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**NANCY WILSON**  
***NEA Jazz Master (2004)***

**Interviewee:** Nancy Wilson (February 20, 1937 – December 13, 2018)  
**Interviewer:** Devra Hall Levy with recording engineer Ken Kimery  
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**Levy:** This begins our oral history interview with Miss Nancy Wilson. Today is December 6th, 2010. We are sitting in a lovely room at the Marriot Courtyard Hotel in Pasadena, California. My name is Devra Hall Levy, and in the spirit of full disclosure, let the record show that I have been involved in your career since 1979, when I signed on as your publicist and later married your manager.

Nancy, we've got six or seven decades to cover. So let's get started. We're going to take a mostly chronological approach and a few digressions along the way. You were born in Chillicothe, Ohio, on February 20th in 1937. What was your given name?

**Wilson:** Nancy Sue Wilson. That was my name.

**Levy:** Though you were born in Chillicothe, you were raised in Columbus. Did you always live in Columbus?

**Wilson:** I always lived in Columbus. I never lived in Chillicothe. I was just born there. I lived outside Columbus. I'm from an area called Burnside Heights. It was about a mile to the bus stop. It was very much country compared to the city of Columbus.

**Levy:** Before we get into your singing, which I know you started at a very young age, maybe four or six or somewhere about there . . .

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**Wilson:** Everybody knew that there was a showoff in the house.

**Levy:** . . . tell us about the household before we get into all of that. You lived with your parents? You had sisters, brothers? Just give us a little setup of what life was like in your childhood.

**Wilson:** My mother and father were married for about five or six years, and divorced. There was one – I had a brother. So they had two children. Then, when I was eight, my father remarried, and we had four more children. So I'm the oldest of six and lived with my father and his mother and father. In the summers I was at my mother's mother and grandparents. When I was 15, I still had seven grandparents living. So I think that that is one of the better things that – one of the things that makes life worthwhile, is that I had the chance to get things from all of them. That's a lot of grandparents. That's three sides. And great-grandparents were still alive. So there was quite a family gathering between the two families, and it was cohesive. There was no – I don't recall any dissension.

**Levy:** Your parents worked?

**Wilson:** My father, when I was born, was a chef at [Dorsum's] **Doersam's** restaurant. Then I remember he went to Jeffrey Manufacturing Company. He was a supervisor there.

**Levy:** That was a foundry?


**Wilson:** Iron foundry. My mother was always a housekeeper. She was not a maid. She ran people's houses. She ran the houses. It wasn't like she was just doing day labor. She lived in and took care of houses. She did that for many, many years.

My stepmother was a beautician. Since I'm the oldest – I'm the oldest of six – there was a – why am I going to tell you this? My brother and I were very close. We were only 15 months apart. Then there's 10 years between, before the next group of children come along. So I ended up – Mom would – my Mom – you will find that I say "Mom," I'm talking about my stepmother. "Mommy" is my mother. So that clarifies that. I hate to – because I don't want to have to keep – Mom is my stepmother. Mommy is my mother. Okay? It was a great time growing up.

**Levy:** Were you good in school? Did you like school?

**Wilson:** I was an A student. I think I got one C.

**Levy:** In what?

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**Wilson:** Probably home economics. Something like that. I'm trying to remember what it was. Oh, I remember: geometry. I had A's in algebra, but I got a C in geometry. And I never did finish the blouse I was working on in home ec.

**Levy:** Who got you ready for school?

**Wilson:** I did. I don't recall . . .

**Levy:** Later we're going to get into your sense of style. I was wondering how early it started?

**Wilson:** I don't remember not being the way I am. I've always been suits, trousers, sports jackets. I love great suits. I never was a skirt-wearing person. Don't have great legs. Have a great body from the knee up. But the legs are not that great. So I never really liked dresses.

**Levy:** Was there much experience in your childhood or at school of segregation or issues of . . . ?

**Wilson:** No, none. I didn't go through that at all. I talked to some people that I went to school with since then. They seemed to think that there was segregation. They couldn't be this and they couldn't – but I don't understand that, because I was – I had a French – I was vice president of the French club. I was the only black in drama. See, so I don't know that it was anything that was there, because I did anything – everything that I wanted to do and did not get a sense of that.

The first club I went to that I found out was segregated was a place called Kitty's Show Bar. I was working with Rusty Bryant. Some friends were coming for opening night, and they didn't – they weren't there. I asked them why. They said they didn't have any reservations. So I went to the club owner and said, "Do you need reservations to come here?", because that was the first I heard of reservations being needed. "Because if you have to have reservations, I'm making a reservation for four people." So that was the end of that. Everybody was free to come after that. It never occurred to me. I just didn't accept it. I don't remember feeling it. I was involved in everything in the high school, and it was only 10% black.

