Interview with Benny Powell

By Todd Bryant Weeks

Present: Powell, his trombone student Bradley Cooper, Weeks

TBW: Today is August the 6th, 2009, believe it or not, and I'm interviewing Mr. Benny Powell. We're at his apartment in Manhattan, on 55th Street on the West Side of Manhattan. I feel honored to be here. Thanks very much for inviting me into your home.

BP: Thank you.

TBW: How long have you been here, in this location?

BP: Over forty years. Or more, actually. This is such a nice location. I've lived in other places—I was in California for about ten years, but I've always kept this place because it's so centrally located. Of course, when I was doing Broadway, it was great, because I can practically stumble from my house to Broadway, and a lot of times it came in handy when there were snow storms and things, when other musicians had to come in from Long Island or New Jersey, and I could be on call. It really worked very well for me in those days.

TBW: You played Broadway for many years, is that right?

BP: Yeah.

TBW: Starting when?

BP: I left Count Basie in 1963, and I started doing Broadway about 1964.

TBW: At that time Broadway was not, nor is it now, particularly integrated. I think you and Joe Wilder were among the first to integrate Broadway.

BP: It's funny how it's turned around. When I began in the early 1960s, there were very few black musicians on Broadway, then in about 1970, when I went to California, it was beginning to get more integrated. Then after a little while, I was there, I wasn't here, but I understand there were several shows on Broadway with predominantly black orchestras—shows like The Wiz and Sophisticated Ladies. There were others—I can't remember the names of all of them. But my point was: first, it was all white, then it went from white to black, and now it's back to being all white again. And that needs to change.

But, anyway, playing Broadway has its merits. I always enjoyed the challenge of going in and playing in the pits. Many people ask, "Wasn't it boring to pay the same music every night?" Well, I don't think so. I developed the philosophy that each night I went in I was going to play it better than I had the night before. Also, I got myself involved in all of it—the whole experience of being there—because at the time I was doing *Golden Boy* with Sammy Davis Jr., and Louis Gossett, and Lou Gossett had started an acting school, and I enrolled in acting school too. So I was involved with what was going on onstage and under the stage as well. And as a matter of fact that helped me out to determine how the music was affecting the people who were onstage—you can't always see the stage from the pit, but knowing a little more about acting and drama, about what was going on, I'm sure it made me a better musician.

TBW: You're known as an instrumentalist who sings. Do you dance too? That would make you a quadruple threat.

BP: No, I don't dance. But I'm interested in all of it. I'm interested in how it all works. I'm really interested in all forms of artistic expression. And all artistic people. There's not too much difference between a musician and an actor. I've seen the parallels between the two, and it's much more interesting for me to contemplate that. A lot of times you go into a pit, and you see the guys reading the newspaper during the performance—I never understood that. I was more interested in what was going on onstage from night to night, how the music fit into the performance and all of that. I never read a newspaper or a magazine. In fact I consider that rather sacrilegious—because from a practical standpoint, you got to hold the gig—it deserves your attention at least for the time you're there.

TBW: Of course, it's impossible to play your part the same very night, no matter how well you know it.

BP: Well, you shouldn't want to if your goal is to play it better than the night before.

TBW: And it could be argued that you're never going play it perfectly.

BP: Well, you can every night strive for perfection. And you might get close to it. Well, at least it's a lot more interesting than going on, playing it by rote. I mean it used to bug me when I saw guys reading a newspaper, and when it was time for their cue, they'd put the newspaper down and pick up their horn. No, you know, that's not it. I mean, is it *that* dull that you can't give it your full attention at least for the time you're there? But again, there are many musicians who punch the clock without seeing the big picture, without seeing how all of this stuff works. And one of the things that makes it all work is if everybody can rise to a standard of professionalism that elevates us all. And that's really

where the union comes in. When you decide that you want to become a professional, and stand up for yourself as an artist, what backs you up? The union.

TBW: You're known as a highly professional musician, but also as a creative musician—as one of the greatest improvisers on your instrument. Creative musicians have said to me, "I could never do that Broadway gig. If John Coltrane had been in a Broadway pit band night after night, there'd be no "A Love Supreme." What do you say to that?

