part for a lot of reasons. One, I had no ex—similar experience, and two, I was 24 at the time, which means I was just a couple years younger than the students—or a couple years older than the students. So that's how it came about.

FL: Mm-hm.

JS: It was pretty scary, [laughs] to say the least.

FL: You know, it's very interesting that your musical style, you know, is very different than Herb's. But yet there was something that he understood, you know, about you to give that responsibility to you. And—can you talk about that? I just—I find that really fascinating.

JS: Well, I mean, it—one thing that had happened during the years I was at Berklee was I was writing a number of pieces for the band. So that may have led Herb to have faith that I had some understanding of the group and how it functioned and what its

strengths and weaknesses were. But I think—I think we felt some kinship as human beings. And that may have been a factor in his decision.

FL: Mm-hm.

JS: Also, he knew that I had been a student in the band and a student at MIT, which is to say I could understand the pressures that the students were under and could understand what the aesthetic of the band was.

I mean, Herb really created that group and spent, as you know, 22 years shaping it and—and building it to really a beautiful thing. So I think he hoped that whoever would—you know, would take the reins from him would have his understanding or his outlook, even if they didn't have an identical—

FL: Mm-hm.

JS: —stylistic viewpoint or—or even appreciate exactly the same kinds of music. Of course, there was a lot of music that we did have in common. But—but there were things that I was into that he was not and so on and so forth.

FL: Right.

JS: I think it was more that kinship that may have shaded that decision on his part.

FL: Mm-hm. So, Everett Longstreth was running the MIT Concert Jazz Band.

JS: Correct.

FL: And you had to coordinate, you know, auditions and deciding who was in which band. How did that work for you with—with Everett?

JS: Well, usually—I mean, what Herb had done was—how did it—I think usually what happened is Everett would audition the trumpets and trombones and Herb would audition the saxophones and rhythm. And they would compare notes and generally the players that were stronger ended up in the Festival Jazz Band.

FL: Mm-hm.

JS: But you know, I mean, it was also present—it was made known to the students the differences in the band in terms of repertoire, because the Festival Band tended to play more original music. Concert Band tended to play more traditional big band music. So there were occasions where a student would be drawn to playing traditional music. But most students wanted to be in the Festival Band.

FL: Mm-hm. *The MIT Tech* had a review on May 6, 1986.

JS: Uh-huh.

FL: Referring to you, it says, "Jamie has managed to maintain the old experimental direction of the group while introducing a wealth of new ideas." What was he referring to possibly by "the old experimental direction”?

JS: Well, Herb, from as far back as I know, had student writers from Berklee and sometimes from the band itself write for the group. So it was not only MIT's jazz ensemble, but it was a laboratory for composers. And, I mean, I—I remember [Toru]

"Tiger" Okoshi wrote pieces for the band—[Matthias] "Teese" Gohl, who—played both pieces from both of those composers.

So that would be the old experimental direction, right.

FL: Uh-huh.

JS: Because a lot of these writers were students at the time.

FL: Right.

JS: And Herb had no idea what they would come up with. I mean, he'd give them direction. He'd say, this is the kind of thing we need now, you know, something up or something down, a ballad, a—a more aggressive piece, what have you. But some of the experiments worked and some didn't.

FL: Mm-hm.

JS: But I think Herb picked well enough most of the time that it was—it—you know, it was—the—the experiments were beneficial.

FL: Mm-hm.

JS: And—and—you know, and gave the band the sense that they were doing something, that they weren't just playing the same old charts over and over again.

FL: So what were some of the—the ideas that you brought, you know, your own kind of individual vision for the group—

JS: Well—

FL: —that might have been different from what they were doing?

JS: You know, for—for musicians of Herb's generation, jazz is, for the most part, swing and bebop. Rhythmically—I mean, styles that are rhythmically similar, separated by, sort of, energy and tempo. But, I mean, I grew up with music that included rock and funk and R&B and soul and even hip-hop.

So all of those I felt were viable rhythmic areas that the band could explore. And ultimately we did. And so yeah, that—that is probably what he was referring to when he says new ideas.

FL: Yeah. I mean, it's—there's a very different sound in some of the stuff that you—you did with them.

JS: Right.

