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JIMMY SCOTT
NEA Jazz Master (2007)

Interviewee: Jimmy Scott (July 17, 1925 – June 12, 2014)
Interviewer: David Ritz with recording engineer Ken Kimery
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Ritz: My name is David Ritz. It's September 23rd, 2008. We're in Las Vegas, Nevada, in the beautiful home of Jeannie and Jimmy Scott. Jimmy, do want to say your name? Is that what you want?

Kimery: Name, birth date, . . .


Ritz: Please give your name and your birth date.

Scott: Fortunately or unfortunately . . .

Ritz: As the case may be.

Scott: . . . I was born July 17, 1925, which makes me 83 years old this present day, but I'm grateful, because so many that I know have gone and passed on. I'm fortunate to be here.

Ritz: Jimmy, let me start by asking you – I know this is a hard question to answer – but what was the first time you remember hearing music? What was the first piece of music, the first little inklings of music you heard when you were a little kid?

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Scott: *There I said it again.* I guess I must have been about 10 years old, and I got attached to that song. *There I said it again.* I'm trying to remember who the featured singer was.

Ritz: I don't know. So this is something you heard on the radio?

Scott: Yes, because you didn't have the boxes – the record boxes back then. However, I remember the old record players that you wound up.

Ritz: What kind of music did you hear on those Victrolas that you wound up? What was the very . . . ?

Scott: I didn't do anything with that.

Ritz: I see. You just knew they were there, but you didn't have one.


Scott: No. I didn't do anything for that. I was not selected to record anything for that era.

Ritz: Not selected.

Scott: But time went on, and Lionel Hampton decided I had to be with the band. He then hired myself and Benny Carter. That I do remember, because it amazed me that he was hiring two and three people at a time. But before us, Winnie – what was her name? – Winnie Brown? Yeah. All of those and, of course, you can't forget Hampton and Dinah – Dinah Washington. That was a team. That was a unique love of music, those two, Dinah Washington.

Again, like I say, I go back. I remember they had a magazine they used to sell. You could get it for a quarter or 35 cents. Some 5 and 10s sold it more than the others. What I mean is, they sold it higher-priced than the other stores. I was fortunate to be in an era where they didn't sell it for 35 or 40 cents. They sold it – if you had a dime, you could get it. I'd get this thing. It had all the lyrics to songs that were being presented to the public on the radio – big bands, Benny Goodman, and all of those artists. At that time they were the top thing of music. Pops [Louis Armstrong] – different ones like that. You kind of had to be aware of the things. There were things that they were doing that seemed very serious to me. So out of realizing that, I learned that the business was a serious business. It wasn't just a plaything. The music was good, yes, but it also was very – to me, it was very educative.

Ritz: So it's educated music, you were saying – that it's educated music, is what you were saying.

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Scott: Yes. It was an education to me. Then, when I traveled with Hampton, that gave a broader scope of what music was about and entertainment and show business. Real show business. I got that from being with the Hampton band, you see. It was a joy for me. That's where I met most of the musicians and people who – what you would call favors – that's where I met them, being with that band.

Hampton was a fan to everybody who was in show business. If we were in a town, and there were two or three artists that he knew, we had to go and see that artist. That's where I met so many of the up-and-coming artists who were being presented at that time.

Ritz: Let's go back a little bit, and we'll talk more about Lionel a little bit later. But I was interested in the early part of your life, when music was beginning to enter into your heart for the first time, when you were a little boy.

Scott: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah. You see, we didn't have record players or nothing. They couldn't afford it. So where our music came from was radio. We would all get around that radio when the music was being played. The old bands – Tommy Dorsey, Benny Goodman, and others who I call champions of the music . . .

Ritz: Champions of the music.

Scott: . . . yes, yes, I do call it, because they brought the music to you. They really did. That's where I met Julie London, people like that, got to know them, know their hearts were in [the] business, and understood them as artists, because listening to that radio – Tommy Dorsey was on a show with somebody [?], because one time they had Jack Benny with him, doing his comedy, and they had it on the radio.

Ritz: But didn't you also sing with your mom and your sisters?

Scott: Oh yes.


Ritz: Tell us about that.

Scott: That was a thing that my mother was an old-time piano player. Hot dog. That lick.

Ritz: All right. I'd like to hear that.

Scott: I loved that. When she felt like doing it, we were upstairs in the different rooms where we slept. They had those vents in the furnace, but they were in all the rooms, and you could hear downstairs.

Ritz: Ah, you could hear the music coming through.

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Scott: Yes.

Ritz: And that got you excited.

Scott: That's what we would get next to.

Ritz: Oh, you put your ear next to the vent.

Scott: Yeah. She'd be playing, and then we'd start singing.

Ritz: What kinds of songs?

Scott: Gospel.

Ritz: Gospel songs.

Scott: Yeah. We were a family raised in the gospel.

Ritz: Your mom knew how to play piano, and she had taught herself how to play piano?

Scott: I don't know exactly how she – but I believe that was it. She taught herself. She'd just get on that piano and strut.

Ritz: She could play stride piano.

Scott: Yeah. I [?], knowing it was her or hot dog, that's my big shot.

Ritz: Did she early on identify you as a person who had musical talent? Did she early on tell you, "Jimmy, you got a beautiful voice. You can sing."?


Scott: She would hear me sing, and I was more or less – she'd say, "[?], you didn't sing that song right. No, no."

Ritz: So she'd – so she'd – if you missed the note, she would tell you.

Scott: Missed a note or didn't sing a phrase right. No, no.

Ritz: So Momma was a strict teacher. This is how the song goes.

Scott: Yes. She was a teacher for me more than anything else. She never expressed to me that I was a singer and I had to do this or that or the other.

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Ritz: So it just kind of came sort of naturally that you and your brothers and sisters got together, gathered around the piano . . .

Scott: Yeah, right.

Ritz: . . . and started to sing.

Scott: That's right. There were four of us that were the family quartet. That was Kenneth, my brother, younger than I; Nadine; and Adoré.

Ritz: That was the quartet.

Scott: That was the quartet in the family.

Ritz: Tell us a little bit on the personal side – first of all, we haven't established that you grew up in Cleveland. So you want to – it's Cleveland, Ohio.

Scott: Ohio. Coldest place I've ever been.

Ritz: Cold. It's cold in Cleveland.

What did your dad do for a living? And what did your mom do for a living?

Scott: Mom, if she'd have been supported by my father, she could have been – she was a seamstress.

Ritz: Right. Like my mom. She could sew.

Scott: Yes.

Ritz: And design dresses.


Scott: Yes. Loved it. Loved it.

Ritz: And could design dresses and make a . . .

Scott: When Singer sewing machines came out, that was her dream.

Ritz: To own a Singer sewing machine.

Scott: To have that Singer sewing – she finally got it, and everybody in the neighborhood – all the women . . .

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Ritz: Came over to Mom and had her make her . . .

Scott: Oh yeah. [?] had her do the seam or fix [?]. She'd get on the sewing machine and show them how to put those seams in, and different things that she learned with the machine.

Ritz: What about your dad? What did he do for a living?

Scott: My father, he worked with the contractors, buildings, doing the streets, laying asphalt.

Ritz: Laying asphalt, right. He was an asphalt worker.

Scott: And he was a – what do they call it – he could level . . .

Ritz: That's right. He could level the asphalt.

Scott: Yes. All of the contractors . . .

Ritz: . . . hired him. So he was a skilled laborer, a grader. He could grade.

Scott: Right. But he was negligent where it . . .

Ritz: Negligent you say.

Scott: Yes.

Ritz: In terms of his responsibility to the kids and mom?

Scott: I'm speaking in terms of where his family was concerned . . .


Ritz: Right.

Scott: . . . and his wife was concerned. Negligent, and it hurt quite a bit, because he knew we knew he was negligent, and he got brutal towards his family and his kids or anybody that he thought was thinking about his anger.

Ritz: So he had a temper.

Scott: Yes.

Ritz: And he was an angry guy. He didn't want to take care of his responsibilities.

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Scott: No, he wasn't the kind who cared about taking care of the responsibilities. He worked – went to work and like that, but he stayed away. He made that – and they were paying big money back then for that kind of work.

Ritz: Yeah, because he was a skilled laborer. When you and your brother – tell us about the beginning and that part of your childhood when you understood that you had this physical challenge, what we call the deficiency, because I want that part of the story told.

Scott: The Kallmanns.

Ritz: The Kallmann Syndrome. When did that first manifest itself?

Scott: I was born with that. My brother was too – Kenneth – and he passed. You had to realize one thing. I felt, hey, I'm as much man as anybody else. And my mother would say, "You're a man" and make you think the right way about being a young man. There was things that she knew you had to grow into. She would point those things out in her own way to myself and my brother.

The women in the family were the carriers of the disease. Every girl in the family had one or two boys, they had that syndrome.


Ritz: Getting back to the early detection of the disease, the deficiency. Was it clear that you and your brother – did you and your brother discover it at about the same time?

Scott: My mother used to take us to a clinic at Western Reserve, the college there. The medical division there was unique, but there was nothing they could do with the Kallmann Syndrome. It comes to a point where they couldn't do anything to improve anything in your body. The syndrome was that it blocked the hormones that were needed in your growth. So that developed and I lived with it, because that's what I am. I'm human, you're human, the other fellow there is all – I just took it like that and kept on going.

Ritz: What did your mother tell you, Jimmy, when you went to the clinic at Western Reserve, to the medical – how did she explain it do you?

Scott: She didn't. But on those days that we had to go to the clinic, she'd call the school and tell them we wouldn't be there that day and that she was taking us to the clinic. The school never said anything, because they understood what she was doing, trying to help her children. It went on like that until they decided those shots they were giving us wasn't improving anything.

Ritz: The hormone growth shots.

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Scott: It wasn't a hormone they was giving us. The natural hormones is what was needed, but that developed in your birth.

Ritz: And if it wasn't there, it wasn't there.

Scott: Yeah, so that was it.

Ritz: But didn't they have some experimental drugs that she did not want you to use?

Scott: She didn't want them to give us any drugs.

Ritz: Because I remember you telling me she didn't want them to kind of guinea-pig on you guys.

Scott: No. She wasn't going to let that happen, because that's what she expected if they started. All she would call it was guinea-pigging.

Ritz: Yeah. I remember that phrase. She called it guinea-pigging.

Scott: Yeah, and she didn't want that for my brother and I. She didn't want us to be the guinea pigs.

Ritz: Were you teased by other children? Did they tease you?

Scott: No, no. I never discussed it with other kids.


Ritz: You held it inside.

Scott: Yeah, and I went on and actually didn't learn about until I was much older. Then when I got much older, I began to realize, something is different, because my brother – my older brother would go to the bathroom, and I'd say, "I got to go, too." I'd run to the bathroom. He'd shut the door. I wouldn't say anything, but I thought, why did you shut the door? I learned that that was why he shut the door. He didn't want to discuss it with me, about the syndrome or anything. All I wanted from him was for him to be my brother. Just be my brother. Hey, that's all. I never discussed it. I let it go, lived with it. My mother encouraged that, as far as living with it. She encouraged that in a lot of ways.

Ritz: When you say she encouraged that, you mean she encouraged you to be hopeful and cope with what your reality was?

Scott: Yeah. Live with it.

Ritz: Live with it.

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Scott: Learn to live with it.

Ritz: Learn to live with it.

Scott: Because it's going to be there.

Ritz: There ain't nothing you can do about it.

Scott: Nothing. That's right. But like I say, every girl has – if they had boys – they had that syndrome. The first boy or the second boy.

Ritz: The women in your family were the carriers.

Scott: Right. If they carried a baby, and if it was a boy, in the birth of that child, he had to live with the syndrome. But I feel that they're wrong for what they do. They don't teach them anything that will help them understand what they're living with. I think that's so wrong, because it's life.

Ritz: And you have to be prepared . . .

Scott: There you go. To live it.

Ritz: . . . and have help to be emotionally prepared. How old were you when your mom died, because didn't the . . . ?

Scott: How old? 13.

Ritz: Didn't the tragedy of her death coincide with your understanding that you also had this deficiency.