BP: Let me tell you what my average day was like during the balance of my career. At nine o'clock in the morning, I would go and do a jingle—from nine to twelve. And then I would come home and change clothes, and perhaps do a sweetening session for a rock 'n' roll date—and it might be anything from Jay and the Americans to Somebody Else and the Germans, etc, and that session would be either from two to five, or seven to ten. If it were from two to five, then I would come home and change clothes, and go and do a Broadway show, and when I was finished with that, I would go down to the Village Vanguard and play with Thad Jones and Mel Lewis, or sit in with someone else. And that was kind of an average day. And it went on like that day after day after day. If you are truly a professional player, and you want to do all of it, and do it well, then you better have the union on your side, cause you're gonna need it. And my philosophy about being bored playing the same thing night after night? There's an antidote to that: get interested in what you're playing and try and play it better and better every time. And plus, it helped me because I was diversified. The fact that I could handle all this stuff, I mean I'm patting myself on the back a little, but I've been talking with my student here, a young man named Bradley Cooper, and we're talking about being prepared, and I think evidently it was the fact that I had played in big bands that helped

me a lot. Big bands prepared me to do a lot of things, because we played a lot of diversified music, and coming up in big bands and reading the stuff we had to read, it was really difficult. To be able to sight read all of that stuff, multiple charts, always adding arrangements; that took practice to develop that skill. So, I've always believed that big bands were the incubators for the stars who went on to become great recording artists or what have you—Dizzy played with Cab Calloway, etc. The big bands performed a great function in our society—more than is realized. If it were realized how much big bands can prepare a student for other things through discipline, working in a group setting, creativity, etc—there'd be more big bands in schools. Because it's more than just playing in a big band. It's preparation for a broad spectrum. It'll teach you how to handle many things. In fact, the trombone section from the show Funny Girl—which was one of the first pit bands that I played in—Jimmy Cleveland, Frank Rehak and myself—we all came out of big bands.

TBW: Jimmy Cleveland played with Basie?

BP: No, Jimmy Cleveland came out of the Lionel Hampton band.

TBW: I wanted to talk about what led you to that level of professionalism—how you actually got involved with jazz and big bands—but first I wanted to talk about Thad Jones and Mel Lewis. That was a very loose, swinging band very much of its time but also close to Basie in many ways; certainly Thad Jones had come out of the Basie organization. What was your opinion of that band—did you enjoy playing the music?

BP: Immensely.

TBW: What did you like about it?

BP: Well, the music was more progressive than Basie—it was a different flavor. That looseness that you're talking about had a lot to do with Mel Lewis. He was one of the great, underrated drummers. In fact, you wouldn't call him a Gene Krupa or a Max Roach or none of that stuff, but in a big band he could sort of stretch it out, or create contrasts, you know. He could stretch the tempo out—in other words we could set up in one tempo, he could raise the tempo as we were playing the piece. Sometimes it was just by doubling it up. And Mel could do that very well. And of course, Thad was just one of the greatest leaders ever, anytime. Because Thad conducted very naturally. He used his whole body—he used his eyes, his hands, his hips and all of that. I guess about the closest thing to him now would be Jimmy Heath. If you watch Jimmy Heath conduct, you know that he's completely into it. Every extremity is giving you another note. And you know he understands it because he wrote it!

TBW: And the same thing held true with Thad Jones, I would imagine, because he composed a lot of what the band played.

BP: Right.

TBW: I've also heard musicians say that with the Thad Jones-Mel Lewis band, that there was a small group sensibility that came forward—within the structure of a larger band—and that that was distinct. Did you find that to be true?

BP: Yes. You always, no matter what part you were playing, felt as if you were playing a lead part. I've been involved with others who were aware of that—Slide Hampton could do that. All the parts were so well written, you felt as if you were playing lead. Although it's not the lead at all, it's just so well written. And a lot of times, Thad did write for a

small group, with a big band in the background. He wrote a lot of things for Frank Wess, Joe Newman, and Eric Dixon, like a trio thing, with a big band in the background. And that would be the main thing—the rest of the band would just complement what they were doing. But that had a special feeling in itself, a little band within a big band.

TBW: And the background instruments would be playing heads—stepping in with a riff, or things were always structured?

BP: No, Thad would create things very spontaneously, but for the most part, everything was written. He'd have certain tunes where he did create from scratch. He'd have the rhythm section start off, and then he'd have the trumpets set a riff, the trombones after that, and then the reeds would add a part to that. But it was organic because he'd create it on the spot. It was so free—you play this, you play that. The trumpet players would play whatever riff they wanted, and then everybody would choose something that would enhance what they were doing, and not get in their way.

TBW: Now, you've taught jazz history and written about music, you worked to educate people about jazz. What's it been like for you to work in that setting?

BP: For a long time, I always wanted Americans to understand the contributions jazz has made. And so my way of doing that was working with children and introducing them to jazz. And I've done that since my daughter was in school—for over fifty years, now.

TBW: You've been in New York since the 1950s?

BP: Yes.

TBW: Was New York your first stop after leaving your home town?

BP: Well I am originally from New Orleans. But I first went out on the road when I was sixteen and I ended up in Port Arthur, Texas, where I joined King Kolax's Orchestra. He was a soloist with Billy Eckstein's band, a high note trumpet player.

TBW: And that was dance music primarily, and jazz?