FL: As a director looking at MIT musicians, do you have any thought about, kind of, qualities of MIT musicians that might be different from other collegiate musicians?

JS: Well, you know, life at MIT is pretty intense, as anyone will be happy to tell you. People tend to do things with, you know—I mean, gung ho. So I always found the players, at least in the Festival Jazz Band, to be really committed to what they were doing.

It was—It was surprising to find someone who was not committed to it. That was—that was an exception rather than a rule.

FL: Mm-hm. Mm-hm.

JS: I mean, you can find committed musicians, of course, anywhere. But, for instance at Berklee—because I also taught at Berklee for five years—sometimes students were into it and sometimes they weren't. You would find all types. But I rarely found someone in—in the MIT Jazz Band who wasn't completely there, who wasn't really into the mission of the band, you know—

FL: Mm-hm.

JS: —trying to make it the best they could.

8. Role of music at MIT (1:17:33)

FL: Mm-hm. So how do you look at the—the role of the MIT music program, you know, the function of music? I mean, obviously you know, music has been a big part of MIT for a long time. And you can major in music here. But it's not, you know, the predominant role of—of MIT is, you know, science and engineering and related fields.

JS: Right.

FL: How do you—how do you look at that?

JS: Well, I think there are a couple ways of looking at it. One is that music provides a release or a relief or a counterbalance to, to a—you know, a technical or a mathematical or scientific way of doing things or looking at things. And another way—and—and I find this among some of the musicians at MIT—is there's not really a distinction between the two, that it's all sort of stuff, right? That it's—it's not act—I mean, it's not a dichotomy, it's not a contradiction to do science or to pursue science and to pursue the arts.

And that—I mean, as someone who plays synthesizer, as someone who is extremely comfortable with, you know, the whole range of computer tools, I don't—I don't feel the dichotomy there that some people may, like a—you know, a division between things that are technical or scientifically-oriented and, say, things that are musical.

FL: Right. And that goes back, you know, for—for centuries, scientists and engineers have been—been, you know, musicians. You know, Alexander Borodin, William Herschel, who discovered Uranus, was an astronomer but also a composer. And I mean, you know, Albert Einstein was a violinist. I mean, the list goes on and on. And—

JS: Right.

FL: —it's—it's one of those best kept secrets that people don't understand that there really is—there's not a contradiction there.

JS: Right, right. It—it's comforting, I think, for people to have to put other people into boxes because then they don't feel threatened by them. You know, it's like, "Oh yeah,

he does that so he can do it as well as he wants." But I—I don't—I don't feel the division so strongly.

FL: Mm-hm. There's an aspect of—of jazz theory that might be appealing to certain kinds of people who are good at mathematics. Did you find any kind of affinity for that—that particular kind of music theory and—someone who is kind of mathematically gifted, or not necessarily?

JS: Well, hmm. I mean, that's—it's a good question. But I think—I think, I mean, when you think of jazz improvisation, like we were talking about on the phone, it's really more of a language. And I—I mean, I suppose one could devise a—a more mathematical way of looking at it. Or—I mean, it might even be useful for some people to—you know, to decode it mathematically.

But I think most jazz improvisers are speaking a language that they've learned in the same way that children learn a language, by hearing it over and over again, by attempting to repeat it, and then by assembling their own sentences from the components they hear other players play or other players perform.

So, yeah, I don't know. I'm not—I'm not that familiar with—with the theoretical approach to improvisation. Maybe you can elaborate a bit.

FL: I mean, that could go on to—a—a big—big—big subject.

JS: [laughs] —a whole big can of worms.

FL: But I just wondered if in your experience with MIT students—

JS: Right.

FL: —if you—you found a certain—there are books on the subject, but that's another—for another time.

JS: Right. Well, I—I mean Berklee certainly doesn't shy away from—you know, from getting very particular about what works in improvisation. You know, like, this scale for this chord and this scale for this chord. I had a teacher I mentioned earlier, Charlie Banacos who was very much into—he was actually almost the opposite of learning licks, although he was a big proponent of transcription.

One of the things that he did—he had his students do—was play permutations of melodic patterns. And some of these permutations would run into the thousands. So—so that is actually a kind of [laughs] mathematical approach to improvisation. And his thought was: learn all of these permutations, or, you know, at least run them through your fingers so that you have complete fluidity.