I went to a one-room school from the fourth grade to the eighth grade, just a little one-room school in Burnside Heights, all black kids. But I went to West High School. That's when basically it was 90% white.

**Levy:** Any family activities, fond memories of? What did you do in the summertime?

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**Wilson:** I went to my grandmother's. Picked tomatoes. Went out in the hollow and picked mushrooms, which I would be scared to do today. I wouldn't have a clue what I was looking for today. It was definitely country. The tomato patch was in the front of the house. My great-grandparents lived across the road. Notice I say road and not street., because it was called Whiskey Run Road, which my grandmother before she passed got changed to Schoolhouse Lane. I think I figured out why it was called Whiskey Run Road. The bootleggers and whatnot had gone through there back in the day.

**Levy:** The only thing we haven't touched on at that time is church. I imagine you attended.

**Wilson:** Yeah. When I was down in the country, I went to little one – little tiny, small church. That was Baptist. Then, when my father married Mom, she was Pentecostal. That was a whole other thing. At eight years old, to be a sinner was kind of hard to swallow, and I did not swallow it. I didn't believe it at all. I just did not believe it.

**Levy:** And you were a sinner because?

**Wilson:** I sang secular music. That was the gift that was given. I just never thought there was anything wrong with singing *My Little Margie* or just little pop songs of the day that you would hear. I would just perform them in the middle of the room. Do my number. I just didn't think there was anything wrong with that. I remember my mom being upset by her mother, when her mother – because I saw my mom in tears. She was crying. I couldn't tell what's wrong, because Grandma Trout was saying that I was a sinner and I should be singing for the glory of the Lord. Of course I told my mom, when she stopped crying, next time that comes up, to ask her, what makes her assume I'm not? Because I'm doing what – I'm using the gift that He gave me.

But when you're – when you can't sing – I wasn't able to sing in the choir. So I went to the Methodist church and sang in the choir.

**Levy:** Who went to the Methodist church?

**Wilson:** Just me.

**Levy:** For those of us who aren't real knowledgeable about the different denominations . . .

**Wilson:** Oh please.

**Levy:** No, no, no. I don't want to get into the religious theory. But what is the difference musically? What would you sing in one versus another?

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**Wilson:** It was just the fact that I was allowed to sing from the hymnal and could be in the choir, as opposed to sitting out front. I could not sing in the pulpit at the Pentecostal church. But at the Methodist church I was in the choir, and there was no ostracism – I wasn't ostracized or anything because I sang and at a young age was known for singing.

**Levy:** Are all hymns the same?

**Wilson:** I've never given that a bit of thought. Are all hymns the same?

**Levy:** Do you remember any of the hymns?

**Wilson:** No, no, no, no. If I had the book in front of me, I could – in fact, even when I go to church now, I'll have to – the book has to be in front of me. I still – when I go now, they have only six voices, and it's really a lot of fun. The pastor is my brother-in-law. So if I want to sing in the choir, I can.

**Levy:** Since we're talking about the pastor, your brother-in-law, and church, fill us in a bit on all of the people in your immediate family, who your sisters all married.

**Wilson:** There are four Wilson girls, all of whom married Reverends.

**Levy:** Yourself included.

**Wilson:** Me included. All of the girls married preachers.

**Levy:** Was there an uncle who was . . . ?

**Wilson:** There were several uncles who were bishops. One was a bishop of the American Lutheran Church. He loved the way I sang. It didn't bother him at all. Another was a bishop in the Pentecostal Church.

**Levy:** I read somewhere a reference to *I'll Walk Alone*? Is that a hymn? Or is that a – does that ring any bells for you? A song that you sang at age . . .

**Wilson:** I just know it.

**Levy:** . . . eight.

**Wilson:** "I'll walk alone, because to tell you the truth, I'll be lonely." It wasn't – that wasn't a religious song. It was a popular – called the pop of the day, I guess.

**Levy:** Are your earliest memories of singing church or other, and what other?

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**Wilson:** My earliest memories of singing are doing the soft shoe and singing *My Little Margie*.

**Levy:** Where?

**Wilson:** In the living room.

**Levy:** Entertaining the family?

**Wilson:** Yeah, and they had to pay attention. I told you I was a showoff, and everybody would want to hear the little kid sing. So it worked out fine.

**Levy:** Where did you hear music that you learned to sing these songs?

**Wilson:** On the radio. There was no-one in my family who was in show business or knew anything about it. It was a gift. It wasn't anything that I saw or witnessed or copied or anything like that. It was just there.

**Levy:** Your dad had a Victrola, right?

**Wilson:** Oh yeah. We played – he listened to Count Basie. In fact I heard Little Jimmy Scott with – Lionel Hampton, wasn't it? So I had to be maybe 10, then. But he would listen. And the Ink Spots. I remember he loved the Ink Spots. So basically Daddy was the one who listened to music.