BP: Yes. As a matter of fact, it again served many purposes. When I first joined, it was part of a review; there were dancers. In fact it was a review—of female impersonators!

TBW: That was a fairly common part of the scene at that time, yes?

BP: Yes, into the 1940s. That was a just a part of show business, just like vaudeville was before that. We were in a club in Port Arthur, Texas, with this review. Then we started traveling through that territory. Texas, Oklahoma. And then we would get to Kansas. But generally not too far away from Texas. I played every little town...Leveret, Texas, places like that. But then, when we got to Oklahoma, and we were stranded. That was a problem with bands. You'd get to a city that had booked you already, and when you'd get there, the place was closed or had burned down, or something. Anyway, we got to Oklahoma City, and we were stranded. And the deal was, you'd stay in whatever city you were in, until the office, which was in Indianapolis, sent money to bail out the band and you'd go on to the next city. Anyway, while we were stranded in Oklahoma City, I got a call to join Ernie Fields's band in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

TBW: By the way, when was this?

BP: This was in the 1940s.

TBW: Before the war or after the war?

BP: After the war. About 1947. Arnold Depass and I grew up together in New Orleans. We didn't go to the same grammar school, we went to the same high school. And we went to the same college, which had the Alabama State Collegians. Because Erskine Hawkins's band had graduated from there. And we knew then we wanted to be musicians. So we went to Alabama State, and I don't think I stayed over a year, and I came home, the next year for summer vacation, and went out on the road, and stayed out. This was in '46. Arnold told me that he was going to join King Kolax's band, and that they needed a trombone player. I think at this time, I was sixteen. Anyway, I talked it over with my mother, and since Arnold was a little older and would look after me, she allowed me to go and I went.

TBW: You had a sponsor.

BP: Yeah. So I joined King Kolax's band in 1947.

TBW: Now, you said you got stranded in Oklahoma City? What happened there?

BP: Well, I'm not sure whether the club burned down, or what. But the usual case, whenever you got stranded, there was some kind of malfunction between the band and the office. When we first got stranded, I think the band was about twelve pieces, so when we first got stranded, we had six rooms with two guys in a room, and then we stayed for a little while and then it became three guys in a room, and after a while we were six guys in a room. And after a while there were six guys in the room, and the other six guys walked the streets or the parks or whatever. But you know we were sixteen or seventeen...

TBW: Right.

BP: Anyway, Vernel Fournier and I were roommates, and I got the call from Ernie Fields to join his band in Tulsa. I couldn't walk out the door of the hotel, so I walked around behind the hotel—our room was on the second floor—and Vernel Fournier lowered my bags down on a rope!

TBW: Wait, because you owed money for the room and you didn't have it?

BP: Yeah, that's it.

TBW: Wow, that's...intense.

BP: Yeah, right, you know when I hear people saying that they've had some interesting experiences and stuff. I've had some. I traveled on a bus (laughing) with a wood burning stove!

(laughter)

TBW: You're kidding. How is that possible? In the back of the bus?

BP: I can't remember.

TBW: How'd they deal with the smoke?

BP: I can't remember. But I remember that same bus...buses, they always break down and so forth. I remember one time with King Kolax's band, near Denver...the bus skidded off the road and ran into a tree. And I think, again, we had to wait around for the office to send the money to get the bus off the tree. (laughing) It was funny in those days, you know. I was all of 17. And the other guys were young, too.

TBW: Did you ever go back home to New Orleans after that?

BP: No. I vowed that, when I left....because, conditions were not really conducive. Most musicians there in New Orleans were porters during the week, and musicians on the weekends. So when I got the opportunity to be a full time musician.... Of course my mother said, you know, "I want you to go because I would rather you do that then end up a porter."

TBW: Did you have any formal training as a young person in New Orleans?

BP: In New Orleans, yes, I studied with Benny Pearson. He was an older musician. A very wise man and a very good guy. Also, I played with a band of young people—I don't know I must have been maybe fifteen when I was in that band. It was run by a restauranteur in New Orleans, his name was Dooky Chase. Well Dooky Chase was a little older than us, but his father had these restaurants. So he sponsored him with a big band. And we were beboppers, this was the '40s, maybe '45 or '46. And good arrangements, and we played good music. So I guess when you ask about schooling—that was my training—on the job training. In New Orleans I used to marvel at the fact there was so many places to play. I used to say, "This is a hip city." But I found out later, that New Orleans has no industry, so tourism was it. That's why it's so tourist friendly. Come down and have a good time in New Orleans.

TBW: That's how people make their living down there.

BP: Most of them.

TBW: They're dependent on the tourist trade—people coming down to party.

BP: Most of them. And I also found out that because of Catholicism, there'd be many holidays where people would play. Lent used to be celebrated. St. Augustine's Day and this day and that day. Many, many celebrations.