I—I actually liked that approach. I thought it was really cool. Although over the years, I've come to think that the language model probably makes more sense. At least it's where more jazz players I think have grown out of.

9. Musical influences and compositional style (1:22:48)

FL: Mm-hm. Mm-hm. So I want to talk to you about your own compositional style and approach and—and all that. What would you say are your—some of your, kind of, primary influences that affect what you're doing today?

JS: Huh. Well there's—well, [laughs] I'm not sure where to start because there's really quite a bit.

FL: Yeah. It's—

JS: I mean, you know, as I mentioned before, there's—there's quite a bit of jazz that I listened to when I was younger and not—and, you know, and continuing on. There's quite a bit of, for lack of a better term, world music. Mostly West African and Middle Eastern, but really music from a lot of different cultures that I've found compelling.

There's quite a bit of pop music that I find interesting. And I think all of this is just kind of flowing in and running around. I don't—and—and I'm not sure—you know, I'm not sure at any given time what's dominant.

FL: Mm-hm.

JS: There—I mean, my records, they're—you know, you could feel a pretty clear stamp of West African and Middle Eastern elements.

FL: Mm-hm.

JS: Certainly rhythmically.

FL: Tell me how—where some—I mean, obviously you've been listening to some of that stuff for a while. But was it at Berklee when you were actually meeting students from some of these countries that you actually got interested in playing?

JS: Well, no, I didn't—I mean, I did meet one Nigerian musician at Berklee who was an influence and—and—and I think shaped the direction. But a lot of it I just became curious about. And—and I think it was—I remember it was at the end—it was after graduating from Berklee and after leaving essentially several years of a very intellectual approach toward music, you know, which any music school is going to be, I begin to, like, feel the need for a more visceral connection to music.

And something in me says, "Well, I wonder," you know, "I wonder where investigating African music would lead." So it was—you know, it was a lot of fumbling at first.

FL: Mm-hm.

JS: Like, where can I find this? Who knows about it? I ended up taking lessons with the Agbekor group that David Locke runs at Tufts and found a number of like-minded people in that group, Ben Wittman and Michael Rivard and Simone Haggiag, who, you know, I ended up working with and still work with to this day.

FL: Mm-hm. The stuff of yours that I've heard—a common theme is a particular attention to—to rhythm as a—as a primary element.

JS: Uh-huh.

FL: And not a—not a—a backdrop for—for melodic material.

JS: Right. Well, I—I think part of that grew out of investigating African music and—and you know, in particular, West African music, and finding something in that that, you know, it—to my ear, asserted a greater primacy for rhythm. And you know, also playing in the Agbekor Group, it's basically a drumming group with some singing, some dancing—they're just—you know, felt—there's—there's something about that that's so stripped down and beautiful, to just have—you know, to just concentrate on rhythm, to concentrate on time and feel. And try to, you know, try to look at music through that lens, as it were.

FL: Uh-huh. So when did you start really looking at—at Persian and Middle Eastern music and really, kind of, getting inside, kind of, what that's about?

JS: Well, it was around the same time, you know, after graduating from Berklee, and—and—so now feeling the need to look at more things.

FL: Mm-hm.

JS: Or to—you know, to get beyond the—the—the emphasis that Berklee placed, at least at that point in history, on—on jazz and, you know, on—on—on a really Western view of things.

FL: Mm-hm.

JS: So—and—and again, it was fumbling and, you know, just listening and finding my way and trying to understand the musics more by listening than anything.

FL: Mm-hm. As a person coming into those musics, as an improviser—

JS: Mm-hm.

FL: —did that give you some kind of commonality? Because those—those musics also rely upon that.

JS: Absolutely.

FL: Tell me about this kind of cross-cultural improvisational approach to—to music.

JS: Well, I think you see in—in many, you know, quote unquote, world musics, a—a less, shall we say, well-defined line between improvisation and composition. If I think about Persian music, there is a set of melodies that people learn, the—you know, the *gusheh*, the sort of component melodies that are—that are based on folk melodies.