**Levy:** Eckstine at the time?

**Wilson:** Oh yeah. Billy Eckstine, Little Jimmy Scott. I heard r-and-b at the little – I don't know what you would call it. It was like a – what was it like? It was a little restaurant, little hangout place where teenagers went. I heard Little Esther and Dinah Washington, Laverne Baker, Ruth Brown. So that's when I – I had to be maybe 12 or so when I started – when I really recall hearing r-and-b.

**Levy:** Radio was WDKL? Is that the . . . ?

**Wilson:** I have no idea. I remember one station in Columbus. It was WVKO.

**Levy:** WVKO, all right.

**Wilson:** They played r-and-b.

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**Levy:** You've described yourself as a showoff.

**Wilson:** Yeah. I don't think it was – if you asked me, I performed, but I didn't push it on anybody.

**Levy:** I've also heard you refer to yourself as a little ham at that time.

**Wilson:** Oh, well, I knew – since everybody seemed to think that I had this little gift, I used it.

**Levy:** So when did you decide, I want to be a singer?

**Wilson:** I never did decide to be a singer. I recalled always being one. I don't recall deciding that I wanted to be a singer. I was always a singer.

**Levy:** You never went through the, I want to be a ballerina, I want to be a . . . ?

**Wilson:** Nope. If I had not been a singer, I would have gone into something in medicine. I know that. But the voice was calling, and work was there. So it made it very difficult to think about going to Carnegie Tech instead of Central State. I stayed at Central State about – I think one semester. The dean was never able to understand why I did not come back, because I had a scholarship and all that. But work was already there. I'd already had a television show at 15.

**Levy:** Tell us how that happened.

**Wilson:** I went representing my high school. That's why I didn't sense any segregation and all that. They were having a contest. Each high school within the city of Columbus and the outlying areas was to send somebody to represent the high school for a talent show. So I went and did my little audition. Actually I played the piano, had a song that I wrote. I have no idea what it was. But I was asked not to participate in the contest, and would I like to have a television show?

**Levy:** Because you were too good and would run away with the . . . ?

**Wilson:** That's a little arrogant, but it's true. It's very true. That's the way it was put to me. They would like to have – so I don't know if they ever sent anybody else to represent my high school or not, but next thing I know, I was on television twice a week.

**Levy:** And the show was called . . . ?

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**Wilson:** *Skyline Melody*. I just had a keyboard player, a pianist, who had nothing much to say, who did not help me very – even if you’d ask him a question. People would phone in or write in and request songs for their birthday or their anniversary or whatever. It was just 15 minutes twice a week. But it was fun. As I look back today, to have had a t.v. show at 15 years old in a fairly good sized city was something to be proud of.

**Levy:** I would think so. That was on WTVN?

**Wilson:** TVN, um-hmm, channel 6.

**Levy:** And the pianist was?

**Wilson:** I think it was Hugh Thompson. I think.

**Levy:** Who later played for . . .

**Wilson:** Dinah Washington.

**Levy:** That’s what I thought.

**Wilson:** But asking him a question, all I got from him was “uh-huh” or “yes” or “no.” There was no – trying to make a conversation was just something that did not happen. I could stand up there and turn cartwheels. It wouldn’t have made any difference. All I got was a “uh-huh.”

**Levy:** Here you are with a t.v. show. You’re 15. You’re in high school. You have work coming at you. How did you get these jobs? Where did you perform?

**Wilson:** I performed pretty much at every nightclub. One that I stayed at a long time was called Club Regal. I worked on weekends there. I worked just about every place you could work in Columbus.

**Levy:** Do you remember any of the names of those places?

**Wilson:** There was a club at the Litchford Hotel. There was Club Regal, Kitty’s Show Bar. There was always work. I worked with a big band at 15 called Sir Wally Randolph and the Sultans of Swing.

**Levy:** Is that the one where you had a net gown?

**Wilson:** I remember having this little short dress with the maracas. Oh God, that was – instead of – the big band would play within a 50-mile radius or so. So my dad would take

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me. When I got my driver's license, my baby brother went as my "protector," I guess you would say.

**Levy:** Did you need protection?

**Wilson:** No. The musicians protected me, always, always protected me. I remember Bobby Shaw – that was the pianist at the Club Regal. But I played the Club Regal with Rusty a lot. Rusty was famous for being at the Carolyn Club. When he had his big hit record – I went to the Carolyn Club on my prom night and sat in with the band. Rusty came to my dad the next day. I still wonder – but I went to school instead. I didn't join the band until I decided, after him, why fight it? It's there.

**Levy:** Let's go back, just for a minute, before we get into going on the road with Rusty. A lot of musicians were coming through town, playing at different places. Did you get out to hear people? Were you meeting people?