Scott: I knew that was the person who, if I needed something or needed to understand something . . .

Ritz: That was mom.

Scott: . . . she was the one that would. My father would never talk to me. My father and I, we were distant.

Ritz: He just came and went whenever he wanted to.

Scott: So you lived with it. Mom would say, you live with it. That's what I did.

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Ritz: Tell us about the circumstance of her death, how she died when you were 13.

Scott: I went to school that day. Something told me to skip school. I decided I was going to skip school that same day. If she had been living, she would have whipped my butt for skipping, and I'd say, oh Lord. But something kept nagging me to go home. I didn't think of it as it was trying to tell me something was wrong or nothing like that. The whole problem was, I had an older sister that was very, very selfish. She was a selfish girl. My mother was taking her to school or going with her to school, because the teachers had asked her to come so they could talk with her about how my sister was acting in school. So she was doing something wrong. If you're just sitting around in school, yeah, mom was coming. She's coming to find out what you did and then whup your heine. You got a good whuppin' if you did something wrong in school.

[interview interrupted]

Ritz: You were saying your sister acted up in school, and mom had to go to school to hear about it from the teachers.


Scott: She had to go. That was the day they asked her to come to school, so they could talk to her and tell her about what my sister was doing. On the way to school with my sister, they got to a point where they were crossing the street. This driver shot out from – wanted to get to the front of the cars, and there was space for it. But my sister stepped out in the street. My mother saw it, and she reached for my sister to save her. Pushed her back off the curb of the street. The car hit my mother instead of hitting my sister. My mother stepped in that, trying to save my sister – that's how that happened – and got all tangled up. It tore her – when she got [?], they found out it tore her arm off. They were going to try to put it back, but couldn't put it back together. That was it. It shocked me. Mama. Wait a minute. What are you doing to her?, I'm thinking. Kids. You know. You don't know what's on. You think anything.

That was my buddy though life. I could depend on her. My father had no good. We never had a father and son conversation, never. It hurts, because you've seen others who shared things with their father. But I got that sharing with an older person from my brother-in-law. He was mechanic and fixed cars. He was unique. All the neighbors, if their car broke down, here comes – here they come. They're going to get Leon to fix their car.

Ritz: So the death of your mother – where . . .? – tell us about how you learned about it.

Scott: I went home.

Ritz: Right, from the day . . .

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Scott: Like I said, I skipped school. I went home at the noon break, when you'd just be going home for lunch or something like that. No, I just went home to stay. That was my intent, to go home and stay. When I got there, Nadine, one of my sisters, she tried to keep me from knowing that my older sister was upstairs, but my mother wasn't. So I said, "What's going on?" I was surprised to see her home too. "What's going on?" "Shirley's upstairs in the bathroom. Don't go up there." I said, "Okay," knowing them and their attitudes about things. I just left it alone. But I kept thinking, something's wrong. Then I got to thinking, where is Mom? Where's Mom? If Shirley's home, where is my mother? "Mom's at the hospital." "The hospital? For what?" Then I began to question things like that in my mind. Eventually I got it out of them that she had been hit by a car. That's the way I got it. We were waiting all day that day for someone to tell us that she was going to be all right. That's all we wanted to know. Was she going to be all right?

We waited all day that Friday. Saturday, they got a hold of my grandmother, who was very distant to my mother in her growing up and in her – they'd never got along. So that was a problem there. But my grandmother was there. She broke the family up, because she put us in – they call it a detention home. The kids hadn't done anything wrong. Why were we going to the detention home?

The thing that got me the most mad was the games that they played with me about things concerning my mother's death. Shirley and Nadine got together, and they schemed up an idea to keep me from going to the funeral home to see my mother. I said, "You better get out of here." I was really upset. But this they had done other times, little – like I told you, I'm ready to give you the other side of the book. I said, wait a minute. Why aren't they telling me something about my mother or what's going on with the funeral home. The funeral home came and gave us the service with their cars to take the kids to the funeral home so they could see their mother the last time. I went. I saw her in her casket. Then they take us back home after that. Instead of home, we went back to the detention home. That I couldn't figure.

Ritz: So your dad was absent.

Scott: Yeah, he wasn't around.


Ritz: So he couldn't take responsibility for keeping . . .

Scott: To save . . .

Ritz: . . . to save the family.

Scott: Yeah.

Ritz: And there was no other. Your grandmother didn't want to do it. So what had . . . ?

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Scott: She . . .

Ritz: So what had . . . ?

Scott: Huh?

Ritz: Go ahead.

Scott: You dig? Listen. He didn't care. My mom's gone. That was it. That was the end of the family. That's why I say they – a family life, they don't know the importance of being a family with one another. No. No they don't, because – I see why. I understand why – because it wasn't presented to them in the right way. He wasn't a father to us and wasn't there at times we knew we needed him. So that was one of the problems that was involved in their life.

Ritz: So here you are at age 13. Your mom's gone. Your dad won't step up to the plate and assume responsibility. Your siblings are at each other's throats or scheming.

Scott: Yeah. Couldn't get along with each other. You're right.

Ritz: Couldn't get along with each other. So no-one's really pulling together. You and your brother go off. How did you – describe to us what it must have been like to be a 13-year-old Jimmy Scott or a 14-year-old . . .

Scott: Then, after that, leaving – what happened, they gave us a – they called it a worker or something.

Ritz: Worker's compensation?


Scott: No. They gave us a woman who . . .

Ritz: Oh. A social worker.

Scott: Social worker.

Ritz: Right.

Scott: It was up to her to place us in foster homes. A brother and I, and my younger brother, who is now determined – he destroyed himself – he's destroying himself, being a hoodlum. He's just messed up, and it hurts, because my mother didn't allow that. I know it, and they know my mother didn't allow it. But, how can you tell him? He got a hold of that junk, and he started using it. This is my younger brother. He's much younger. He's

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before the last kid. The last kid was a boy also: Justin, who's named after my mother. However, that was what the situation was.

Ritz: So after she died, there was this moral breakdown. There was a moral breakdown. There was nobody to take charge and tell them what is right and what is wrong and you can do this.

Scott: No, no, nobody.

Ritz: Because she was such a strong person when she was alive. She held it all together. And when she died it all kind of . . .

Scott: It will fall apart.

Ritz: It all fell apart. What do you think kept you from falling apart?

Scott: My interest in music.

Ritz: All right, all right.

Scott: My interest in music.

Ritz: So music saved you.

Scott: When I would sing or something after that . . .

Ritz: It was healing to you.


Scott: . . . I'd say, wait a minute. This is what mom was trying to tell me or something like that.

[interview interrupted]

Ritz: Jimmy, getting back to the thing with music, was there ever a point – I'm just trying to put myself in your shoes. Your mom dies. Your dad's not taking responsibility. The kid's are at each other's throats. They're scheming against you.

Scott: Like I say, that destroyed the family.

Ritz: That destroyed the family. Was there ever a point that you feel as though you were going to fall apart. In other words, did you ever go in your mind, I can't handle this. I can't live without my mom. I can't live with this situation.

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Scott: Yeah.

Ritz: It's too funky. It's too crazy.

Scott: But then there were things that she had said to us before she died . . .

Ritz: That kept you together.

Scott: Yeah.

Ritz: What were those things?

Scott: I said, listen, mom wouldn't appreciate me falling. She'd whup my butt if I fell apart. I'm saying that to myself.

Ritz: So in other words, even in her death, she remained a present source of strength for you.


Scott: Yes.

Ritz: Even in her death, she remained alive.

Scott: Yeah. I tell many people. I tell them, wait a minute. You know better than that. Mom – because, they were old enough. There were enough of them. They were old enough to hold the thing together. But those that were old enough, they all drifted apart. Now we go back to the foster homes. As I said, my brother and my youngest brother – two younger brothers – were put in a foster home together in Youngstown, Ohio. No, we were put in Miss Gray's home first, in Cleveland. We didn't get along there, so we were shifted to this home in Youngstown. This home in Youngstown, this lady was a beautiful, beautiful lady and did a beautiful job of caring for my brothers and myself.

But the thing was, when I got 16, I could leave the home. I got 16. That's just what I did: went back to Cleveland to try to find a home. I had to get a job and get a place to live. So I did. Went back and wasn't welcomed back. People, when they don't want to be bothered with you, they do a lot of funny things. You know this. I know that. Okay. That was what was being done. Nobody wanted to be bothered. I was their brother, but wait a minute. You don't bother with me. Burnt. When I got paid, I saw you in my face, asking for money. To hell with you. And you don't want to be bothered with me. Took a long time. When I moved here, that was another reason I moved here, is because they weren't together.

Ritz: You mean moved here to Las Vegas?

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Scott: Uh-huh.

Ritz: Just to get away from Cleveland.

Scott: Yeah.

Ritz: And the squabbling of family.

Scott: I was tired of it. I felt I knew something about family and what it should be. It wasn't there, so I would rather be by myself than to be around them, knowing what my mother taught us, and it wasn't in practice. Now that she's gone, they didn't practice it any more, living like that.

[recording interrupted]

Ritz: Jimmy, we were talking before about, in the aftermath of your mother's death, where music was so important to your heart and helped to heal your heart. Was that music you were listening to on the radio? Music that you heard live? Singers like . . .

Scott: Yeah, and then there in Cleveland on Sunday mornings, all the gospel churches would be on the radio.

Ritz: And you'd listen to that, and that would remind you of your mother.

Scott: Yeah, because my mother played piano for the church we went to. That was my comfort.

Ritz: How about artists like – when – how old were you when you heard artists like Paul Robeson?


Scott: I was just a young kid, 6, 7 years old, something like that.

Ritz: What was your impression of that music?

Scott: Wait a minute. This man is telling a story and singing it. The way he sang was very expressive. I said, uh-uh. I got – that's the way I got to sing. It's got to mean something. If you listen to him, it meant something, and you knew it meant something. Paul Robeson, you'd hear him on a record or something, it meant something.

Ritz: So it was the dramatic way that he told the story in song.

Scott: Yeah, that's right. That's where I learned a lot of what I do as a singer, those things. Then I start looking for it in all of the singers.

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Ritz: The story-telling.

Scott: Yeah. Dinah [Washington] was fabulous, and look how long she held the rein.

Ritz: Look how long she held the rein.

Scott: She reined for a long time as the champion.

Ritz: I know your dad liked to go to clubs and hang out.

Scott: Oh yeah.

Ritz: Would you go to those clubs with him ever and hear music in those clubs?

Scott: Those clubs he went to? No.

Ritz: They were just drinking places?

Scott: They were just drinking and talking menacingly to me. It didn't mean anything to me, listening to them, because they wasn't talking about nothing that was interesting enough to listen.

Ritz: When do you remember the first time – I can't remember this – when do you remember the first time that you walked into a jazz club and heard jazz or any kind of music in a nightclub? How old were you or when do you remember – I remember as a kid. I remember walking into Birdland, hearing Count Basie. My heart starts to beat fast. How old were you – when do you remember hearing live music outside of church?


Scott: I'll tell you what was happening. I don't whether you'd remember. What was happening was that little theaters in my home town began to bring bands and people like Dinah Washington – different musicians with names – they started bringing them to Cleveland in the theaters that we had there. That's my first time hearing the live music.

Ritz: That's a beautiful thing.

Scott: Yeah.

Ritz: So, before the movie started.

Scott: Oh, listen. And I said, oh, looky here. We were getting live music every week for a period of time.

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Ritz: You're talking about hearing Jimmie Lunceford?

Scott: Yes, and Earl Hines.

Ritz: The great bands.

Scott: And Cab Calloway. He was one of them that was out there. Then Lionel. I had gotten to know him and was anxious to get a chance to work with him.

Ritz: But tell us, before you got to Lionel, and you're moved back to Cleveland and 16 years old after the homes and so forth.

Scott: I got jobs. Worked various places. I worked the hotel. I worked restaurants. Busboying and whatnot.

Ritz: Before – so you're going to all these live shows with the big bands, Earl Hines and Lunceford. Where did you begin to build up your chops? When did you start to sing in front of people before Lionel Hampton?