So there is an—an acquisition of licks, as it were. And yet the performer in a performance will put those together and inflect them in his or her own way. So it—there is this element of: okay, I have to acquire all these compositional or musical sub-assemblies. But the assembly is done in real time.

And I don't think that's so different than jazz, I mean, getting back to the notion of a player learning the language. He's learning the licks that are—have been played by other players. But they are reassembled in new ways.

FL: Mm-hm.

JS: So yeah. That—I mean, having studied improvisation and having studied jazz made it a lot easier to understand those musics than perhaps someone who hadn't had any experience improvising.

FL: Mm-hm. You know, a—a kind of useless debate that's out there: oftentimes, people say, what is jazz? But it—it made me wonder if—that there's a—a kind of approach to—to music that could be called kind of jazz, as—as a kind of a creative approach. And I wonder if that might be a way that—that we can understand, maybe, jazz in a modern age as opposed to staying stylistic exactly what it is.

JS: Right. Well, that is—yeah. That is a—it is, as you say, possibly a useless debate. And yet some people care deeply about it. And you know, I've—I mean, I've come to the—the thinking that if people want to say that jazz is this certain thing that happened in this certain time with these certain players, that's okay, you know.

It's really a semantic argument. There's no doubt that the—that the thinking in jazz can be applied elsewhere, right. It doesn't—I mean, the—the—when I say the thinking in jazz, the fact that, you know, that there is improvisation, that—I mean, even the harmonic thinking can be applied elsewhere. So—but I—I don't worry that much these days about what—you know, what jazz actually is.

FL: Mm-hm.

JS: And I probably come to the more of the Wynton Marsalis definition. Okay, it's this music that was at this time. And it's acoustic and it's swing and, you know, there's acoustic bass and drums and—and—which, of course, leaves you saying, "Well, is Bitches Brew jazz?"

And I think the, you know—the traditionalists would say it's not. I always felt it was, but [laughs] it doesn't matter to me, you know. It's certainly vital, alive music, right? It's—and there is a jazz aesthetic running through it. But this semantic argument as to which side of the line it falls on I'm not sure I'm interested in.

FL: Mm-hm. So the notion of being a composer when you're in an improvisational ensemble, or writing even a piece for an improvisational ensemble—

JS: Right.

FL: —that's very different than when you're writing for a group where there's no improvisation and what—what the composer means.

JS: Right.

FL: Can you talk about that? Because you've had experience with both.

JS: Yes. Well, you know, even—even the notion of writing for an improvisational ensemble can vary quite a bit, as you know. I mean, it—it could be something as minimal as saying "Okay, right now, everybody play whatever they want," right? I mean, that's a kind of minimal form of composition.

I think most improvisational writing is not that completely hands-off. There are sections that are written and there's sections that are improvised. But, yeah, it's—hmm. What am I thinking here?

Well, I—I think, I mean, if you're composing for an improvisational ensemble, what you're trying to do is engage—collaborate with the improviser, get them to add something that is—that will raise the piece higher, right, while at the same time providing enough of a framework that you're influencing the improvisation in some direction or another.

FL: Mm-hm.

JS: I think if you—you know, if you just say to a player—well, if—let's say you write some notes and then there's a blank space for a player just to improvise. If it's that bare, it may turn out great, but as a composer, you should offer a little more direction, you know, a little more guidance. Whether that's in the form of written parts that accompany the improvisation or whether that's in the form of instructions to the improviser or whether that's just talking with the improviser before the performance or before the—you know, during the rehearsals, saying, "Well, I want you to reflect on this written section here. I want you to incorporate this melody. I think it's important to, you know—to—to shape the improvisation in some way."

FL: Mm-hm.

JS: With some pieces that happens pretty organically, you know. If the piece suggests a certain harmonic language, then a sensitive improviser will hear that language. Or if it suggests a kind of melody, you know, say, a very angular melody or a very slow moving melody, then perhaps the improviser will reflect on that. It doesn't mean they do exactly what's in the written section. But they're at least aware of it and responding to it.

FL: It probably also makes a difference if you're writing for people that you know.

JS: Yes, absolutely. And this was a big point of Duke Ellington and with Herb, that it—effective writing for an improvisation ensem—improvisational ensemble is tailored to the improviser.

FL: Mm-hm.

JS: Right, and—and takes into consideration that improviser's strengths.