TBW: Religious festivals? For particular saints?

BP: Not necessarily, just a dance. And there were opportunities for musicians to play.

TBW: Like a St. Augustine's Day Dance?

BP: Yeah, yeah. But also, there's the French Quarters [sic]. I never got a chance to play the French Quarters because I was too young. I left before that. But that provided opportunities for musicians.

TBW: When you said you were beboppers, were you playing bop arrangements in that band?

BP: Yeah.

TBW: Did people find it hard to dance to? I know there are good dancers in New Orleans, but bop is hard to dance to, isn't it?

BP: The beat was still the same, yeah. Well, it wasn't exactly the same. It changed a little bit as the time went on, with the advent of Max Roach and Roy Haynes and Kenny Clarke, those guys—dropping bombs. With the bass drum. Instead of a steady 4/4, the bass drum became like another instrument.

TBW: You had to be a good dancer if you were gonna dance to Kenny Clarke.

BP: Well, the groove would be there. No matter what the drummer was playing. Even if the drummer stopped playing, the groove was still there. That's the thing about a New Orleans beat. Even now, when I start playing something like a second line, the rhythm itself is so is so organic, or so basic, until babies start moving their feet, and so forth. Because it is really a beat that's close to the heart beat. It's not anything really fast. It's sort of like the pace that people *walk* in. Because it was for parades and people had to walk a long time—there was no alternative. But nevertheless, that beat was kind of established. That groove thing you get into, without a bunch of horns or anything, that's the basic thing. Now, I've been working with Moroccan musicians, and I've been thinking how well we blend with what they do. 'Cause it's just the same 1-2-3-4 or 1-2-3-4-5-6, no matter what the chord changes or whatever.

TBW: But are they playing 3 over 4, or what?

BP: They don't think about it.

TBW: Right.

BP: There's one master drummer who might play in 4/4, and then somebody might be playing in 3/4, somebody playing in 6/8— in 12/8, but it's all off the master drummer.

TBW: You just came back from Spain. Did you have a good time?

BP: Oh, man. Well, you know, performing to me, when you go away, if you ask me if I had a good time, a good time is having a good concert.

TBW: Right.

BP: So I don't do much else. I don't go myself to all of the social things that people invite me to. I don't do any of that stuff. I stay in my room most of the time, by myself, and practice. Because, I remember what I was called for. Because unless you do, you know, you do a lot of this and that and then you get up on the bandstand, and everybody says, "Man, why did we pay all this money for this guy?"

TBW: That's like [Bob] Cranshaw. He just stays in his hotel room, eats his yogurt, and watches football. And maybe practices a little bit.

BP: Well, that's like I was saying, my same philosophy—"remember what you came for."

TBW: But that's also how you keep working, too.

BP: Yeah, of course. People are still out here. Bob Cranshaw must be about 570 years old by now.

TBW: Well, you know how old Bob is? I think you're a bit older than Bob, if I'm not mistaken.

BP: I'll be 80 next year.

TBW: Then yeah, you have about 4 years on him.

BP: Oh yeah. The thing with Cranshaw, is he's so perennially young looking.

TBW: He's got a picture in the attic somewhere.

BP: I don't know what he's got, but whatever it is, it's really working for him. To me, I equate his good looks and all of that, with his good heart. It all comes from inside. He is one of the most caring people I know.

TBW: Well, he's got himself together, and that's how he's able to reach out to so many people, which he does.

BP: Exactly.

TBW: And I think sometimes it takes a while for people to learn how to do that.

BP: Well, particularly for him, because he's been in special circumstances, that is to say, he's done very well with Sesame *Street*.

TBW: Sure.

BP: And many people who do very well get carried away with doing the fine things for themselves, and not really caring about other people. And Bob is not like that at all. He and Jimmy Owens are two of the most caring people that I know. I feel that I'm always fortunate to work anywhere with them, because we all know about the time, we've all been out here, so we all know where we are, and we all know that we can be influential. So, we older musicians are aware of what we can do, and we want to do as much as we can while we're still here to do it. That's why this campaign to get pension in the clubs is so important.

TBW: Well Bob always remarks that he's been very fortunate to get the television work that he did, and he turned around one day and realized that he had a sizeable pension, and now he's trying to give back by turning other people on to that pension fund.

BP: Right.

TBW: Even with the recession in full swing, it's still a very healthy investment and it's an employer contributed plan, so the money doesn't come out of the musician's pocket. But

there are also ways for musicians to make contributions from freelance work, outside of traditional union contracts, by using a form called an LS-1.