Scott: I was working with a couple of tap dancers. I remember the names: Lem Neal and Dickie Sims. They were a team. They picked me up at the theater in my home and asked me, did I want to valet for them? Oh yeah. Anxious to be around show business. This would give me a chance to hear all kind of music. I'm going around, meeting all these guys. I was working with them, and Lester was in the band that was playing on this gig they did.

Ritz: Lester Young.

Scott: Lester Young. He was playing his tenor in the band. He was another one I had fallen in love with – music – it was like hearing birds or somebody. He was in the band. They played. One of the fellows that I worked for said, "Come on, man. They want you to sing." I said, "What? Want me to sing?" I didn't know anything about me. I felt like, hey, you know. Anyway, *Talk of the Town* was the song I sang. [Scott sings:] "I can't show my face. Can't go any place. People stop and stare. It's so hard to bear. Everybody knows I love you. It's the talk of the town. Friends and our relations send congratulations. I'm not setting our wedding day. Friends and our relations send congratulations. How can I face them? What can I say?" It stops there with me. Those are the last lyrics I remember. But that's an old song. *Talk of the Town*.

Ritz: So you went out and you sang.

Scott: I went out and sang that for them. Then they wanted another one. They kept applauding. "Bring him back here. Bring him back here. Give us another." I could hear

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the people say that. It was in Pennsylvania that this was happening. What was that town? I'm trying to think of the town. Not Meadville, but we were near Meadville. You could just cross the street almost and be in Meadville, but this sound started with an S.

Ritz: Scranton?

Scott: Huh?

Ritz: I forgot. Not Scranton?

Scott: No.

Ritz: So you're in Pennsylvania . . .

Scott: It was little. One of those little towns, little country towns.

Ritz: So they asked you to do another song after *Talk of the Town*.

Scott: And I did *Don't take your love from me*. That was the other one that I did. That and . . .

Ritz: *Talk of the Town*.

Scott: Yeah, *Talk of the Town*. Those two I did. That spurred me on. I had done two. Okay, I'm going back home and be a singer. It was a couple of clubs that I knew wanted me to sing for them, but the guy was so cheap, a lot of artists wouldn't work for it.


Ritz: So you wouldn't work with the guy because he was too cheap.

Scott: Anyway, I went ahead – like I said, did those two nights with them. They had – this was a weekend – three-night gig that we were on. The dancers had – it was their date. Like I said, it opened my eyes that I could keep on singing.

Ritz: Yeah. You got the bug.

Let me ask you one thing before we leave the initial time you sang *Don't take your love from me* and *Talk of the Town*. When Lester Young said, let him sing, and after you did sing, what was his remarks to you.

Scott: He said, "Go back in the dressing room. You're a valet. You don't belong out here." I felt so bad about what he had said to me. So I went back in the dressing room. I didn't say anything. Just moseyed back in and sat down and thought about it. I said, I don't have to be insulted like this. I told the fellows. I said, "I'm sorry. I'm going back

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home” – the fellows I was working for. So they gave me my money and my fare back home, because I had to take a bus from there to Cleveland. I took the bus fare and got the bus.

Ritz: Do you know what’s so interesting about that though – was Lester telling you, I don’t like the way you sing?

Scott: No.

Ritz: Or was he just telling you, you shouldn’t be doing this. You’re a valet?

Scott: Yeah, that’s all. In other words, I really deciphered what he meant by it. “Now don’t get a big head, boy.” Because I had stopped the show. The people just kept raving.

Ritz: So he was kind of jealous that you were getting all this attention.

Scott: I don’t think that it was jealousy more than trying to express, don’t get the big head, boy. When I thought about it – the longer I thought about it, the more that came to me, that uh-uh, he was just telling me, don’t get the big head. I was hurt, of course, because he said this, and in the way he said it, I was hurt, because that’s Lester speaking to me, telling me.

Ritz: Did he tell that to you on stage? When did he actually make those remarks, Lester?

Scott: No. The band had stopped playing. The dancers had went into the dressing room. I was standing outside, watching them come back to the dressing rooms. I stood by the door that came out of the stage. I was standing there. Here come Lester, with his horn. He saw me over there and he looks. He says, “Go back in the dressing room. You belong in the dressing room.” Belong in the dressing room? Why would you say that?, I’m thinking. So I did. I went on back to the dressing room. I knew I was going to leave that place and he didn’t have to worry about insulting me any more.

Ritz: Do you know, what’s so interesting to me about that, is that Lester Young, who had such an individual style, and obviously had an influence on you, because he was so relaxed. He was always behind the beat. He didn’t care about – he was his own man, the way you became your own man. It would seem like he would be one of the biggest appreciators.

Scott: Later it came. Oh yeah.

Ritz: Good. I’m happy to hear that. Later it came.

Scott: Later we were friends. It was, “Hey, there’s that boy.” Blah-blah-blah-blah-blah. “How you doing? Where you been singing?” and like that. No, later we became very great friends.

Ritz: And he was an appreciator of yours and your style, because he probably heard his own style in your stuff.

Jimmy, building up to where we began today, which was building back up to this Lionel Hampton, how did you . . .? – so these years, you’re singing the Cleveland clubs. Now you’re off the road with the dancing guys. How did you come to hear about Hampton’s band and get to sing for them?

Scott: They had – I was singing in a club in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The fellows got him – two of the fellows got him. He liked going around to clubs. Especially when he had time, he would take time out and go. So, this night, before our show – I think it was the second show in Milwaukee – I looked up and they were sitting in the audience. I was a bit surprised.

Ritz: So you look out in the audience, and there’s Hamp.

Scott: Huh?

Ritz: You look out in the audience, and there’s Hamp.

Scott: Yeah. But the fellow that had him and made him come with them to hear me. That’s what they had – this was some of the band. Then, after he did that, we all went to dinner – lunch – a little lunch, whatever. We got to talking. I met Gladys.

Ritz: His wife.

Scott: His wife.

Ritz: The boss.

Scott: That’s right. The next thing I know, about a week or two weeks after that, I got a message telling me where to meet him. There’d be somebody to meet me, and I was to go with them. I said, what is this? Lionel Hampton? But I followed instructions. We went to this room where they were. It was like a hotel room. We went and sat there on the couch. Out comes Gladys. “Hi there. How are you?” “Fine.” Then, “How long will it take you to get your clothes?” I said, what are they saying, how long will it take me to get my clothes? Anyhow, she told me they were going to hire me for the band. I said, “Oh?” Then I thought to myself, well I will have to get my clothes.

Ritz: Did they discuss what material you would sing?

Scott: No. I sang, “Why was I born? Why am I living?” [*Why was I born*]. That was one of the features that he wanted me to do. And a couple of things he had me doing. *Don’t take your love* was one, and *Everybody’s Somebody’s Fool*, after we recorded it. That was one of them that I did. When I left the band, he tried to get the singers that he had to do the song, because the song was getting popular.

Ritz: *Everybody’s Somebody’s Fool*?

Scott: *Everybody’s Somebody’s Fool*. He couldn’t get anyone to do it, because they’re saying, no, that’s Jimmy’s song. We ain’t going to do that. Most of them were loyal in that sense. That was how it went.

Ritz: How long of a period of time were you out there with Hampton? Did you travel all over the country?

Scott: Yes. We traveled many places. That’s the first time I got to Hawaii, was with his band. It was an overnight thing. When I woke up, I’m laying on the ground, on the grass, and they’re telling me, “Come on. Get up.” “Get up? Where am I?” I must be in Heaven somewhere.

Ritz: Must be in Heaven; turned out to be Hawaii.

Scott: Yeah. That’s right. It turned out to be Hawaii. They entertained us that evening. Then we slept. Then they entertained us that night, before we left. Then we got the bus and left there and crossed all that water. They had a ship that took us across.

Ritz: Tell us a little bit about the different kinds of music, the different styles that the Hampton band played.


Scott: Many, many. He was a uniquely equipped musician, Hampton was. The beauty was in the vibraphones that he played. Sometimes he’d play them with a song I was singing, and I just thought I was in Heaven.

Ritz: Just hearing him play the vibes behind you.

Scott: Uh-huh. It was beauty, it was truth, and music.

Ritz: Beauty, truth, and music. Tell me – but there was also parts of that world that had like – they were still playing Illinois Jacquet’s *Flyin’ Home* and there was still the heavy .

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Scott: Oh yeah. They're still – all those songs that he specialized in.

Ritz: The big hits and the rock-and-roll-ish or rhythm-and-blues-ish honkin' and shoutin'.

Scott: I'll tell you. Winnie Brown came to one of our – was it in Chicago? yeah, in Chicago – Winnie Brown came and sang with the band as a guest singer.

Ritz: Tell me what it was like singing with – singing on the same band as Betty Carter. What was she like in those days?

Scott: Betty was unique, different, in her style. It was – you could tell instantly different. Betty was a good showman.

Ritz: In her presentation, you mean.

Scott: Right.

Ritz: How she used her hands and sold the song to the audience.

Scott: All the different little things, yeah.

Ritz: In terms of you developing your style as a showperson . . .


Scott: Who?

Ritz: In terms of you developing – I'm just thinking about how you developed your style as a showperson on stage, delivering a song to the audience – how you used your hands, how . . .

Scott: Yeah. That . . .

Ritz: That's so unusual.

Scott: . . . came from a coach I had in school. He was the bandleader of our band at the school. Then he'd have music classes. Certain ones that he liked, he'd pick you out and have them, and we'd all meet up as a class for him. Mr. Todd. Both he and – Miss McGrath was her name. Miss McGrath was supposed to be our art teacher. She was an art teacher. Every time we'd turn around, she'd have us on stage, doing some kind of play or something. But that was interesting. There was another lesson, learning how to act on the stage.

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Ritz: The use of the hands, your gestures, how you do when you're on stage – that came out of acting class, you think? Or you came out of – or were you influenced by people like Judy Garland or Betty Carter? Or by then you had developed your own style?

Scott: Judy was one of the influences for me, Judy Garland. I forget the kid that was with her.

Ritz: Mickey Rooney?

Scott: Mickey, yeah, but he didn't do vocal. He did the movies and thing with her, but he wasn't active in the music. No, but he was always behind her.

Ritz: Donald O'Connor.

Scott: Oh yeah. That was the tap dancer – the young . . .

Ritz: You like to see his movies.

Scott: No, he was a tap dancer. He was a young man doing all that tap dancing. We used to go to see the movies just to see him tap dance.

Ritz: When you got on stage with Hampton, and you're getting all this reaction – you cut *Everybody's Somebody's Fool* – did you surprise yourself by what an emotional vocalist you were, by how much feeling poured out of you? Was that a surprise for you, Jimmy? Did . . .?

Scott: A surprise to me?

Ritz: Yeah. Did you ever go, my God, I didn't know I had this much feeling . . .?


Scott: To give.

Ritz: . . . to give.

Scott: In a way, yes. But again Lester popped into my head. Don't get the big head, boy.

Ritz: Why did – tell us – first tell us the story of *Everybody's Somebody's Fool*.

Scott: This young lady, Regina Adams – she used to come to the Apollo every time we were there. She would talk with me about this song she wanted me to sing. We never got to do it for her, but before we left New York, she brought a music sheet to me and said, "Here. Here's the song." So I looked at it. There were a few changes I had to make, but nothing big. We got it together and made our decisions about how we would express it.

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One night – no, one day, here comes Hamp. “Jim Scott.” “Yes sir.” “Where’s that song that girl gave you?” I didn’t even know he knew the girl gave me a song, but I think someone in the band probably told him, because they would be – we were all back in the dressing rooms together. So, I just let it go. I said, “Okay. I say, “Here. Just a minute. I’ll get it for you.” I went and got it, and he had somebody in the band write an arrangement for it. That was what you heard on the record.

Ritz: But when it came out, it didn’t have your name on it.

Scott: No. You know what?

Ritz: What?

Scott: The only person he ever put their name on the record was Dinah Washington. Only person he put her on it. Nobody’s name – none of the others – and if you check it out, none of the other singers, their names weren’t on the records.

Ritz: So when it came out, were you upset? Were you angry that your name wasn’t on it? Or you didn’t even expect anything?