FL: So how do you work with the idea of a piece that you don't know who the players are going to be but you want to incorporate improvisation? And—and if your—if your style—your basic style might not be familiar to—to the group taking on the piece.

JS: Right, well, most of the experiences I've had writing have been with some foreknowledge of who the improvisers were. If—even if it's the case of, you know, talking to the band leader or the ensemble and saying, "Well, who's doing the improvising? What are they like? Can I hear them?" And so on and so forth.

If there is no foreknowledge, if you don't know who the group is, well, then it becomes important to convey, hopefully in the score, something of what you're thinking.

FL: Mm-hm.

JS: It—you know, it can be that you sketch little patterns or melodies. It can be that you have a written note saying, "Reflect on this melody," or, you know, "Build from the

melody at A." Or "Build from this energy level." Or "Start low" or "Start high," or what—whatever instructions you feel are relevant to getting an improvisation that matches the piece.

FL: Mm-hm.

JS: But I think any composer working with improvisational material, their main hope is that they've got good improvisers, right.

FL: Right.

JS: And a good improviser is going to do that intuitively. They're going to listen to where they are and what they're surrounded with and make something that fits it but that also raises it to another level.

FL: Mm-hm. So here at MIT, you've written some pieces for the Festival Jazz Ensemble, both when you were director but, you know, subsequently.

JS: Yes.

FL: Including a piece for Herb Pomeroy and then one in commemoration of his passing.

JS: Right. Uh-huh.

FL: And this recent commission is for the Festival—or for the MIT Wind Ensemble.

JS: Yes.

FL: A piece called "Awakening."

JS: Uh-huh.

FL: Tell me about, kind of, how this piece came about. And we can talk about some of the harmonic and melodic language of that too.

JS: Right. Well, the—the—the seed of the piece started actually at the—around the time of the last piece that I wrote for Herb, for Herb's passing, which was called "The Calling." And Fred had assembled—Fred Harris had assembled a larger group for that concert than the usual Festival Jazz Band. He had the regular big band, but he added some woodwinds and he added some strings. And a couple extra brass as well.

So we had actually a significant chunk of the Wind Ensemble—well, I shouldn't say—well, no, actually about 20 or 30 members of the Wind Ensemble there. Twenty or 30 of the instruments of the Wind Ensemble there. And Fred said to me at that time, "Oh, I'd love to get you—love to get you to write something for the Wind Ensemble." And I said, "That'd be fantastic."

So that was the seed of that. That was a few years ago now. And Fred, when the visiting artist program came up at MIT, he thought that might be an opportunity to make it happen. And this was right around the time of the events of the Arab Spring. And he thought, "Wow, why don't we do something that's connected with that. And, you know, it'll allow you to use some of your work in Middle Eastern music incorporate—incorporate that into the piece."

FL: Mm-hm. So there are these Persian modes called *maqam* that you were using. Tell me about that and how you're working with that with—with a group that's using an even—even-tempered, you know, tuning system.

JS: Right. Well, first of all, just a bit on—on the Persian and Arabic split, right. The—I mean, Persian music and Arabic music are related to each other, although Arab and Persian musicians will tell you they're completely different. [laughs] They both use—you know, they both work from a kind of home scale that may be modified in the course of the piece.

In Persian, they're referred to as *dastgah*. In Arabic they're referred to as *maqam*. There is some overlap but not entirely. There are some that exist—I mean, there are actually many more *maqam* than there are *dastgah*, as I understand it. I—I think the traditional view of dastgah is there are 12. And I think there's probably a couple dozen *maqam*.

But they are, like Indian *raga*, a set scale that may be modified in the course of the improvisation but provides a ground for the melodies and also, you know, is the place that any improvisation would come from. Most of them, not all, but most of them, include non-equal tempered tones—what we in the West would call quarter tones, but they're not—they're actually a little finer specified than that, as we talked about on the phone.

So you know, the—the—the question became in writing this piece: how do we deal with that? And—and I—it became pretty clear to me that it wasn't realistic to ask college students, especially college students as time-pressured as those at MIT to learn a completely different technique to—to perform the piece. Because to play quarter tones on a Western instrument, on a wind instrument requires that you learn a separate fingering for every quarter tone that you want to do.