BP: When I was getting contributions for all of those years on Broadway, I had no idea. Coming from the jazz world you don't think about anything but how much somebody's paying you. And I'm very fortunate that I was able to do some hit shows that lasted for a little while. And so at this point in the game, I'm collecting a union pension, and I'm fairly comfortable. Now everybody can't do Broadway shows, but I would like to see something done about the plight of people who can't work on Broadway, such as jazz musicians. So what we're faced with is trying to find a way to help these people who can't get that 22% pension contribution week in and week out. So that's why we've begun this campaign to get pension in the clubs.

TBW: Right.

BP: And the campaign is find ways to help people feel more secure with themselves and their careers as they go forward. And I would like to see everybody have this same security. I think first of all that security has got to come from being educated, because I told you I had no idea that somebody was paying into a pension fund for me, nor did I care.

TBW: Right.

BP: Because I was diversified with a bunch of things. As I've gotten older and reaped the benefits of it, I would like to see other musicians benefit, and I think it's about time it started. It's gonna be a long time before we get it up to the level of Broadway, but it's got to begin sometime.

TBW: That's right. It's a foot in the door.

BP: Yeah.

TBW: And I know that jazz musicians often feel on the outside looking in. I know you were present at a meeting of the Local 802 Jazz Advisory Committee last month where a younger musician stood up and said, "Look, 802 has not always advocated for vernacular music, for freelance musicians, for black performers. Larry Ridley has said this, Bob Cranshaw and others have said this—you had to pay your work dues for whatever live gigs you were doing, but then when you went to the federation for assistance, it wasn't always forthcoming. And your response to that musician was, "Well, this campaign is an example of how we're trying to change that, and to turn it around."

BP: Yeah.

TBW: But it's hard to convince people sometimes that there's some good that can come out of all of this.

BP: Well, again, it goes to education first. You've got to find ways to educate people about union benefits. And perhaps interviews like this one, where you reach out to people by showing them someone who's really benefiting from the pension fund. At age 80. And I'm not even 80 yet, but 79. You know, for the musicians, thinking about when they'll be 79...that's something I'm trying to teach a young person like Barry Cooper, because we have to instill the mindset that this has to change. And everybody can't get a Broadway show, so we have to do something with what we *are* getting.

TBW: This jazz campaign, it ends up being just a taste off the door, but it adds up. Like you said, you weren't aware that there was a contribution being made on your behalf,

but at the end of many years of performing, you suddenly realized that there was something in the bank. And I know that creative musicians in particular are not necessarily focused on these kinds of things.

BP: Yeah.

TBW: Because you're often just focused on the next job; trying to get your music heard, trying to grow as a performer...

BP: Yeah. So therefore an organization such as the union has to really step up until everybody's convinced, club owners and musicians as well. It's gonna be a tough uphill fight educating musicians about the campaign. Most jazz musicians are likely to say, "What has that got to do with me? I don't even work those clubs." So that's gotta be part of our battle.

TBW: Right, well we have to start somewhere. And the hope is, if we can get one or two of these major clubs to sign on, even for a year, then we can use that as leverage to convince the others that they have to do it. And it'll create a kind of domino effect, where they'll be forced into doing the right thing through public pressure.

BP: Right.

TBW: And in the end it's an ethical question. It's also about preserving the music and those who create it. And allowing for musicians to age gracefully even as they continue to participate in the community, to continue to be able to play, to have some money flowing, and to be able to have relationships like the one you have with your student Bradley Cooper, so that young people can continue to learn from the masters. That's what keeps the music alive. And we would like to do that nationally if we can.

BP: Yeah. Well I think a major breakthrough occurred when we were able to get benefits and health care at the New School. When we came through that campaign successfully, I thought to myself: If I never do another thing in life, and nobody even knows about this, I know about it. And we did it with a committee of about four guys: Jamil Nassir, Jimmy Owens, Bob Cranshaw and myself.

TBW: You were the original 802 Jazz Advisory Committee.

BP: Right. And we realized the power of an organized entity behind us. And when we brought this to the other faculty at the New School they were skeptical, but we just stayed the course and told them, "This is the plan—if you do this, it'll work." Fortunately, they listened. Now, I think the thing I brought up at the meeting, was that the face of 802 had changed. There's much more blackness in it than people even know. Because at this meeting a couple of weeks ago, I looked around at the faces surrounding the table and I noticed that African-American musicians outnumbered the white musicians, and I was thinking, "Wow, I don't know what this means, but this is really a good thing." And I said, "This is the first time I've seen this many black musicians together in the day time."

TBW: (laughing) That's right, that's what you said. But we need to empower other musicians, young musicians, regardless of race, creed or color, but particularly, yes, the African-American community. The jazz community needs to know that dealing with the union means that there are real hurdles to traverse, hurdles that are always there that need to be dealt with on a daily basis, but that it *is* a community of musicians, a professional organization of musicians, and musicians are the ones that run it. So, if you want to get some power, you have to step up and take that power and make something

for yourself. I don't mean to say that that's an easy thing to do, because you're still dealing with a bureaucracy. At best, it's still a bureaucracy.