Scott: No, no. I didn’t even think about it.

Ritz: You didn’t have any expectations. So you didn’t have any expectations of having your name on it. You were okay that your name wasn’t on it. But how about when it began to be played on the air and everybody was listening to it and calling for it and screaming when you did it? Then did you – what was going through your mind then? I better quit this band?

Scott: No. I was just hoping that it would be successful. You’re anxious to do a good job, and you hope it’s successful.

Ritz: But when it was successful, what was your reaction?

Scott: I wondered, wait a minute, because I had some doubts about the young lady’s lyric to the song, but I sang them as they were and put it together, and we went ahead and recorded it. Do you know, that’s a big request now, when I am on the stage. I get many requests for that song, *Everybody’s Somebody’s Fool*.

Ritz: Why did you leave Lionel’s band?

Scott: We had a little discrepancy, and I didn’t want to stay in the band and be fussing and all that. No, I don’t need this. I don’t need this. I’m here to do a job. I will do it, and

that's the end of it. But I don't need to be arguing with the man or his wife. That's why I left the band.

Ritz: So you were – the discrepancy was over not getting paid what you felt you needed to get paid.

Scott: Yes, in a way it was about not being paid. Not only that. We had done the record, and everybody said, "How much did you get?" The fellows in the band. I said, "What do you mean, how much did I get? I ain't got nothing." Oh man. Then them cats – the cats in the band started talking then, and it came out that he had did this to others. I said, if that's the case, then I don't have be with the band.

Ritz: I see. So you didn't get one penny.

Scott: Not one penny did I get out of the record.

Ritz: No advance, no royalties.

Scott: No nothing.

Ritz: You just showed up and sang . . .

Scott: Not nothing. He . . .

Ritz: . . . as part of your job as the band singer.

Scott: He had the contract with Decca.

Ritz: Yeah, the recording company.


Scott: See? So he presented the song to Decca. Yes, yes, yeah. Somebody in Decca wanted to hear me sing. It must have been somebody pretty important, because if it was somebody important, Lionel Hampton is going to do what he's supposed to – what he can to please that person. That's the way Lionel was.

Ritz: What did you do after you left the band?

Scott: Went home to Cleveland. Got a job.

Ritz: What kind of job?

Scott: I worked in the drugstore that I grew up. He was on the corner. Curlander's Drug Store. That was the name of the fellow who owned it.

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Ritz: How old were you at this point?

Scott: Huh?

Ritz: How old were you at this point?

Scott: At that point, I guess I must have been like almost 30 years old, not quite.

Ritz: In your 20s.

Scott: I was in my 20s, late 20s.

Ritz: Were you discouraged? Did you feel like, my voice is on this hit song, it's being played all over the country, and here I am working at a drug store – what the hell's happening?

Scott: No, no.

Ritz: That was not your . . .

Scott: I didn't even think about it. Keep going on.

Ritz: Keep going on.

Scott: No turning back. I still had a job to do.

Ritz: At the drug store.


Scott: Yes.

Ritz: But were you also singing gigs in Cleveland?

Scott: I did do a couple of little places that used to know me. I'd go by and sing there. Then, when I was home, they'd ask me to do gigs for them and how much did I charge and like that. So I did. I went. One guy had the club – honey, you'd know. You don't know the name of the club either, where Goo-Goo Eyes and myself – this was a blues singer . . .

Ritz: This period when you're back in Cleveland, you're regrouping your strength and determination . . .

[recording interrupted]

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Scott: I did that club. That's where I did my first production. I produced a show . . .

Ritz: At the Cedar Gardens.

Scott: . . . at Cedar Gardens. It was like an old-time burlesque.

Ritz: Oh yeah. You produced a whole show with dancers.

Scott: No, I don't think it was a whole show. It was – Cedar Gardens was a nightclub, always a nightclub.

Ritz: The Cotton Club she's talking about.

Jeannie Scott: The Cotton Club [?].

Jimmy Scott: The Cotton Club, that was something else. That was downtown. That was downtown.

Ritz: Let me ask you this: talking about the Cleveland jazz environment. When you were in Cleveland, you knew Tadd Dameron, right?

Scott: Tadd Dameron, we grew up sort of together, in schools and things. Tadd would say, "Come on and sit in" on the piano stool with him. I'd sit down. He'd say, "Sing – let's get the key" for such and such a number that he'd want to play for me. If I knew it, he'd play it and I'd sing it.

Ritz: So what was happening in music . . .

Scott: His brother played tenor – Caesar Dameron.

Ritz: Right, Caesar Dameron.

Scott: Caesar Dameron

Ritz: In Cleveland, before you went to New York and Newark and all that to kind of settle in, would the big name beboppers come through Cleveland? Would you see Dizzy [Gillespie] or Bird [Charlie Parker] or Dexter Gordon or whoever?

Scott: No, they hadn't come through yet. No. They hadn't come through yet, because I was away from home when they did come through.

Ritz: But how about Tadd though? He must have introduced you to – because he was such an advanced musical mind.

Scott: Oh yeah. He was a bad piano player, baby.

Ritz: But an arranger and composer as well.

Scott: Yes.

Ritz: Do you think he influenced your musical vision?

Scott: I think so. I think so in many ways, because he'd get after me about having my notes to the songs, like that. He'd sit down. He says, now this one, you sing in such and such. I said, whoa. He'd give me the information about the keys that I sang the songs in.

Ritz: Right. So he was a teacher.

Scott: Yes.

Ritz: Let me ask you this about the other big-time jazz vocalists who were coming through in that era – Ella [Fitzgerald] and Billie and Sarah. I know they loved you to a degree, when they heard you.

Scott: There was a club called [Café] Tia Juana in Cleveland. That's where they would come, to the Tia Juana.

Ritz: And you'd go hear them.

Scott: Yeah, because that was mostly jazz. It was one of the clubs that dedicated themselves to jazz only.

Ritz: To jazz only. But when you heard these tremendously individual styles, like Ella . . .

Scott: Or Billie Holiday.

Ritz: . . . or Billie – Sarah Vaughan.

Scott: Yeah. Dinah was there.

Ritz: Dinah, big individualist.

Scott: Yeah, all of them sang at the Tia Juana. When they came, they were exposed at the Tia Juana.

Ritz: But did you feel, sitting in the audience, listening to Billie or Dinah or Sarah Vaughan, did you feel like, they're great, they're great, they're great, but I have my own style already in place? Or did you feel that you . . .

Scott: I never thought of things like that. I just – truthfully, I never thought of things like that.

Ritz: You just heard them live and went on and sang.

Scott: If I had to do a gig, I was prepared. My music was prepared. I knew what I was going to do and got with the piano player when they come to the club and said, okay, let's get the keys to the songs, and I'd ask them, which songs do they know?

Ritz: And that was it.

Scott: That was it.

Ritz: How did you first – because this is an important part of history – how did you first get a recording contract, with the name Jimmy Scott on the record?

Scott: Teddy Reig . . .

Ritz: Yeah, we just – Teddy Reig.

Scott: And, what's it? What's his name?

Jeannie Scott: Jack [Hook?]


Jimmy Scott: Jack Hook.

Ritz: Yeah.

Scott: Yeah. They had a label that they were trying to make go. I did a – I think I did two songs for them. They of course sold it back-to-back, the record. That was back-to-back, the two songs that I did for them. I'm trying to remember what they're called, the record company.

Ritz: But Teddy Reig, how had he heard you or how had you met him?

Scott: Teddy was always around.

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Ritz: He was talking about the . . .

Scott: Roost. That's right, baby.

Ritz: Yeah, the Roost label.

Scott: That was the name of that record company: Roost Records.

Ritz: So Teddy. You were talking about how you met Teddy. He was always around.

Scott: Yeah, he was always around Count Basie or the bands.

Ritz: Yeah, I know he was a Basie guy.

Scott: So he started coming around us, hanging, and I'm wondering, who in the hell is this cat? Because he had to be somebody, if he could walk in the door and nobody'd say nothing. He'd just walk in. So I says, got to be somebody they know. The clubs knew him.

Anyhow, he'd start coming around. He asked me to do some records, and they put Jimmy Scott on those records. That was one of the first records I did outside of doing the Hampton record.

Ritz: In terms of the musical input and how they wanted you to sing and the accompaniment, was that mainly up to you? Were you . . .?

Scott: No, see, that was the whole trouble.

Ritz: I see. Okay.


Scott: I had no choice. They'd bring a song . . .

Ritz: . . . that you'd have to sing.

Scott: And that was annoying, because there was many songs I wanted to sing that were great music. But no, they didn't do it like that. So that was a problem.

Ritz: So you didn't have the artistic freedom that you needed.

Scott: There you go. I didn't have the choice to do what I wanted. That wasn't – what they were all – all of them was looking for somebody to rock the place. Wait a minute. I didn't come here – I come here as a singer, not . . .

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Ritz: And it wasn't in your nature to say, wait a minute. I'm not going to sing this song, because it doesn't suit me.

Scott: No, I wouldn't do that. I wouldn't do that. I'd say, okay. Then, with my voice, I'd figure out a way to do it, and do it.

Ritz: Let ask me something while it's on my mind, Jimmy – jumping ahead a tiny bit – not too far. During this period, the 1950s, when you heard certain vocalists – remember Johnnie Ray?

Scott: Yeah.

Ritz: [sings:] “If your sweetheart sends a letter goodbye . . .” – when you heard these – he was obviously modeled on you, and later he would tell that to everybody – but when you would hear Johnnie Ray on the radio sing *Cry* or *The Little [White] Cloud that Cried*, whatever those songs were, did you ever feel like, God, that's me, that's my style? Or that's not in your nature either?

Scott: I never thought about it. But Johnnie Ray, every time I was in the Apollo, Johnnie Ray would be sitting there.

Ritz: Listening and talking notes.

Scott: Yes. He'd be sitting there. Finally he came and introduced himself. Say yeah, okay, this is the guy.

Ritz: This is the guy. So you never went through a period when you said, it ain't fair. Why should he be getting his big old hit and get all the big old money, and I ain't. That's just not in your nature. You just kind of said, I'll go on and do my thing. Let him do his thing.

Scott: Yeah.

Ritz: As you were recording in the early days for Roost, do you think what they were trying for, or what you thought they were trying for, was to get a pop hit on the radio? As opposed to, hey, we're working with a great jazz vocalist and we'll let him be a great jazz vocalist. Did – when you were making those recordings, did you feel as though they were striving for a hit song?

Scott: Yeah, they were striving for a hit song, but it was a hit song that they thought was going to be a hit.

Ritz: Not that you thought.

Scott: No. My interest wasn't important to them. All right. They'd get this song, and they'd bring it, and they'd say – I'm saying to myself, I don't sing that kind of stuff. Then they'd have somebody sit down and play it for Howard Biggs. He played the piano for them.

Ritz: Yeah, Howard.

Scott: No, it just didn't work.

[recording interrupted]

Ritz: My name is David Ritz, here in the home of Jeannie and Jimmy Scott, September 24th, 2008. I can't believe it's 2008. 2008.

Scott: How about that.

Ritz: 2008, and you were born in 1925.

Scott: Yeah, how about that.

Ritz: That's beautiful. You lived a long and one of the most interesting lives of anyone I've ever met in my life.

Scott: A long time.


Ritz: I would have to say you have lived one of the most interesting lives of anyone I've ever met in my life.

Scott: It's been rough.

Ritz: Been rough.

Scott: But I'll overcome.

Ritz: I will overcome, he says. Let's get back to the timeline here. 1953 you do the things for Roost and this and that. Then, from the middle of the 1950s to the end of the 1950s, you're in Newark and you're getting hooked up with this guy named Herman Lubinsky. How did you meet Herman?

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Scott: He came to meet me at the club that I was at. I was at a club there. He came over and invited me to the store, because he did all this work right above one of the stores that he had.

Ritz: This is in Newark.

Scott: In Newark. Then that's when he told – what was his name? The one that worked . . .

Ritz: Freddie Mendelsohn?

Scott: Yes. That's when he told Freddie to arrange the studio. I think that was in Linden, that studio.