**Wilson:** Not a lot, because mostly I was working. But the 502 was someplace that Rusty Bryant and Nancy Wilson kind of established. Then they were – we did so well there that they were able to book people like Miles [Davis]. I remember Cannonball [Adderley] being there with Miles. That's where they were, after we were there for months. Then they started to bring in outside and larger performers.

**Levy:** I've heard that musicians coming through town heard about Nancy Wilson.

**Wilson:** Yeah.

**Levy:** How did that word proliferate? Because if you were too busy working to go see them, how . . . ?

**Wilson:** We were all working at the same place, pretty much. They knew that Nancy Wilson and Rusty Bryant had kind of established the 502, and if I were not working, I would go see – I saw Sonny Stitt. I remember that. I saw – I think I went to see B. B. King. But the bottom line is, usually, when people came through town, I was performing someplace. But I met Joe Williams. I met Cannon. I met Miles. I remember sitting in with Miles's band. Bill Evans was the keyboard player then. That was before college, even.

**Levy:** So you didn't get to go out too much as an audience member, but every once in a while. I think you once told me that you saw Nat Cole at a theater.

**Wilson:** RKO Palace. But I didn't meet him. I just saw him. He's one of the few people I got to see. I remember going to see Al Hibbler, but he – because he was working at the

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502. If I were not working and it was somebody that came in at the 502, I would go see them with a girlfriend.

**Levy:** Did you learn anything when you were in an audience that you actually were conscious about?

**Wilson:** Nope.

**Levy:** Nope?

**Wilson:** No. Because I don't – if you notice, I haven't mentioned any singers except Al Hibbler. I didn't really get to see female singers. I didn't really see what they did, other than to know that Lena Horne was Lena Horne and to hear the humor in Dinah Washington's records. I was already signed with Capitol Records when I met Dinah Washington.

**Levy:** So there are people that influenced your style. I think you've referred to it in that past, maybe, as osmosis. But, **looking back, what do you see in you that came from places?**

**Wilson:** Okay, the gowns, the style, the look – Lena Horne. The humor on the floor, Dinah Washington. The sound is Little Jimmy Scott. The phrasing and all that's Little Jimmy Scott, to me. I heard – I loved him. I loved to hear Jimmy sing. I only heard him. I never saw him until last – when we brought him out to California. I never saw Little Jimmy Scott perform. I heard him, but I never got to see him perform until way late.

**Levy:** So, on your prom night, you go to see Rusty. You sit it. You don't remember what you sang, do you?

**Wilson:** No, no.


**Levy:** And he comes to the house . . .

**Wilson:** It's so much – you're going to discover there's an awful lot that I don't – that I have not retained.

**Levy:** Rusty came to the house. He invited you to go on the road with him. Your parents probably would have allowed it.

**Wilson:** Yeah, they would have.

**Levy:** But you had a different idea.

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**Wilson:** I said no. I was going to go to school. Since I had a scholarship, it would be foolish not to use it. And I wasn't ready to – it still would have been close by. In fact I don't think I ever went too far with Rusty's band. We did not go out of the Midwest, really.

**Levy:** So you went to school, and you were studying what?

**Wilson:** When you're a freshman, you study just a normal – there's a curriculum that's already set up. I had not picked a major at that point.

**Levy:** Did you have any ideas about what you thought your future was going to be at that point?

**Wilson:** The voice was there and I knew – because if I'd have done four years of college, I would have been a teacher, and I couldn't see that. I didn't think that that was going to work for me. And, as I said, the work was there. As a freshman, you're not supposed to go off campus. I went home every week. Because, first of all, the cafeteria. You see my size. I've always been tiny. I would have to go home and get a decent meal. I had relatives who lived near the campus. So if I got – I could not bear cafeteria food. So I would go into town, go to my Aunt Jenny's, and get something to eat. I didn't sing that much on campus, but everybody knew that I sang. Obviously – I'm trying to remember. To have only been there for one semester and to be an Omega sweetheart was kind of rare.

**Levy:** What's an Omega sweetheart?

**Wilson:** It's a fraternity. It's like a Kappa Alpha Psi, Alphas. So the Omegas were big men on campus at the time. It was the only time that anybody ever sang. When they came and sang the sweetheart song to me, I sang back, the first time.

**Levy:** After a semester or so, you just . . .


**Wilson:** Just went on with the work.

**Levy:** Back to work.

**Wilson:** Yeah.

**Levy:** And that's when you actually did join Rusty's band?

**Wilson:** Yeah.

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**Levy:** For a couple of years, I believe?

**Wilson:** Yeah, yeah. I don't remember how many years it was, but it was – I don't remember what it was. Let's see. It was . . .