And for most people, it's through experimentation. It can't even come from a fingering chart. I know a few people that have done this. It's—you know, it's not unusual for an avant-garde classical musician to have those techniques. A clarinet player I work with, Ole Mathisen, who I met at Berklee, has, you know, complete control of quarter tones on the saxophone and he's been working out on the clarinet.

But it—it—it's almost like learning to play again. So I let go of the idea of quarter tones. Briefly, actually, Fred and I had talked about having a guest performer. And I thought, "Oh, maybe this person could be an Arabic musician or someone from the Arab world who could play quarter tones."

But the more I thought about it, the more I felt I wanted this to be just the Wind Ensemble, you know, for it to be their thing, not them with a star in front. So my approach was not to use—you know, not to specify quarter tones in the score, but to modify the scales to equal temperament. Which means that a lot of them lose their peculiar flavor, but, you know, that's—that's just one of the compromises that had to be made.

The flip side of that is that you get the ability to make chords and harmonic structures which is a little bit trickier in a quarter tone situation because, well, they—they just sound unusual to the ear. So you know, thinking from there, okay, if we're

not going to use quarter tone scales, well, what other elements from Arabic or Persian or Middle Eastern music can I bring in?

And for me, the most obvious—or one of the most obvious ones was to take an essentially modal approach to sections of the composition. It may be that, you know, we change keys or move—move into different harmonic areas. But within a section, the approach is essentially modal and not harmonic in a Western sense.

FL: Mm-hm.

JS: So there's not a lot of real functional harmony in this piece because there's not really functional harmony in—in Arabic or Persian music. There are some rhythmic elements that I brought in. There's a—a fair amount of riq, or Arabic tambourine, playing which, you know, gives a certain flavor, but I think not as significant as—as coming at it from a modal point of view.

And then, I was—you know, I was doing a lot of listening to Arabic music at the time, just trying to get it back in my head and get some of the melodic patterns, you know, including some recordings from the teens and twenties, which I find really moving. Because the stuff is just so raw and—and passionately felt. So those crept in. And you'll hear a number of themes that—that—even though they're in equal temperament have a Middle Eastern flavor to them.

FL: What about some of the underlying rhythmic impulse of the piece?

JS: Well, I—I had listened in particular to a lot of Egyptian rhythms and, you know, actually rhythms from all over the region. But as I got into the writing of the material I found that I was driven more by where the melodies were going to go. And the rhythms that re—resulted were in support of that melody.

I mean, the—like, there were several times where I was, like, consciously setting out to write a very traditional Arabic 6/8. And it just for some reason didn't feel right to me. It was—it was more—really more about following the melodic direction.

FL: Mm-hm. Is that different for you in some ways, where some of your music is—is very, kind of, rhythmically driven?

JS: Correct. Yes. A lot of the pieces on my record actually started—well, those records, *Prayer for the Soul of Layla* and *ONE* were mostly done from two angles. I would build rhythmic tracks that sounded interesting and exciting to me. And then I would work on melodies independent of any rhythm whatsoever and just record these melodies of—you know, I had dozens of them on tape.

And then I'd just review all of that material and find what were the melodies that I was most drawn to? What were the rhythms I was most drawn to? Is there any that can connect with each other?

And in some cases there was. In some cases, I just grabbed a rhythm and said, "Okay, I'm going to build something on that. It's not any of the melodies that I did." And in some cases, I took one of the melodies and said, "Oh, none of these rhythms are going to work."

But for the most part, rhythm was at the center of building those records. And it wasn't so much with this piece. This was much more melodically-driven.

FL: Mm-hm.

JS: There's also a certain amount of programmatic information, especially in the first movement. You know, it was reading about the Arab Spring and the events that led up to it and what the shape of it was and tried to let some of that seep into the structuring of—particularly the flow of the first movement.

FL: Mm-hm. Did your work in film music help you with kind of a programmatic element there?

JS: Well, probably, yeah, that's always there. You know, I kind of feel like I never really get away from film music because that thinking—once you start thinking that way, it's always in your head.

FL: Mm-hm.