Ritz: Where you began to record. You knew of his recording label, Savoy.

Scott: Yeah, but I didn't know what he was doing to folks.

Ritz: But you knew that on his label Charlie Parker recorded.

Scott: Right. I mean, then he had a big thing with Wynonie Harris. That was his biggest thing. He wanted that back again. But Wynonie Harris was dead and gone.

Ritz: So he basically saw you as a guy who might be able to give him some hits the way Wynonie Harris had given him some r-and-b.

Scott: Yeah, but like I told you yesterday, everything was what he wanted. Nothing was what I wanted to do, which I felt good about doing. That wasn't the case.

Ritz: Yet, in that period in the 1950s, you recorded a number of songs . . .


Scott: Yes.

Ritz: . . . that you're proud of and that got through even though you weren't in charge of the recording and you weren't really asked what you wanted to record. But nonetheless, aren't there a lot of those recordings that you love and that you like?

Scott: Some.

Ritz: But not a lot.

Scott: Some, but I wasn't big on them, because I couldn't do my own selection of the tunes.

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Ritz: So you continue to be frustrated by your ability to choose the material . . .

Scott: Yeah. You go through it.

Ritz: . . . that was most close to your heart.

Scott: You go through it, because he throws in your mind about he owns you and the contract he's got on you. You don't know how they negotiate those contracts and things. You don't know, because I never did know just what it was, and when I found out, it was too late.

Ritz: Too late, because you were contractually obligated. You had no legal advice at that time? You had no lawyer?

Scott: No. I had no legal contact or person that would work for me. It was because of him. They knew him so well. Lawyers and everything knew him so well, they didn't want to be bothered. If you were related with him . . .

Ritz: I'm not going to give you any legal advice, because I don't want to mess with him.

Scott: Right.

Ritz: That was their attitude.

Scott: They didn't want to handle – do anything for any of the artists that he was handling. That's why I say, poor Maybelle. I know she had a rough time with . . .

Ritz: Let's talk about a couple of those artists in that period that you hooked up with, like Big Maybelle and Little Esther.


Scott: Larry Darnell. Remember that one? Larry Darnell was one of his hits.

Ritz: Tell me a little bit about your relationship with Big Maybelle, because the idea . . .

Scott: Maybelle and I both came from Cleveland, and we worked around together before he even got to know her.

Ritz: I see.

Scott: We worked various cities and other clubs. She was like a little sister to me. [?]. She just had a bad situation, like myself. I didn't have anyone handling the business for me, and Maybelle didn't have any. She had a boyfriend that she went with. He wasn't

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doing anything right for her. He was letting her get that junk. I always felt that was a rough thing for her. Then she was big and fat and then using that dope. Hey. It wasn't going to be too long. That's what happened.

Ritz: But she was your close personal friend, and you loved hanging out with her.

Scott: Oh yeah. She's my girl, yes.

Ritz: Also, before I forget, the other character that you hooked up with in the 1950s and the early 1960s, I guess, was Little Willie John, who – I always love Little Jimmy Scott and Little Willie John, and the two of you guys together.

Scott: We used to hang out together.

Ritz: Oh you did? How did you meet?

Scott: He wanted me to teach him all my songs.

Ritz: That's what I was going to ask you. He wanted to be a balladeer.

Scott: Then I didn't get around to doing that. I didn't get around to doing that, and he sort of acted mad towards me, because I wouldn't do it, but that's Little Willie John, selfish.

Ritz: Let me ask you something about that, because what I've always heard about Little Willie John – a lot of people think was one of the best rhythm-and-blues vocalists ever, along with Clyde McPhatter . . .

Scott: And there would have been Lubinsky's bet for a hit . . .

Ritz: If Herman . . .

Scott: . . . the kind of hit they wanted. Willie John would have been the thing.


Ritz: That's right.

Scott: But they never got around to . . .

Ritz: He was over there in King Records with . . .

Scott: King Records, yeah.

Ritz: . . . Sid Nathan.

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Scott: And he'd never got around to dealing with Lubinsky.

Ritz: Let me ask you this about you and your life – this is such a – whatever was heard about Little Willie John is that he had a short man's complex.

Scott: Yeah.

Ritz: That you couldn't tell him nothing.

Scott: No, baby.

Ritz: He'd take on the big . . .

Scott: Willie was a little short guy, and he wanted to be a gangster. His style was . . .

Ritz: Gangster style.

Scott: . . . gangster style. He thought he could be a gangster. That's what hurt him. He'd get around people, and they didn't want to bother with it, because he didn't know how to talk to people.

Ritz: But in terms of you – do you ever feel like you had a short man's complex?

Scott: Huh?

Ritz: Do you feel like you ever had a short man's complex the way Little Willie John did?

Scott: No, no. I never thought of that.


Ritz: Back to mom. Accept it.

Scott: No, I never thought of myself being short or physically inadequate or whatever. But like I said, them guys, everybody wanted to be a big shot, and the kind of big shot they wanted to be was no good, because they wanted to be tough and bossy and run the show that they were involved in.

Ritz: So, this period of your recordings in the 1950s, both with Royal and Savoy, you never got any royalties for that stuff?

Scott: No.

Ritz: Never got paid.

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Scott: No.

Ritz: Would you . . .

Scott: The most – sometimes now, I wondered [*sic*: remembered], he would send – Freddie Mendel[sohn] would send over a \$5,000 check. This was supposed to be an advance for doing the record. I said okay. But I knew at the end of the session, he hadn't paid the session cost. Never paid it. He did that to a whole lot of people, not only myself. I don't feel like I was the only one that he did these things to, because I know, the more I was with him, I realized he was mistreating everybody.

Ritz: The same, equally as bad.

Scott: Yes.

Ritz: Equal mistreatment for everybody.

Scott: That was just his way of living and dealing with people. He didn't respect anything you could do. It had to be Lubinsky's way.

Ritz: Just kind of moving on a little bit here: tell us how we get into this next period of your music, that you meet Ray Charles. Did you meet him through Mary Ann?

Scott: No.

Ritz: Or had you known him before?

Scott: No, no. What it was, I had . . .

Ritz: This was like 1958, 1959-ish, end of the '50s.


Scott: Yeah. You see, we all traveled. They were travelling too. We'd meet up in different towns, and I got to know Ray. Then he got Adams – Joe Adams . . .

Ritz: Yeah, became his manager.

Scott: . . . became – he gave him a job as his manager.

Ritz: Right, early 1960s now.

Scott: Uh-huh. Anyway, then he told Joe to have me come to California. He wanted to record me.

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Ritz: Before that, did you know that Ray was a Jimmy Scott enthusiast, a fan of yours?

Scott: No, I didn't.

Ritz: So all the times you're hanging out, the times that you had met him on . . .

Scott: Right.

Ritz: . . . the road, he never told you, "Man, I love the way you sing." You just didn't have any idea.

Scott: Oh. He respected me, and I always found him to be a very generous person. With all the artists that he dealt with, he was a generous person.

Ritz: So you get a call from Joe Adams that says, Ray wants you to come to California.

Scott: That I – that Ray wants to record me.

Ritz: So you go to California.

Scott: I go to California. We started rehearsing at his house.

Ritz: Were you instrumental – a bad pun – did you help pick out the tunes?

Scott: Oh yeah. He was glad that I wanted to do those tunes. He had intended that we would continue. He passed before we could get together.

Ritz: But, just keep it on this little time zone, for a while. So this is really, if we look at the big recording career of Jimmy Scott, beginning with *Everybody's Somebody's Fool* and *Roost and Savoy* . . .

Scott: Yeah, I finally get . . .


Ritz: This is the first time . . .

Scott: Yeah.

Ritz: . . . you got – someone was telling you, you tell me what you want to sing.

Scott: That's right.

Ritz: You bring me some songs.

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Scott: And allowed me to pick tunes.

Ritz: That were close to your heart.

Scott: Yes.

Ritz: And where you liked the stories.

Scott: And we were beginning to make a list, he and I. I picked tunes. He said, “I know that.” He said, “That’s beautiful, man.” “Okay, we’re going to do that.” Write it down.

Ritz: What about the orchestrators, Gerald Wilson and Marty Paich? Did they come in and work with you before the recording began? Or did Ray just tell them, okay, y’all do the charts of these songs? Do you have any recollection of working with Gerald Wilson or Marty Paich?

Scott: Yeah, but I – it was a very short time.

Ritz: So the charts got written in a hurry.

Scott: Right.

Ritz: You go up to the RPM studio on Washington Boulevard, Ray’s own studio. Did you know he was going to play piano on every track?

Scott: No.

Ritz: So that must have made you happy.

Scott: Oh yes. That was beautiful. I felt like a king.

Ritz: Right. Ray’s on the track.


Scott: Yes. Ray Charles is playing for me.

Ritz: Every track. Let me ask you this . . .

Scott: That was a big boost . . .

Ritz: A big boost.

Scott: . . . for me.

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Ritz: Let me ask you this, because Ray is well known as being a controlling guy in the studio: do you feel like he produced your vocals or he kind of left you . . .

Scott: He left me . . .

Ritz: . . . to develop your own . . .

Scott: . . . to be free . . .

Ritz: To be free. All right.

Scott: . . . and sing.

Ritz: So he wasn't telling you, "Aw man, you're too behind the beat. Let's move it like this"?

Scott: No, he never, never . . .

Ritz: "Let's redo this, because I don't like the way you enunciate."

Scott: No. He'd say, "Hey man, we will do" such and such a thing today, and we'd sit down and rehearse that song that we were going to do. After we would rehearse two or three songs, he'd go in the studio.

Ritz: Was there much punching in and punching out of those vocals? In other words, were they highly edited? Or did you mainly sing them down one time or two times?

Scott: They weren't highly edited. Most of them were one time. It was what he wanted. At least he said he did. And we'll do such and such a thing tomorrow, he would say to me. I'd say, "Okay," . . .


Ritz: So here . . .

Scott: . . . because it was pleasant, the numbers and the songs that he was projecting to me.

Ritz: So here . . .

Scott: They were close to the ones I wanted to sing.

Ritz: Yeah. So you're a happy guy. So here comes the first, in your mind . . .

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Scott: Yes.

Ritz: . . . great Jimmy Scott album that expresses your heart and your soul and your artistry . . .

Scott: Yes, right.

Ritz: . . . in a way that makes you happy . . .

Scott: Right.

Ritz: . . . not only because you've got him playing behind you. You've got these beautiful orchestrations.

Scott: Right. And I've got to tell you something about that.

Ritz: Please. We want to hear it.

Scott: I got to tell.

Ritz: I want to hear it.

Scott: Listen. What's his name? Tony or something?

Ritz: Tony Gumina. The cat who lives down the street here? In Vegas?

Scott: Has he been to see you?

Ritz: Yeah. I know Tony well.

Scott: You know the program he's after.


Ritz: Yeah.

Scott: Good. Okay. I just wanted to make sure . . .

Ritz: I'm behind it.

Scott: . . . you knew, because . . .

Ritz: No. I talk to him all the time. No, Tony wants to help you, and I want to help Tony help you, and blah blah.

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Anyway, getting back to the – right, please God – getting back to the thing about – right – so, the album’s done. Ray let you be need to be and who you are. The orchestrations are beautiful. The tunes are all the songs that are of your heart songs.

Scott: Yes. Of my heart.

Ritz: Now, the first that happens, that a cover of the album comes out, and there’s not your picture on it. There’s a male model on the cover. What was your reaction when the album came out and your picture wasn’t on it. Did that . . . ?

Scott: Oh that. He . . .

Ritz: Joe Adams.

Scott: He was a no-time tap dancer.

Ritz: Oh, the model.

Scott: The man that – yeah, that was on that album.

Ritz: That’s interesting.

Scott: And the girl – I don’t know who the girl was.

Ritz: She was probably a model too.

Scott: Probably a model or [?].

Ritz: Did that hurt you?

Scott: Huh?


Ritz: Did that hurt you, when you saw a Jimmy Scott album?

Scott: No.

Ritz: So you didn’t care.