**Levy:** Two and a half is my calculation, but I'm not sure.

**Wilson:** I'm trying to think. I came out of high school in '54. So '55. So off and on for four years, off and on.

**Levy:** Can you talk at all about those couple of years “on the road,” so to speak, although near by? You were honing your craft, yes?

**Wilson:** Yes.

**Levy:** Was it a conscious process for you? Or were you just having a good time?

**Wilson:** I was just doing my job. I never thought about changing anything. I just sang the songs that I knew. It was easy. It was fun. No new difficulties. So I was fortunate, very fortunate.

**Levy:** Today, that wouldn't happen, no?

**Wilson:** There's no places to work like where we worked. The places where we worked have been long gone. There's no place for young singers today to meet. There doesn't appear to be places for them to hone their craft. There are no Club Regals, no **Lichford Litchford** Hotels, no Kitty's Show Bars, no place for a young person to work and get exposed and heard.

I never signed a contract with anybody. Those contracts were put in front of me from a young age, to want to be the agent or want to be whatever. I never had an agent. The first time I had anybody was John Levy.

**Levy:** If my chronology is right, when you were working with Rusty is when you finally met Cannonball, maybe in New York?

**Wilson:** I met Cannonball on the street in New York, at the corner of 52nd and Broadway. Me and Rusty, and I don't know if anybody else was with us, but Nat [Adderley] and Cannon were there. We were staying across the street at a hotel right by Birdland there. Rusty was in there, in New York, recording, and we were on our way someplace else to work. Just walking down the street and met Cannonball and Nat.

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**Levy:** Went on your way. Came across them again at the 502.

**Wilson:** Yeah.

**Levy:** When did you begin to formulate a plan for your next step.

**Wilson:** Everybody was talking about plans, but I wasn't going along with the program. I wasn't ready. I liked myself, and I wanted to continue to do that. If I went and did this on a larger scale – I thought about it long and hard. I waited a long time to go to New York. I had been working professionally for seven years before I went to New York. As a 15 year old kid, I'm still working up until – I went to New York when I was 22. I was in no rush for anything national. It didn't occur to me that it would not be. If I got the things, surrounded myself with what I thought would work, I knew that it would be more than just what I was doing. I also knew that I was successful enough, I could come back and pick up. I would never be a failure. I was already a success before I ever left and went to New York, looking for, specifically, John Levy, Capitol Records, and I knew that if I was John, I could – John – I was basically known as jazz, but I wasn't a jazz singer. I was singing pop. I just knew that John Levy had the reputation of being a person of great integrity, and I did not want show business on a larger scale if I did not have security and peace around me.

**Levy:** How did you know so much about John and also about Capitol Records?

**Wilson:** That was kind of obvious. If you knew Cannon, if you knew the musicians. I knew who John Levy managed. He had George Shearing. He had the Three Sounds. I just knew that I liked a lot – I liked the people that he managed, that he handled, and I knew that I would fit in, or could expand John's – I wouldn't be working in a jazz room. I would be working in a nice supper club, and John saw that too. That was a way for him to move on up and do something different, to get out of jazz rooms and get into the Coconut Grove with a singer. John was not looking for a singer. The last thing in the world John Levy wanted was a singer. Oh no, no. Girl singers? Oh, John did not want to hear. Everybody was coming from Ohio, telling John about this kid in Ohio who sings. John couldn't care less. John's assistant was from Cleveland, and he must have bugged – I know he bugged John about it a lot. He just got tired one day, I guess.

What happens, I finally got a showcase where I did come to New York. I knew Cannonball, and I knew a girl named **Sonja LaForte Sandra Lefort**, who was the singer with Johnny Hammond Smith. So I stayed with her and hung out. We went to a couple of the clubs. We went to a club called the Blue Morocco. Irene Reid was the featured singer. I can't remember. I can see the drummer, but I can't remember his name. Arthur Jenkins was on piano. I do remember going there. I went to the Blue Morocco and sat in. A

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couple of weeks after I had sat in, had been up there, Irene Reid broke her ankle, and they called me to replace her. That gave Chuck Taylor and everybody who – and Cannon – who knew – they knew I was in the city. That’s the way we can get John there to hear you.

**Levy:** Back up, just a sec. This idea of what it would mean to go national, of liking who you were, are – what do you attribute that kind of – at the age of 20, 21, 22 – that kind of self insight and level-headed thinking? Where does that come from?

**Wilson:** That’s part of the gift. I was fortunate. He gave me the singing gift. He gave me the storytelling part of all of this. He also gave me a little bit of common sense. I did not see a lot of females in show business who were happy. I did not see any of that. So why would I want to jump in there, when I didn’t see, I didn’t – everybody I knew that was married and divorced and struggling and drugs. I didn’t want any part of that, and I didn’t think that at 15, 16, 17, I was ready to deal with that. I needed to wait until I got to know who I was first. That’s just me. That’s part of the gift. It was one thing for Him to give me the signing voice, but I really appreciate God giving me some common sense.