JS: You know, how—what is the picture associated with this, or what is this—you know, what is this saying? What is this speaking to? So I'm sure it had an imprint, although I wasn't consciously trying to go there. You know, in other words, I wasn't trying to write a score for the Arab Spring.

FL: Right. I wonder when you're writing film music—is there an element where you're also saying, can this just work on its own, that it doesn't need a picture?

JS: There is. And sometimes there'll be pieces for film where I'll really try to write them away from the film, especially when I'm trying to write themes. You know, if I want to write the essential musical material that's going to be the groundwork for the score, I'll try to write that away from the film if I can.

FL: Mm-hm.

JS: Because you want it to be—you know, you want it to have some kind of life of its own.

FL: Mm-hm.

JS: But once I get into the writing of individual cues—they—I tend to let them be driven by the scene, because that's—that's what they should be.

FL: Right.

JS: You know, they need to ebb and flow with what the scene is doing. And they need to respond to what's happening emotionally on the scene.

FL: Mm-hm.

JS: So yeah—yeah. Usually the technique there, for me at least, is: write the themes with some awareness of the film but not to picture. And then start fitting these themes to picture in individual cues.

FL: Mm-hm.

JS: But yeah, with—with this, I was trying not to be too connected to any kind of picture in my head.

FL: Mm-hm. Mm-hm. One last question. we talked a little bit on the phone about this, and we could talk for hours.

JS: Yeah. [laughs]

FL: This—this—this concept of world music.

JS: Yes.

FL: In some ways, it's kind of an absurd abstraction because how can you talk about world music?

JS: Right. It's like talking about world people or something like that. I mean, it—as I said at the time, I think it's—you know, it's a kind of shorthand introduction to a conversation. And I—I know it's not particularly descriptive because you're trying to cover—you're using it to basically describe everything that's not Western music, right, which is a huge amount of material and in—and includes art music and folk music and pop music and things that are Western influenced and things that are hybridized and things that are, well, less hybridized.

So, yeah. It's not—it's not particularly useful. But it's a kind of shorthand that people use, unfort—

FL: Mm-hm.

JS: —you know, for better or for worse.

FL: Mm-hm. In the—when it's used in kind of the marketing sense—

JS: Yes.

Fl: —some of your—your work has been described as mark—you know, in those kind of categories. And, when you're thinking of what you do when you're not writing, like, for—for jazz ensembles or for—for film, but using some of this—this ethnic stuff, how do you think of your work?

JS: Well, it's—I mean, it's pretty obvious to me that it's hybridized, right. That there's—there are elements of musics from the Middle East or musics from West Africa in there. And there's obviously very Western elements. But that's kind of who I am, right? I mean, it—you know, I'm—I'm a hybrid person. And I'm—hybrid in my experiences.

FL: Mm-hm.

JS: So it's just—it's just the—the, kind of a natural expression of the—of the music I want to make. So yeah. What do you call it? Well, for lack of a better term, I think some people have called it world music, classified it as such.

I know Jon Hassell tried to put forth the term "fourth world music" for a while as music that had a world sensibility but was, you know, was also referencing other elements. But I don't think that term has caught on.

FL: Mm-hm.

JS: And it—I mean, you know, I mean the thing I mentioned to you is that—that the terms for defining music are possibly useful for commercial reasons. They may be

useful for critical reasons. But among musicians, they're a little bit—they're not really that important.

FL: Yeah.

JS: You know.

FL: I love Duke Ellington's thought that there's two kinds of music. There's good music and there's bad music. Period.

JS: Right. [laughs] Right, exactly. And—and, you know—and—and Duke was someone who looked, really, everywhere and brought a lot of influences in. But you know, as—as I said, especially, I mean, in a place like New York where we have so many musicians from so many countries, a lot of those divisions are just not the—you know, they're—they're not relevant.

People work with each other if they feel a kinship, if they feel some kind of common musical ground. And it has usually very little to do with the players' background and more to do with their mutual affinities.

FL: Mm-hm. Mm-hm. Well, I want to thank you very, very much for this interview. This has just been—

JS: Well, thank you, Forrest.

FL: —been fantastic. I—I've—my, I just—have learned so much from you. So—

JS: [laughs] You're too kind.

FL: —thank you. Thank you.

JS: No, thank you for having me, Forrest. It's a great pleasure.