Scott: No. I was so glad that Ray was playing with me. I never thought of those things, about who was who.

Ritz: When did you first learn that there was trouble with the album from a legal point of view?

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Scott: Lubinsky interfered.

Ritz: Why?

Scott: He told Ray – he even threatened the boy. He said, “I’ll have you put in jail for life.” He said, “Because that’s my artist that you recorded.” He kept threatening, calling him, threatening him. So of course, I didn’t feel bad when Ray stopped the record. He stopped the record to protect himself. I can understand that, and I took it like that, that Ray stopped the record and put it on the shelf until he could get a clearance.

Ritz: But the other thing that always blows my mind about this story is that – so you’re in L.A., and it looks like you’ll be in L.A. to stay, because you really like L.A. . . .

Scott: Oh yeah. Loved it.

Ritz: . . . and there’s more opportunities there for show business and . . .

Scott: Yes, but the biggest – the big thing was I had – went home to Cleveland, and my father wanted to come with me back to L.A. So I put him – he got in the car and got his little suitcase, the things he wanted, and we – I drove him back to L.A. with me. We had an apartment already. So there was no problem about a bedroom for him. So he stayed with us, Mary Ann and I. I had met her, and we started going together.

Ritz: Mary Ann, who was one of the original Ray Charles . . .

Scott: One of the – yes, the vocalists.

Ritz: . . . vocalists, before the Raylettes. Mary Ann Fisher.


Scott: The song – he wrote a song about her.

Ritz: *Mary Ann*.

Scott: *Mary Ann*. He wrote a song about her.

Ritz: So you and dad and Mary Ann drove out to L.A. Dad wanted to be in L.A., and ten . . .

Scott: Yeah. So all he wanted – I realized after he got there, what he wanted was to interfere with my affairs, my business. Then when he couldn’t, “I want to go home, boy.” Kept nagging about going home. I said, “Wait a minute, Dad. I’ve got business to take care of out here. Let me take care of my business.” “No, boy. When you taking me

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home?” Like that. He kept on. I told Mary Ann. I said, “Mary Ann, I’m going to do something you don’t like, but I got to do it for peace, to have a little peace.” I said, “I’m going to take my father home.”

Ritz: This is, to me, one of the most interesting parts of your life – though every part of your life is interesting to me – but one of the most interesting parts of your life is that here you’re out in California under the auspices of Ray Charles, who has become your mentor. You’ve cut an album he loves. Whether it’s released or not is another story. Ray artistically loved the album . . .

Scott: Yes he did.

Ritz: . . . because he told that to me and many other people. And he loved your style of singing. Ray had never produced another vocalist before. This was a big thing. He only produced his own stuff. So, okay, the album’s done. He produced a vocalist he loved. You’re in California, land of opportunity. Dad, who abandoned you as a child and never kept everybody together after mom died, is telling you, “Boy, drive me back home.” So my question to you – it doesn’t have any real answer, but I love hearing you talk, so I’ll be happy to hear you tell me whatever you tell me: why didn’t you tell him, “Dad, I’m in California. Take the bus home.”

Scott: I did. I said, “Look here. I’m out here. This is where my business generates.”

Ritz: Right. So he prevailed upon you.

Scott: He got to go home. I said – kept on, and then I thought, I’m going to take this man home. So the first break I got where I would have the time to drive him home and come back myself, I did. When I came back . . .

Ritz: To Cleveland.


Scott: When I came back from Cleveland to California, Mary Ann had an attitude about me taking him home. All of a sudden . . .

Ritz: It turned bad.

Scott: Yeah. She was going to leave. We had adopted a little boy, who is now – Tracy’s now about 46 – something like that, because when came back and I found out he was still alive – he’s now – he’s got a job being a x-ray technician.

Ritz: Right. I talked to him. He lives in Tennessee, right?

Scott: Uh-huh.

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Ritz: Kentucky? Kentucky.

Scott: Oh yeah. And looks good.

Ritz: Nice guy.

Scott: Nice kid. I . . .

Ritz: So when you got back to California, things weren't happening, and then you went back to Cleveland.

Scott: Right. So she jumped up and grabs the kid and leaves. I don't know where neither of them was. Anyhow, I'm out there, and I decided, might as well go back . . .

Ritz: To Cleveland.

Scott: . . . to Cleveland.

Ritz: Jimmy, before we go back to Cleveland and trace the end of the decade, let me, before I forget, because the story I love so much, I want to get that on tape – the time you played with Charlie Parker.

Scott: Oh yeah.

Ritz: Now you had met Bird . . .

Scott: That was before . . .

Ritz: Exactly. No, this is 1950s, the mid- . . .


Scott: Yeah. Early 1950s. Yeah, because what? – he died in like '52 or something like that.

Ritz: He died in '55, I think.

Scott: It was something like that. Yeah.

Ritz: The early 1950s. I just want to hear on tape – I just don't have it on tape – how you two performed together.

Scott: We all – we'd finish our gigs and hurry up and go down to Birdland. That was our hangout after we did our shows around New York and New Jersey and whatever.

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Birdland was our hangout. We would all get together and go down there and jam with Bird. One night I came down, and as I came down the step, he was playing *Embraceable You*. He saw me, and he knew I knew it – the song. Motioned for me to come on up. Come on up here. So I went up to the stage. He said, “You take the next chorus.” I got up, and I sang *Embraceable You* with him.” But I didn’t know that Columbia was going to record it. They recorded. It is on one of his old albums. That sort of upset me, because nobody had offered me anything to release it to the public. But, that’s the kind of thing that they pulled.

Ritz: Okay, so getting back into the time zone here. 1960s, ’3, ’4, you go back to Cleveland. What kind of jobs did you do in that period before you got this call from Joel Dorn to do . . .

Scott: I was a busboy in restaurants. In the train station, there was a restaurant called Fred Harvey’s.

Ritz: Oh yeah. It was a chain back then.

Scott: They had a chain in various stations and various big buildings – business buildings, whatnot. I worked for them. I worked for other restaurants.

Ritz: Was it with humility that you worked?

Scott: Huh?

Ritz: Did you work with anger and bitterness, to a degree?


Scott: In a way, I did have an inner anger . . .

Ritz: An inner anger.

Scott: . . . because I didn’t want to do that. I wanted to work with my career. I didn’t have an agent, so how was I going to work? The agent I had, he wasn’t doing anything to support my career, but he was taking the money that was offered for my engagements. That was Jimmy Evans.

Ritz: Jimmy Evans, a famous guy, at the time.

Scott: He also destroyed poor Maybelle. I hated it when I found out he had her as an artist, too. That was the worst thing, for her to have him and nobody there to protect her or handle her business for her. There was nothing I could do, because I didn’t have anyone to handle mine. So obviously, I had to back off from her situation and try to deal with my own. That was what was happening. I had to have a place to live, and of course

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if you've got to live, you got to pay rent. So I had to get a place, an apartment, small [?]. Two or three rooms, I think I had – three-room apartment, because I had a brother that came and lived with me.

Ritz: Kenny lived with you?

Scott: Kenny – Kenneth. But he was hardheaded and wouldn't listen. So I had to let him go his own way. That was a little struggle, because – I don't say it was a big struggle, because I had been by myself so long over the years, it didn't bother me, being by myself and taking care of myself. It didn't bother me at all. No. It never became a thing with me.

Ritz: Where were you – I know you were in Cleveland – but when you get this call in 1968 or 1969 from Joel Dorn, who's a producer at Atlantic, how did that all come about?

Scott: Joel Dorn?

Ritz: Yeah. *The Source*, I'm talking about. The album that became *The Source*.

Scott: That was a problem. He was with Atlantic.

Ritz: Right.


Scott: That was the problems of being my agent. It didn't work out, because he did nothing. I'm wondering, all these people are getting advertisements about their career and who they are and whatnot, but I never got any and there was never any to support my career. So I just had to wonder about it and let it go.

Ritz: But when you were hired by Atlantic, when you were signed to Atlantic, at least for this one album that Joel Dorn was producing, the album on which you sing *Day by Day* and the song from *Exodus* and *On Broadway* – tell me about the experience of making that album. Because that's really – between *Falling in Love is Wonderful*, which is the name of the Ray Charles album, done in the early '60s, and *The Source*, which is done in the late '60s – this is really the next great Jimmy Scott that we all know will live forever.

Scott: That was actually the first great album that I got through, as far as the music and the arrangements and the selection of tunes.

Ritz: That's what I wanted to ask you about. Did Joel give you the freedom to pick songs?

Scott: Yes, yes. Why, I don't know, because after that, he was like all the rest of them. He didn't – and I'm wondering, what is this cat doing?

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Ritz: So in other words, you didn't feel as though, once the album was done, it wasn't promoted with . . .

Scott: That's right.

Ritz: . . . the enthusiasm or promoted . . .

Scott: It wasn't promoted properly. That was another thing with Lubinsky and all of them that I had made records for before. They didn't promote anything. The records are out there, even now.

Ritz: When *The Source* came out, and there was a picture of a woman on the cover, did that anger you?

Scott: *The . . .*

Ritz: *The Source.*

Scott: *The Source?* A black girl?


Ritz: Yeah, on Atlantic. She had a big afro.

Scott: Yeah. Somewhat, because that wasn't – to me, that wasn't selling me as an artist. Here's someone else on it, and it looked like they were saying she did this album. She didn't do the album. I did the album. Boy. I done been through hell.

Ritz: 1971, you're working in Cleveland at the hotel. Tell us about that accident you had, because that had a big impact on your life.

Scott: I was shipping and receiving clerk for the hotel. So food comes in, I have to accept it for the hotel. Packages come in, I have to accept it for the hotel. But some of the things weren't just for the hotel. They were for people who resided there as well. Someone would send a package to somebody that had a room there at the hotel and was staying there a long while. Packages came to them. When they came, I had to deliver them to their rooms in the hotel.

When the accident happened, that day a shipment of food supplies came in. I got the skid – I had a skid down there – and I stacked them on the skid. I took them down to the little store, because he worked with me, that fellow that had the little store. He worked with me. I would have to take food or anything like that – that would go to him. I didn't know he had made this shipment. He didn't say to me, "Scott, I got a shipment coming in" or nothing like that.

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It came in. I loaded it on the skid. I got it down to the little store in the hotel. He said, “No, no, no. We can’t put it in here” in the little store. He didn’t have any room for it. But, the guy had planned to put it in another room which they used for storage. It was on the thirteenth floor. Now I had to pull this skid into the elevator with the stack of food and stuff on it – canned food and stuff like that. When I got up to the thirteenth floor, this guy goes in front of me and says, “Just a minute.” Opens this door, and this room is like – okay, the elevator door opens, and there’s the room where – it wasn’t a distance, a long distance or anything. The thing is, when I got there – in there – the guy says – showed me where he wanted me to put it. It was between some other boxes and some other platforms. So they said, “Put the skid there, and I’ll have Johnson stack it tomorrow.” I said, “Okay.” I tried to back it in there. When I tried to back it in there, I got my foot caught in the thing, and I turned around and fell backwards.

Ritz: You fell backwards.

Scott: That’s when all the injuries . . .

Ritz: All the injuries start. So you had.

Scott: . . . started.

Ritz: I always look at that both kind of literal and metaphorical. Things kind of went downhill from there, and you have this long period from ’73-ish until ’84 where you’re living in Cleveland. You’re not doing much. You’ve had this accident. Your hips are really . . .

Scott: No. I didn’t have a job . . .

Ritz: You didn’t have a job.


Scott: . . . or anything like that.

Ritz: You worked at old age homes. But then, in ’84, an interesting thing happens. Freddy Mendelsohn calls you. By now, Lubinsky’s gone. ’84.

Jeannie Scott: ’74.

Ritz: Yeah, oh, that’s what I meant to say: ’74. Lubinsky – Freddy Mendelsohn calls you in 1974, and he tells you he wants you to do an album – another album for Savoy, *Can’t We Begin Again?*, which has all sorts of hopeful implications. Tell me about that album.

Jimmy Scott: I don’t know. I never saw any publicity on it, and I hardly heard it on the radio. That’s the way they worked.