**Levy:** So you formulate a plan. You set parameters, as I recall. You gave yourself a certain amount of time. You knew Sandra. So that’s how you felt okay to just go.

**Wilson:** Yeah, and Cannon. Those are the only two people I really knew.

**Levy:** You got a job.


**Wilson:** Came and went and learned how to work a pbx board.

**Levy:** Switchboard?

**Wilson:** Um-hmm. Gave myself six months to get John Levy and Capitol Records. But I knew that I needed to support myself while I was there. So I worked at a handbag company for a few minutes as a pbx operator, and then I went to the New York Institute of Technology. They were very, very kind. I worked – my hours were such that I could do work at night. I didn’t have to be at work until 12. They gave me time off for photos and all the things that I needed. I ended up doing, in longhand, a textbook for the dean. I can’t remember his name. But New York Institute of Technology was very kind to me. They really – they stuck by me. The thing was that I gave it six months, but everything happened and was solidified in five weeks. What can I say? It was just supposed to be.

**Levy:** Did your coworkers know that you were a singer?

**Wilson:** Yes.

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**Levy:** Did anybody come out to hear you?

**Wilson:** Yes. Richard Griffin was the librarian. He came to just – I was pretty much working at the Blue Morocco then. Then I went to – in October of '59 I went to New York. In December of '59 I was recording for Capitol. The first album was done.

**Levy:** So you were up at the Blue Morocco. John Levy arrives. I want to talk about your signature song, *Guess Who I Saw Today*. It not only became your signature song, ongoing to this day, but that's the song that won John over.

**Wilson:** Yes.

**Levy:** Now, Carmen McRae had recorded it.

**Wilson:** That's where I heard it. I was 15 when I heard it.

**Levy:** Even Eydie Gormé, I think, had recorded it.

**Wilson:** She did it first, Eydie Gormé.

**Levy:** So how is it that that's the song that John says, Nancy sounded most like Nancy.

**Wilson:** Well, I don't know if he'd heard the others sing it. I had heard Carmen sing. I hadn't heard Eydie Gormé sing. Everybody was surprised at me singing a song that heavy, at such a young age. I had been singing *Guess Who I Saw Today* for a long time before John heard it. So I had a habit down pat. I had my little shtick that went with it.

I don't remember what I was singing at that time. I do know that *Guess Who I Saw Today* has always done – it doesn't matter when I sing it. It always – I love it to this day and have never gotten tired of it. It's fresh and new all the time. I see a different man every time. Different audiences. I mean, I don't see the particular man. But the bottom line is, it's a play. *Guess Who I Saw Today* is like a – literally like a small play. I've always looked at it like that.

**Levy:** Are ballads your forté?

**Wilson:** Yes. I always loved the ballads. I like uptempo things, but give me a heavy ballad with a message, and I'm – that's me. Give me a ballad that says something, that tells a story, and I can get my teeth into that. Sometimes with uptempo songs, it's almost like you're throwing them away. That's just me. There's no uptempo song that I would say was my top 10 songs, favorites. I used to love – I'm trying to remember the song I

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used to open with. *Fireworks*. That was a great chart. It was a great way to get on stage. It was a great way to get to where you wanted to go, which was, eventually, *Guess Who I Saw Today*. I'm thinking of the Coconut Grove album, and I can't think of all the songs that were on it.

**Levy:** We'll get to that album, and I'll give you a list.

**Wilson:** Good, because I truly do not – *Don't Talk, Just Say*, I remember that. That's the kind of think that I like. I never professed to be a great jazz singer. I've always been a song stylist, to me. I still feel that, to this day, and that was how I looked at the music, is in the story that it told. I'm still that way. Trying to find a song today, oh boy.

**Levy:** We'll come back to that subject too. What do you remember about – we know that John was impressed. He signed you.

**Wilson:** No, we never signed anything, to this day. I don't remember ever signing anything. I've been with him for, what?, 50-some years. If there ever was a contract, it was 50-some years ago and never renewed.

**Levy:** That's true. There is, actually, on file, at the Smithsonian, a copy of your first management contract.

**Wilson:** That's probably the only one.

**Levy:** It is indeed the only one. We will come back and talk more about John and what that means, because it is very important that both of you feel that there was no contract and what that means. But let's get a little more history down before we get into that. You did a demo very shortly after that night at the – with Ray Bryant, I believe.


**Wilson:** Yeah, Ray Bryant's trio. Right.

**Levy:** Do you remember anything about the session, the demo.

**Wilson:** I remember the two songs that I did. There might have been four, but I remember *Sometimes I'm Happy* and *Guess Who*.

**Levy:** Did you know Ray?

**Wilson:** No, John Levy set all that up. I did not. I didn't know anybody in New York except Cannonball and Sandra, and Nat, of course.