BP: I think what I was alluding to... (to Bradley Cooper) You gotta run?

BC: Yeah.

TBW: Let's pause the tape for a minute.

(pause)

TBW: You were talking about the Moroccan musicians and the rhythmic patterns that you were working with on your last trip, the groove that you were playing. I wanted to look at that in terms of your overall experience as a player.

BP: Well, I've been working with Randy Weston for thirty-five years.

TBW: Right. And he's got a big African thing going , right?

BP: It's called Randy Weston's African Rhythms.

TBW: Right. I think I heard him perform at Benny Carter's memorial several years ago—at St. Peter's Church. He did a tribute to Benny Carter that was in a decidedly African-sounding vein. But I wanted to address your work with Randy Weston in terms of your New Orleans roots, if that's appropriate, and I'd love it if you'd comment on New Orleans rhythms and their Caribbean, which is to say, their West African antecedents.

BP: OK.

TBW: Someone once turned me on to the notion that despite all the claims about the development of jazz in North America—about how it was born in New Orleans, traveled

up the river to Chicago where it had its adolescence and then reached its maturity in New York and all that—that this narrative leaves out the important idea that New Orleans is at the top of the Gulf of Mexico, that it's really the top of the funnel that is the Caribbean part of the African Diaspora. Any thoughts?

BP: The first time I heard a Bossa Nova, it was played by Dizzy Gillespie at Birdland, and the way he played it sounded to me like Dizzy had just left New Orleans. I had never heard a Bossa Nova before—but that rhythm sounded very familiar, that New Orleans rhythm. So then I began to realize how New Orleans had been a stopping point for Brazilian musicians, Cuban musicians, Haitian musicians. And parts of all of those different rhythmic identities are inherent in New Orleans music. But like I was telling you before, it basically all boils down to 1-2-3-4. No matter how you look at it.

TBW: But it's not a straight 1-2-3-4, is it?

BP: No, but the base of it is still simply 1-2-3-4.

TBW: But don't you need to make the distinction of the broken rhythmic aspect the bom, bom, bom, bom-bom feeling. Like that "Iko Iko" kind of beat?

BP: Yeah, but the basis of that too is 1-2-3-4. So you still have that feeling of four even when you are doing a mm, mm, mm, mm-mm or a mm, mm, mm, mm, mm-mm. That's 1-2-3-4. Dom, ba boom boom boom boom, ba doom. Mm, mm, mm, mm-mmm, mm, mm, mm, mm, mm-mm.

TBW: So no matter what there still essentially grouped in fours?

BP: Yeah. It's all based around the four. I'm not really that well versed in African music, but there's a master drummer and he gives the basic beat, just like in Latin music you have the clave. Everything is built around the 1-2-3-4, no matter whether it's here, or Morocco, or wherever it is. And that's what people respond to. That's why they can dance to it. Most of the time, they're dancing on the one beat, and whatever they do after that they do, but you can bet your bottom dollar almost everybody's foot is comin' down on one.

TBW: OK. Here's another question. Basie. You joined the Basie organization after Basie had broken up the original band, went to a small group format, and then eventually reformed the big band, right?

BP: That's when I joined.

TBW: In what year?

BP: 1951.

TBW: In the second Basie big band, known as the New Testament Basie band, you can hear the spirit of the earlier band, but obviously the second aggregation had its own unique sound for its own unique time. What about the oft held notion of Basie as a blues influenced, Harlem stride composer-pianist, who worked with head arrangements; and his original aesthetic, if you will—I doubt Basie would have used that term—but the original aesthetic of the first band, which was loose, with a down home, kind of shout 'em up quality to the music, very fresh and alive. Most people would see that band in that light, at least in its earliest incarnation. But how did that original Old Testament

spirit influence what was to become a more arranged sound of the New Testament band, equally powerful in its own right, during the 1950s?

BP: Again, you're talking about the mother of the Basie thing—what made Basie unique. But in the band I joined, it got more sophisticated because the arrangements in the 1930s sometimes were head arrangements. Other times they were arranged by Jimmy Mundy and other fine arrangers.

TBW: Right.

BP: But I think the earliest band was kind of a head arrangement approach, and many of those arrangements still stand today. But, then, when I joined the band, Ernie Wilkins was a major contributor to the arrangements. It became much more sophisticated, and Basie was one to really see changes coming, and he knew how to implement those changes into his own thing. And from a dance band, he knew how to make the next step into a concert band, where people would just sit down and listen. Now, he knew how to make that change. There were many bandleaders who didn't. I guess one example of a bandleader who didn't, in a relative sense, was Cab Calloway. Or even Lionel Hampton.