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Ritz: But he gave you some money for that, didn't he, or not?

Scott: Who?

Ritz: Mendelsohn. Freddy Mendelsohn.

Scott: Mendelsohn, yeah.

Ritz: Because I got the idea that he wanted to a degree [to] make up . . .

Scott: I think it was \$10,000.

Ritz: Which is a whole lot more than you ever got from . . .

Scott: Whole lot more than Lubinsky would have gave. The best I'd have got out of Lubinsky is \$5,000.

Ritz: I guess the other powerful thing that happens in that period, in the mid-1970s, when you've done this album, *Can't We Begin Again?*, is the thing that happens on the jazz station in Newark, where somebody says . . .

Scott: Yeah. Bill Cook was the deejay for that. Bill Cook had a club in Newark. It was a jazz club. Everybody hung out there at Bill Cook's place, and everybody knew he was a deejay and had the radio show. Bill Cook was, at one time, pretty big there in Newark. But he did nothing with it. He had a lot of opportunities, but he didn't do anything with it. He had everybody available that would help him, or be on his shows to help him. No. Didn't happen.


Ritz: But I'm talking about that time that they put you on the radio in Newark, because somebody had called in and said, "Jimmy Scott's dead," because you were always loved in Newark, because you kind of began in Newark, to a certain degree. Newark was the town where you had really made your mark. When you had heard somebody . . .

Scott: In a way, that was my town.

Ritz: Right, Newark was your town in a certain way.

Scott: In those days.

Ritz: Because guys like Joe Pesci and Frankie Vallée, they all . . .

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Scott: Joe Pesci and them came over then. Frankie Vallee, he used to come over with Joe Pesci and hang out and try to get me to sing songs with him.

Ritz: Because they idolized you, and they loved your style. They wanted to copy your style. But what I was moving towards, that time when you get on the radio, and you're telling people, no, I'm not dead; I'm alive and well. Then, suddenly, the calls start coming in, and you're there all day. People are remembering and going, wow, Jimmy Scott's not only now alive – tell us about that day that they had you on the radio.

Scott: There was all kinds of people that called – agents, club owners, and like that. I am just so disgusted that I didn't have someone to keep a record of who those people were, because, see there, I would have had a lot of work. I was offered a lot of work that day. So, it was a good day in that sense, but nothing ever came of it, because I didn't have anybody who could handle business books.

Ritz: Yeah, but you did play Newark after that.

Scott: Oh yeah.

Ritz: And you did move back to Newark and reignite your career to a degree.

Scott: Right, because I used to work Newark and Long Island – out Long Island, and New York – the Baby Grands, both of them. One was in Harlem and the other one was in Brooklyn on Nostrand and Bedford, on the corner. Both of them were established on the corner of the street, like Nostrand was going through – one Baby Grand [?] on Nostrand. Then the other was 125th. It was on 125th . . .

Ritz: The Baby Grand up in Harlem.

Scott: . . . yeah, and Eighth Avenue.

Ritz: On that day, Jimmy, in Newark, when people started calling, like Quincy Jones or whoever – I think a lot of people called – and it all began because it was reported on the radio that you were dead. Here you are talking on the radio. You come down to the station. You get some gigs. Did it renew your spirit?

Scott: Yes, it helped a lot. It helped a lot.

Ritz: It helped to renew your spirit. Then another part of your career begins, where you're playing little clubs, like the Baby Grand, like you were saying, in Long Island and all over, but you're still struggling, but you're able to make a humble living as a jazz singer. Is that accurate?

Scott: No. It wasn't enough. I wasn't able to make a steady living . . .

Ritz: Ah. That's the distinction that has to be made.

Scott: . . . a steady income . . .

Ritz: There was no steady income.

Scott: . . . that would support me until things got in shape or I could find someone who could handle things for me. I had a sister who lived there, but they never – none of my folks ever wanted to be around me. I have never had any of them at a performance of mine. No-one in the family. What are you going to do? So I couldn't talk to them about the business end, because they had to come around.

Ritz: Do you know – tell me about – because this is an important character in the new phase of your career – tell me when you first met Doc Pomus, the great . . .

Scott: At the Baby Grand. The funniest thing, he had a metal brace . . .

Ritz: On his leg.

Scott: . . . on his leg.

Ritz: This is Doc Pomus, the great blues composer and singer.

Scott: Right, and writer. Anyway, Doc used to come to the Baby Grand.

Ritz: This is in the late 1940s.


Scott: Anyhow, he was sitting in the chair, and this brace was reflecting light. He would move his foot or something, and the lights would reflect. I kept seeing this. Then I realized, that's that thing on his leg. That's how we met, because when I'd come off, I knew who he was. I go over and greet him. We sat and talked and became friends. I even was invited to his house. Ertugun – Nes Ertugun – it wasn't Ertugun – his brother? What is it?

Ritz: Raoul.

Scott: Raoul, yeah.

Ritz: Felder.

Scott: Oh boy. He didn't like it, because . . .

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Ritz: The lawyer.

Scott: . . . yeah. He didn't like it, because Doc Pomus brought me to his house, and I had dinner with him. He didn't like it. Very nasty.

Ritz: The record industry, for not giving Jimmy Scott a record deal. He says, "What's wrong with you guys? This is one of the greatest vocalists there is out there. Why don't you give him a deal? This is crazy. He is going to die, and everybody's going to say how great he was, and he'll never have a deal." Tell me your reaction. Did you read that letter in *Billboard*? Or did you learn about it?

Scott: No, I didn't.

Ritz: So you didn't even know that it happened.

Scott: No, I didn't.

Ritz: Because you weren't even reading *Billboard* then. Neither was I.

Scott: He would call my house. Keep up with me. "How you doing, Jim?" I said, "Good." Until the end. That last call I got, the person that called told me he passed.

Ritz: Now we're in the early '90s. When you were invited to perform at Doc's funeral, you had no hesitancy.

Scott: No.

Ritz: You were going to do it.

Scott: I did it.

Ritz: Tell me about that funeral.


Scott: It was highly sad in many ways, and a lot of people felt that sadness.

Ritz: Do you remember what song you sang?

Scott: Uh . . .

Ritz: *Somebody to Watch over Me*, wasn't it?

Scott: *Someone to Watch over Me*. You're right.

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Ritz: Tell us what happened after the funeral.

Scott: Huh?

Ritz: Tell us what happened after the funeral.

Scott: Everybody went their own way. I got on the train and went back to Newark, because I was living in Newark at the time. I had an apartment there. I went on back to Newark.

Ritz: When was the first time that you heard, as a result of your performance at the funeral, there was interest in you as a recording artist again?

Scott: Interest?

Ritz: I'll ask it again. When was the first time, after the funeral, you heard that there was interest in you as a recording artist – that people were beginning to talk about recording you, because they had heard you do *Somebody to Watch over Me* at the funeral? When did that happen? Who called you?

Scott: It was a little reporter that lived in Brooklyn. He called and told me what was going on.

Ritz: Then did you hear from Seymour Stein? Did he call you? Or you don't recall that?


Scott: I don't recall.

Ritz: Because what I'm trying to figure out is how – what led to making the album *All the Way* with Tommy LiPuma?

Scott: Actually, the attention came from the funeral. The attention came from the funeral, and they got together and got him. I think he did a good job for the recording, helping to produce the recording. I think Tommy did a good job.

Ritz: Did you think – was all this taking you by surprise? Because it had been so long since you had had a record deal. To get a recording contract from Warner Bros. Records, which is a huge label, as a result of singing at the funeral and having Seymour Stein – who was a big-shot music mogul – hear you and able to give you a contract, and then give you one of the leading jazz producers in the country, must have been a big thrill? Or were you excited?

Scott: It was for me, yeah.

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Ritz: You were excited by that.

Scott: You get excited . . .

Ritz: But you're scared it . . .

Scott: . . . and you always hope that this is it.

Ritz: Right. That's what I'm saying. But you had been excited before and been disappointed, so you . . .

Scott: Yes.

Ritz: . . . you keep your expectations down.

Scott: There you go. You're fighting to keep from getting excited over things.

Ritz: Knowing that your heart might be broken, and you don't want to deal with another broken heart.

Scott: Yeah, right. So many times.

Ritz: So many times. So many times.

Scott: You've got the idea. You're right dead-on the idea.

Ritz: You want to keep your expectations down, because you don't want your heart broken again.


Scott: Right.

Ritz: Tell about – again, the – when, in picking out the tunes and all, was that a happy experience? Were you involved artistically in the making of that album?

Scott: Yes.

Ritz: So nobody imposed material on you that you don't want to do.

Scott: No. We created the songs, myself and Tommy, with his suggestions and his ideas. He put it over beautifully. I got to give it to him.

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Ritz: As a result, in the '90s you were able to find some work and be rediscovered by a group of people, one of whom was Lou Reed. How did you meet Lou Reed?

Scott: They were coming to the club.

Ritz: I think Doc was friends with Lou.

Scott: Yeah. They'd come over to see Doc and hang with him. That was because Doc was a writer. Lou liked his work and would try get Doc to write songs for him. I think Doc gave it up and never did another tune for him.

Ritz: When Lou asked you to tour with him – was that a surprise for you, when Lou Reed . . . ?

Scott: Yeah. I'm – what is this?

Ritz: What is this?! Did you even know what his music was like?

Scott: See, Lou is gay, and he wanted to mess around. That wasn't my thing. I wasn't into that crap. Okay? I knew many that were, but no, not me. No. So I had to tell him, take it another way, because it ain't here. This ain't the stuff.

Ritz: What was the music like on that tour, going to England and Europe? How was your music received? Or did you sing his music?

Scott: Beautiful. I think he got jealous, because of the response that I got from the audience. He began acting funny.


Ritz: Haughty?

Scott: So I said, oh, well, okay, because I've seen it before. It wasn't like I hadn't seen that before. So I went on about my business, and Lou went on about his. But Lou still tries to come around and make me think like he thinks. It'll never happen. It hasn't happened all these years. So it'll never happen, baby. No, baby, they can take that gay mess and keep it to themselves. God bless 'em.

Ritz: So you come back after being on the road with Lou. Then, this is also this period of time when you get a lot of national exposure, isn't it? – when you appear in the David Byrne television show.

Scott: Yes.

Ritz: What's that called again?

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Jeannie Scott: [inaudible]

Ritz: Sessions at 54 – no, but I was thinking about the t.v. show, that big-time t.v. show.

Jimmy Scott: Oh yeah. He had a different name for the t.v. show.

Ritz: Yeah. You know, the famous show. It was a cult t.v. show. He was on the final episode.

Jeannie Scott: “Twin Peaks.”

Ritz: Yeah, “Twin Peaks,” because that always killed me.

Jeannie Scott: That’s David Lynch.

Ritz: I mean David Lynch. Forgive me. David Byrne . . .

Jimmy Scott: What was the name of it?

Ritz: David Lynch, the director. It’s my mind turning to mush. David Lynch, who had you on the episode, the concluding episode of “Twin Peaks.” What was that like? How did that come about?

Scott: I was accepted quite well and supported beautifully with the band. Then they had me come in and do something with strings – with the band, but strings were added. I don’t know what they ever did with those records.

Ritz: Oh yeah. It would be good to have them, because they never came out.

Scott: No.


Ritz: Then you have this long – or at least three- or four-, five-years period where you get a recording contract with Fantasy and you do these albums produced by . . .

Scott: Yeah. That was . . .

Ritz: Todd Barkin.

Scott: . . . Todd Barkin. Yeah.

Ritz: Tell us about those albums and . . .

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Scott: Todd was skunky too. He was one of them skunks that they didn't want to do right and you were supposed to accept it, because they were who they were.

Ritz: Because – but your feeling about that was that they didn't give you the artistic freedom, they didn't let you pick the . . .

Scott: They didn't respect you.

Ritz: I see.

Scott: They didn't respect your ability. Everything turned out to be nothing.

Ritz: On the personal tip here – one thing I'd like to get in here, because we haven't talked about the various women: Angel, Chaney, Ruth. A lot of women in your life, and a lot of lovely women, a lot of difficult women. Overall – and of course I want to hear the Jeannie story for the tape – but overall, how would you characterize your relationship with women?