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**Levy:** So what was it like to walk into this demo session knowing that you were this far from getting the other half of what you wanted?

**Wilson:** I never gave it a thought. To this day I don't think about stuff like that.

**Levy:** No nervousness?

**Wilson:** No. I don't know what it is to be nervous. I never did know what it was to be nervous. I found out later – when you start out doing what you do at three, by the time you realize you're supposed to be nervous, it's a little too late. I don't remember ever being nervous about anything.

**Levy:** So, you do your demo session, and now you have to sit and wait for Capitol to respond..

**Wilson:** Which didn't take but a minute. Dave Cavanaugh heard the demo, then called John, told him to don't let anybody else hear it. That was it.

**Levy:** Then what did you do? Did you go back to work for a while?

**Wilson:** I worked the whole time. I told you, New York Institute of Technology was wonderful. They gave me the time off to go do photos, to do – I could do anything during the week. I wasn't locked into the job. So I kept the job until all through – I went to California and recorded the album. I still was working at New York Institute of Technology.

**Levy:** So you flew out to Los Angeles . . .

**Wilson:** Yes.

**Levy:** . . . to record at Capitol Records.

**Wilson:** Right.

**Levy:** You flew out alone, as I recall.

**Wilson:** Right. I was met at the airport by Ernie Andrews, who took me to this little hotel I stayed at. I don't think my mother was in California then. At some point she was in California when I was out there. But it was a piece of cake. I just don't – I just never felt that I was supposed to be nervous or anything. I figured that if Dave Cavanaugh didn't want anybody else to hear it, that was good enough for me, and I loved the people that David Cavanaugh produced. I loved the production values.

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**Levy:** Okay. We'll start talking about albums in a minute. John had this notion, and he sent you out of the country.

**Wilson:** Yeah.

**Levy:** So you go into the studio, record your album. Now the world is waiting for it to come out.

**Wilson:** Um-hmm. But he did not want me to be in the States when it came out. So I went to Australia.

**Levy:** What was that about?

**Wilson:** You ask John Levy that. I don't have a clue.

**Levy:** Okay. He sent you to Australia.

**Wilson:** I went to Australia, and we worked for three months. When I came back – it was the second album that *Guess Who I Saw Today* was in. When I came back, *Guess Who I Saw Today* had made its mark. I stayed in Australia for three months, I believe.

**Levy:** It was a Hotel Chevron?

**Wilson:** Chevron Hotel, yeah, both in Melbourne and Sidney.

**Levy:** Any memories of that time?

**Wilson:** Just that the little room in Melbourne we got, once my bags got in, I couldn't get in. That's all I remember about it. Then I actually moved out of the hotel into a bed and breakfast or whatever, something like that, because the hotel room was not working.

**Levy:** Somewhere around this time you also managed a whirlwind romance, married a drummer.

**Wilson:** Oh, I met him before that. He was the only person who wrote to me in Australia. I met him when he was with Sonny Stitt. Remember I told you earlier that I had met Sonny? I went to see certain people. So I had met Kenny [Dennis] with Sonny Stitt.

**Levy:** Back in Ohio.

**Wilson:** Back in Ohio. We stayed in touch and wrote. Basically, I've done that twice.

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**Levy:** Yes, I know.

**Wilson:** Jesus. That's just occurred to me, that I've done that twice. Came back from Australia, got off the plane, and got married before I got back to New York. Then, when I met Wiley [Burton], I met him on April 22nd and was married on May 22nd. That's the same thing. Wow. I'll have to think about that. I'll really have to think about that.

**Levy:** In the midst of – really, everything's building up, and you get married to a drummer. Did he work with you?

**Wilson:** Yes. I remember him working with me at Lake Tahoe. We had a nice rhythm section. I don't remember who else was in it, but I do know that – basically, I was working in rooms that had big bands.

**Levy:** How soon did you start a family?

**Wilson:** Got married in 1960. Kacy was born in 1963.

**Levy:** This was part of what you set out wanting from the get-go, if I'm not mistaken.

**Wilson:** I was going to have lived a life that included a family, and they would be first. The business would be second. I always put the children first. I was fortunate to have some fairly decent children, too.

**Levy:** Was that a difficult sell to the people around you? Was that hard to accomplish back then?

**Wilson:** What, to have a baby? It was nobody's business. It never would have occurred to me, what other people would think. Me getting pregnant didn't have anything to do with the jobs. The jobs were still there. I worked pregnant. I took a few months off, after I had the baby. Took the baby with me. Never had – there was no difficulties with that. It never would have occurred to me to wonder, should I ask somebody? It's my life, and I've always put that first. It's my life. It's nobody else's. I have to do what's right for me. And we were very happy, had this beautiful boy, this little child who is so cute. The problem, I think, that happens in the marriage – in fact I don't recall Kenny and I ever having any argument. I just didn't like – I didn't like the way I saw the public perceiving him. If you notice, a lot of female singers, their husbands are dogged. I'd seen that in other people's marriages and didn't like that, and I found that people would – we had a production company. Instead of people listening to the president of the company, who was my husband, it would be, ask – you have to ask Nancy. I thought that was

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disrespectful. I thought it was harmful to him emotionally. So we decided to – well, we're still friends to this day.