TBW: Who had a very popular band.

BP: Right. Lionel Hampton had a very sophisticated band, very good arrangements and so forth, but his emphasis was always on entertainment. And he was so busy entertaining, he didn't realize the changes that were happening, because his main thing was visual as well as the music. When I was with his band, the whole band didn't just sit there on the bandstand when there might be a rest in the music. The whole band would be clapping their hands—his thing was visual. So, I think, in a sense, it kind of hurt

Lionel Hampton, because as a result of his approach, his musical side wasn't emphasized as much as it should have been. He had a fine band and fine arrangements and so forth, but somehow he got carried away with the entertainment aspect, and the musicianship was kind of overlooked. And as you said, he was very popular. Hampton himself was a powerful swayer of people, you know. When we would start playing in front of crowds and so forth, somehow he would have that hypnotic beat going and people would start undressing, taking off their clothes, and so forth.

TBW: Yeah.

BP: And that always amazed me. How did this man, with music, get people to do that kind of stuff?

TBW: (laughing) That's great. Well, what about Basie and the idea of moving into a concert realm, where suddenly you're on stage and you find yourself at a festival and people where you've got 10,000 people sitting down for jazz? Is Basie as an individual aware of all of the changes that needed to be made, and as a member of his band were you conscious of him directing those changes?

BP: Basie was a minimalist. He didn't really make a whole lot of noise. He got things done quietly, so he was really like a mover behind the scenes. So as you were saying about his matriculation from the '30s into the '40s into the '50s, you can't really put your hand on each move, but the difference between the band that I was in and the band that preceded it was arrangers. Now for a long time, many people could make a name in Basie's band, and then go out on their own. Lester Young, Harry Edison, etc. Well, the emphasis was on soloists. That's what made them popular—Illinois Jacquet— enough to

have their own band. Once I joined the band, the emphasis was on arrangers; it became Ernie Wilkins, Frank Foster, Neil Hefti, Quincy Jones—

TBW: Thad Jones arranged for that band too.

BP: Yes, by all means. But that's what I'm saying. The shift was from the soloist onto the arranger. So instead of one soloist, like Lester Young, that everybody's coming to hear him and his solo and so forth, this was incorporated into a more sophisticated setting. It was more of an orchestral setting, without the rough edges. I think there's a story about the first time Basie's band played the Roseland Ballroom; I think one of his reviews said—"If you think the saxophones are out of tune, listen to the trumpets."

TBW: Right.

BP: That was really a kind of a put down.

TBW: It was a rough band at first.

BP: That's what they said, yeah.

TBW: But also that sense of looseness remained even though you had a highly arranged sound.

BP: It was the beat. The beat was still there. (Singing "One O'clock Jump") "Dee dah dee, dah dee dee dee dee, da dee dee dee da dee." At a medium tempo, it was much easier to remember or even to work with. After most of the arrangers started to come in with their own things, we started playing faster tempos. But if you'll notice, most of the dance era things were really slower tempos—they had to be slow enough for people to dance. Now and then, if there was something up tempo, it became a specialist thing,

where people made eyes and went around the corner, but they didn't jitterbug to it—what they call swing dancing now. So, it was all based on dancing, and no matter what Basie played or what era it was, it still had the dance quality. After music became music for listening, Basie said he would rather make a record that a housewife could relate to...she could go around and do her own housework and still listen to the music rather than something that she had to sit down and listen to.

TBW: Instead of what ultimately happened to most big band music, where it leaned towards the symphonic—like a Stan Kenton kind of sound.

BP: Yeah. But the Basie thing is music as a service. That beat as a service—helping you to make your work easier, sort of like a work song. In that same tradition. With that same purpose. Count Basie's beat. And that's what sustained Thad Jones as well. I always considered Thad Jones as playing sanctified jazz—he had that sanctified beat from the sanctified church. You know it's a kind of double rhythm...

TBW: Sure, yeah, I know what you're talking about. (Singing and clapping) "Mm (clap) mm (clap) mm (clap) mm (clap) mm (clap)."

BP: That's it, yeah, yeah. The tambourine, and the (demonstrates) "did dit dit dit dit dit dit dit dit dit."

TBW: That's very interesting.

BP: So, Thad was able to incorporate all of that in a real modern style because Thad was a very good arranger—theoretically. He knew theory and harmony and all of that stuff, so he incorporated all of that, still with a sanctified outlook on it.