Scott: With who?

Ritz: Women, in general.

Scott: It was . . .

Ritz: Jimmy and women.

Scott: I'll tell you. The women, they were hungry.

Ritz: They were hungry, he says.

Scott: Yeah, and all they wanted was, "You're an entertainer, you're making money, and give it to me." Naturally most of them felt – the ones that I went out with, that's the way most of them felt. I didn't feel that that was what I wanted for life, so we didn't get along. I just went ahead and lived my life. But the only women I've ever had that has shown me what a wife is is this young lady right here.

Ritz: Jeannie.

Scott: Jeannie.

Ritz: How did you meet Jeannie?

Scott: I was at – was it? – the Birdland on 52nd, when they moved from the other place. I was there. Jeannie and a friend of hers and mine came into Birdland at night, that I was there. I was introduced to Jeannie. What’s Steve’s last name?

Ritz: Steve Nicholas.

Scott: Nichols?

Ritz: . . . -las.

Scott: However. He introduced me to Jeannie. That was it. It was over, because I dug her attitude first and how she was such a lady about – she’s out there in the streets with us, but she was a lady and acted that way. That’s what I respected about her.

Ritz: You – in your mind, you had never had another woman who cared about helping you with your career.

Scott: No.

Ritz: Not one of them.

Scott: No. Not any at all.

Ritz: Not Catherine or Francis or Chaney or Eve or . . .

Scott: First – this is the first woman that ever took it upon herself to find out information, bring it to me. We’d discuss it. If it was good, she’d work on it for me. We’ve been successful in our relationship because of that, I feel. Right, Jeannie?

Ritz: Let me ask you some general questions about the jazz life, that you’ve lived the jazz life your whole life.


Scott: Who?

Ritz: The jazz life, by which I mean, you’re making it up as you go along. The jazz life is not – you’ve never lived a conventional life.

Scott: No.

Ritz: You’ve always lived an unconventional life. Do you feel that you’ve been true to your art?

Scott: I’ve been what?

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Ritz: True to your art form.

Scott: Yes, I do. I've given it all that I have and will continue to give it all that I have. That's my sincere determination, is to give it all that I have, because it hasn't done me bad. Others outside of the business, they did me bad, but the business itself hasn't done me bad, I don't think. It's just that persons who didn't mean right, they caused problems that weren't necessary. That's where my problems began. It was other people. My family was a big innovator of that, the problems I had in the business. So that's why I say, the business didn't treat me bad. It would have been much better if I had had the sincerity from the folks I was dealing with, sincerity in the sense of nobody wanted to learn how they could help me or what could they do that would help me. That wasn't – but their biggest reasons were, "Man, you got the money?" I said, "No, I don't have no money." "You got paid last night, didn't you?" That was family as well as so-called friends in the street. That was the attitude, which interfered in a lot of ways with my thinking. That was a part of life I had to deal with. When I decided to drop that part, okay, things changed. But the force that helped them change was this little girl right here, Jeannie.

Ritz: When you look, do you think you've been an unfor – do you think you've been a man who's encountered a great deal of misfortune? Or a man who's really been blessed?

Scott: A great deal of misfortune, you can say. It has been a great deal of misfortune. But if I'd had someone in the business who was serious about being in the business and doing the right thing, I know there would have been success out of it.

Ritz: I know you've read deeply into Christian theology and also Eastern religion. So I know you've given a lot of thought to the meaning of God in our lives. Why do you think a guy like you – was a sweetheart and a loving disposition – has had this much misfortune imposed on you?


Scott: People prey on that. There's people out there that prey on that.

Ritz: That's exactly what I'm talking about.

Scott: I didn't – I ignored that. Out of ignoring that, I fell into the hands of many people who didn't care about my career. What the hell? That wasn't their business, and it wasn't important to them. It was only important to me. But like I say, I ignored a lot of it. Out of ignoring a lot of it, it became a damage to me.

Ritz: And also, do you feel as though you took care of your own business?

Scott: The best I could, yes. I also feel that I trusted too many people.

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Ritz: Ah, too trusting a heart.

Scott: I trusted too many people. It didn't do me any good. It didn't create success for me at all. But like I say, you give out, but you don't give up. That was my attitude about the whole thing, and still is.

Ritz: Because the truth is, you began to sing as a teenage, and at 82, you're still singing, and there was no time when you didn't sing. You had other jobs, but you always went back to the little club. So you have this tenacity, where you keep on coming back, keep on coming back, keep on coming back, keep on coming back. But when you look at the great stylists whose eras that you lived in – Lionel Hampton, Nat King Cole, Billy Eckstine, Ella, Dinah, Nancy Wilson, people whose styles have been so influenced by you, do you feel like you've been left out?

Scott: In a way, yes, but they had reason for leaving me out. I wasn't important to them. So there. I had to understand that. Because I looked around. People like James Brown, they were friends. All those kids. They were popular, but they were friends where I was concerned, and they treated me as a friend. So the artists in the business treated me with respect.

Ritz: As an equal.

[recording interrupted]

I was there that night that you were awarded the NEH Jazz Master award. Remember, in the hotel in New York, with – Nancy Wilson gave you the award. What did that mean to you? What was that evening like?


Scott: It meant a lot. It was like graduating at school or something. It's like a graduation for me, to a better side of life.

Ritz: Of course it must have been nice, the award was given by Nancy.

Scott: Yes, but I wondered why sometime. Why did they pick her to do that? Because it wasn't necessary, and there was never any apologies for things that she did. So I just took it with a smile, kept on going.

Ritz: When you think back to the years in Cleveland or L.A. or in Newark or in New York, and you want to warm your heart when you might feel bad from a physical point of view or a little sad, what memories do you conjure forth, do you bring up, that warm your heart and make you happy?

Scott: I think of my mother.

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Ritz: Yeah, I knew you were going to say that. That's so sweet.

Scott: She would play the piano, and I'd hear this. Even since she's been dead, I've heard the music. It's always gospel. It's always gospel, and it was a thrill listening to it and hearing it and singing it inside of myself.

Ritz: What other warm memories do you bring up to comfort your heart when you feel bad, when you hurt?

Scott: Now I have something to feel good about, seriously. I feel that I have something to feel good about. We're going to make it, huh?

Ritz: When people – when you think of your concept of God, do you feel like – tell me just how you react to this phrase – do you feel like God has been good to you?

Scott: Oh my goodness, yes.

Ritz: Good.

Scott: Yes sir. All the good that's ever happened to me . . .

Ritz: Comes from God.

Scott: I figure some people don't stop and realize what it's all about. They deny themselves of that trust and care that God gives.

Ritz: So you're grateful to God. You've . . .


Scott: Oh my Lord, yes.

Ritz: I like to hear that. And you feel blessed.

Scott: Listen. How many times have I fell, and he picked me up. I look at it just like that. My trust [?] than it's ever been before.

Ritz: That's a beautiful thing.

When you think back over the large extent of your life, who are the great characters who stand out the most, the really most brilliant, the most charismatic, most colorful, most unforgettable characters? Were I to just ask you to name them, without giving it too much thought.

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Scott: Bird.

Ritz: Bird.

Scott: One of them. Dinah is another, because before Dinah passed, every time she had to do an important gig, the gig she was on she had to leave, she would call me to take her place.

Ritz: That's quite a compliment.

Scott: Oh yes. Listen. This goes back to the Flame . . .

Ritz: In Detroit.

Scott: . . . in Detroit, and places like that. She'd always have a spot for me.

Ritz: Had a spot for Jimmy.

Scott: I love her for it . . .

Ritz: So we love Dinah.

Scott: . . . because it kept me alive. Now there's another point where you can't help but thank God, because with friends like that . . .

Ritz: Let me ask you something else, before we run out of tape here, which is a big concept in your life. You'll always be remembered in a lot of ways, but one of the ways you'll be most remembered is in your notion of time and rhythm and how you have your sense of it. Throughout your career, you've been criticized and also applauded. On one hand, people love you for having such an individualistic sense of time. On the other hand, you've had people criticize you and in certain instances, like Charlie Mingus, get up and leave when they're recording and saying . . .


Scott: Yeah, we were recording . . .

Ritz: You go ahead and tell that story.

Scott: . . . and he threw the bass. He said, oh man, this cat he ain't doing – can't sing.

Ritz: This is the '50s.

Scott: The other cats had to go get him. They told him – they said, they can't be there when you get there. That was the way they expressed it to him about me.

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Ritz: To Mingus.

Scott: Yeah. I'm saying, here is a cat who – time was no problem for him. No. So why did he pick me to say the things he said at the session.

Ritz: But were you ever challenged to the point where you went, maybe they're right? Maybe my timing's off? Maybe I have to pay more attention to the meter and be – keep a stricter sense of time? Did you ever have those doubts? Did you ever think . . .? You always knew that you were going to take your time.

Scott: Yeah, I knew that worked out well. I was going to sing the song that way.

Ritz: No matter what.

Scott: And it seemed to work. It works.

Ritz: So you had enough people who appreciated . . .

Scott: Yeah.

Ritz: . . . your individualism.

Scott: Yeah, my audiences. It started out like that for me. They appreciate what I was doing . . .

Ritz: So in other words . . .

Scott: . . . and I worked hard at it.


Ritz: So in other words, part of the reason you were able to stick to your individualism is because your early responses had been very positive.

Scott: Yes.

Ritz: When you did *Everybody's Somebody's Fool* with the Hampton band, the audiences loved it and went crazy, and they didn't care if you were behind the beat. They didn't – they just . . .

Scott: They didn't know about that.

Ritz: They didn't know about that. What they heard was your heart, and their hearts connected to your heart, so they went crazy.

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Scott: And I figure, if people listen to the lyrics . . .

Ritz: They'd really get it.

Scott: . . . they'd understand that the singer's telling them a story.

Ritz: In his own way.

Scott: Yes.

Ritz: I guess what I was thinking was, in the case of Lester Young and Mingus, two of the most highly individual people in the history of jazz, getting kicked in the ass by them early on and still maintaining your integrity, I think is impressive, to me.

The other thing I wanted to ask you was, the other challenges of your life – we've touched on the women. We've touched on the career – but the other challenges – I remember the story that went around about you, when *Everybody's Somebody's Fool* came out, and people were saying, "That's not a man. That's a lesbian in drag." Jimmy, you must have heard those stories. Did you hear those stories? Or not?

Scott: Yeah but, again, like I say, you ignore it . . .

Ritz: So that didn't hurt you.

Scott: . . . and move on. You have to move on. You can't let those things stop you. You hear them, and you are disappointed that it's being said, but that's just a disappointment, and you ignore it. You learn to ignore it. The main thing is, you don't want it a part of your life. You don't want it a part of your life. So you learn how to ignore those things when they come about.


Ritz: So you don't feel as though you had been taunted more than you could take. You felt as though you were equipped to handle the taunts and handle the teasing.

Scott: Yes. Exactly. I never had a confusion with a person about things like that.

Ritz: I see. So sexually, you always knew who you were . . .

Scott: Right.

Ritz: . . . and were confident about it.

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Scott: My mother was very strict with my brother and I about, “Get up boy. Stand up there.” You don’t drop down to other people’s things. No. You don’t do that. She was very strict about that. Yeah. And if I see her, she’s saying, “If I catch you ever, I’d tear your butt up.” And she would have.

Ritz: Do you mean by that, catch you with a man? Or just catch you . . . ?

Scott: Oh, anything derogative in life. “If I catch it, you going to get it.” That’s what that – that was her slogan. That’s her way. I didn’t want to get it, so I didn’t drop down to it.

Ritz: That should be the name of this interview.

You look like you’re getting a little tired?

Scott: A little bit.

Ritz: All right. I think we should dedicate this interview to your mother . . .

Scott: Thank you.

Ritz: . . . and to Jeannie . . .

Scott: And to Jeannie.

Ritz: . . . the two women, one of whom gave you life, and the other of whom continues to give you life.

Scott: Yes, yes. You got it just right.

Ritz: All right. On that happy note . . .

(transcribed and edited by Barry Kernfeld)