TBW: Talking with you is a revelation, because as a non-performer who has listened to a lot of music over the years—as we all have—but in my case I started listening to jazz after I had discovered soul and r and b—Sam Cooke, Ray Charles, James Brown, B.B. King—and then came to the music of Bix Beiderbecke. So my first experience of jazz was almost the earliest recorded jazz—acoustic, two beat music—and when I finally heard the original Basie band, it was a revelation, because it sounded like rock 'n' roll to me. With the increased tempo, and that distinct swing element. And talking to you is a revelation of a different kind, perhaps equally significant for me personally, because as a non-player I've spent my entire life on the outside looking in, and you're on the inside looking out, articulating your world of experience and knowledge—and it's really quite fascinating. And it really should be shared—this knowledge—it should be spread to others.

BP: Well, thanks but you see that's the pity of these days. You see, in days past there were big bands. You would graduate from one big band, and then you became privy to all the wisdom that's in the next big band that you were going to. 'Cause that's who sort of raised me; older musicians. That's the ones who taught me about life and all that.

TBW: Right. You don't have that camaraderie or that rapport with your fellow musicians where you're sitting on the bandstand with them every day.

BP: And you don't have that continuum in your own growth. I was sixteen when I first joined, maybe seventeen when I joined King Kolax, and I was always around older musicians, and older musicians were always very generous. I remember New Orleans, and the bands used to come through on Sunday nights. First of all, we would meet the musicians, and help them carry their horns just to be around them. But, if you asked a

question of one of the older guys, he might say, “I don’t have time to talk to you now, kid, but the bus is gonna leave at twelve o’clock tomorrow. If you can be at my hotel room tomorrow morning...etc.” And if you made it, he’d give you more information than you could stand.

TBW: Plus he got his bag carried for him, right?

BP: No, that wasn’t it. In this case, he just sensed I was a kid who really wanted to know. And that’s the way it is now with me and this younger musician, Bradley Cooper. He’s a kid and he’s wide open, and I’m trying to help him. In fact, he’s with the Basie band now. He sitting in the same seat I sat in fifty years ago.

TBW: Is there any one musician from your early days who you absolutely looked up to, who really had a profound impact on your consciousness? Somebody who blew your mind, and who you really wanted to emulate?

BP: I have a few of them. My former roommate—Frank Wess. And then there’s Frank Foster. There’s Barry Harris. There’s Randy Weston. Jimmy Heath. There are many others. I work with Jimmy now and he makes me feel like a kid. I consider all those guys so knowledgeable, and when I’m around them I realize I have a long way to go, before I can catch up with them, if I ever do. It gives me something to strive for.

TBW: These are the masters and we should celebrate them, as we celebrate you.

BP: Oh, yeah by all means they should be celebrated. It’s a thrill playing with Randy’s group. We went to Spain about two weeks ago as I was telling you, and it was really a grueling trip, because we left New York at night and arrived in Madrid at about ten o’clock in the morning, and had to wait in the airport for four hours for a connecting

flight. And then I think we went to—I'm not sure of the name of the town. Anyway, the next morning we woke up at eight-thirty, to get from that town to Madrid, to wait in the airport for five hours layover. The when we finished the five hour layover, we made the connection, and we got there in time for the sound check, and we had put in that same night.

TBW: That sounds suspiciously like the bus with the wood burning stove.

BP: We played a marvelous concert, because each one of these guys in the group—T.K. Blue, Alex Blake, Dale Clarke, Randy and myself—each one of us remembered why we were there. And we couldn't afford to be tired, hungry or none of that. And in a sense, we played above ourselves. It was a magnificent concert, one of the best concerts I've played in a long time. And to think how tired we were. And of course, once you get there, with the hustle and bustle of the sound check and the sound engineer's out there trying to get levels, people running to get you water and all of that stuff.

TBW: That helps.

BP: Yeah.

TBW: It's interesting to me to imagine what it means for you to be playing above your own head at this time in your career because obviously you've got so much experience that even if you have an off night you always know that you've got something that you can dip into.

BP: Yeah.

TBW: And then the idea of really reaching beyond, that's really fascinating to think what that might entail. That's very impressive at this time in your career.

BP: Well, I was impressed with all of us myself, because I realized that every musician couldn't do that. Many musicians. Most musicians couldn't do that. Because they would have been thinking about being tired rather than, "I gonna go out here and play well."

TBW: It sounds like your dedication is really ingrained in the way you look at the world—not just music.

BP: Look, over the years, I've learned that making music is more than just people getting together and playing. It has many functions. It's an important part of our social identity, and it's important to the community at large. But you have to be together if you want to play well.

TBW: So there's a psychological aspect to it—the mental preparation.

BP: Well Randy himself, when he sits down for the sound check, he sounds like he's recording. He never just fools around, during the whole time I've played with him, he always just sits down and plays something. He' s a great role model. I feel very fortunate, I was with Basie twelve years, and I've been with Randy thirty-five years. So hey, it's been OK.

TBW: That's great.