**Levy:** What was it like to travel with a small child? Was – you just did what you did.

**Wilson:** You just did what you did. I had someone with me, obviously, to take care of him when I was on stage. But the bottom line was, it was a piece of cake. He was fun to have on the road. I had all of my kids out on the road at some point. We've been out there, and I've taken somebody with me to see to it that they were there when I – but my girls, especially, they could care less about who was supposed to be there watching them. When they got up in the morning, they woke me up. It did not matter that there was somebody who was supposed to do be there to do – no, no, no. Mom would have to get up and make sure they had their breakfast and stuff. But it was fun. I wouldn't have had it any other way.

There was a time when there was too much work for me, I thought, and I took off and said no, no, no, no, no. This is getting out of hand. When you're working 48 weeks out of a year, that is not fun, and that had to stop. So I called an abrupt halt to that. Nobody understood it, but then, it wasn't for them to understand. It was for me to do what was right for me. When you work 56 nights straight, it's like – two shows a night? Oh no, no, no, no.

**Levy:** Let's take a quick break.


**Wilson:** Okay.

**Levy:** Over the coming years, from '60 to 1980, you would record, give or take, 48 to 51 complete albums. It's been difficult to parse that, because there were some reissues, and things got listed twice. But I'm pretty confident that it was 49 or 50 complete albums for Capitol. What role did you play in planning those albums and selecting the material?

**Wilson:** A lot. David Cavanaugh was a wonderful man to work with, and John – between John and David and I, we really were able to have a lot of fun picking the songs. There were little meetings where we would sit down and decide which direction we were going for the next one. Is it going to be about a specific thing? Usually I did not do albums that were about one particular subject. Generally, I – we'd just – we'd sit down, me, John, Dave, sit at my house, go over the music, and Dave would have music to bring in. We would listen, and we would choose.

**Levy:** Where was your house?

**Wilson:** At that point in time I was living in Viewpark [California], on Monteith [Drive].

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**Levy:** You would sit in a living room? The kitchen? What kind of . . . ?

**Wilson:** The living room, where the piano was.

**Levy:** Did you listen to a lot of material?

**Wilson:** Yes. By the time it got to me, it had pretty well been honed down. There was – I had – I was new and fresh. I had all of Cole Porter to look forward to and all George Gershwin to look forward to. So it was easy to find material then, because there were such great writers of renown. It was wonderful to be able to sit there and pick twelve of the best tunes you've ever heard. Not that many originals, new things that were coming up. I just was grateful to be able to sing all the good stuff that I'd ever heard.

**Levy:** In those years, you recorded at least two albums a year, and in some cases, three and four. That seems unimaginable today. Tell us what you did, what that was like.

**Wilson:** It just was. You couldn't do it today.

**Levy:** Why?

**Wilson:** That industry's changed dramatically. There's no – you can't compare today to 1960, can't compare it at all. It just is no comparison. Today's music is not – I feel sorry. If I were me, today, and I was 22, if there were not a John Levy, I would not do it. I would not attempt to do it. There just is not – the market is not the same, because I keep saying that the music that I was singing then was the pop music of the day. That is not the case today. So I would not be able to be myself if I were starting to do it today. So, I would finish college.

**Levy:** And be a teacher.

**Wilson:** Or go to Carnegie Tech. Right.

**Levy:** Going into a studio, back in the day, in the good old days, if you would allow that – I heard you do an interview once, and you kept referring to 8:01. There would be an 8 o'clock call time for the session, and at 8:01 the music began.

**Wilson:** You've got that right, exactly, downbeat, we were doing the first song. We would do three songs, if not four, a night. We completed an album in three nights, because everybody was prepared. The music was written. We weren't – people weren't going in there, figuring out what to do, in the studio. You already had everything written out. Everything was done. I pretty much knew my music. I had it in front of me, but the

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bottom line is, I knew what I was singing. It just never occurred to me that that would be – nobody would even try to do it today. But when you have the arrangers that I had, who wrote such beautiful charts – Jimmy Jones – it was just easy, a piece of cake.

**Levy:** The arranger on the first two albums was Billy May.

**Wilson:** Billy May, um-hmm.

**Levy:** I don't know if this is a fair question, because this is what people who aren't singers just want to know: what does it feel like to hear and feel an orchestra behind you, beneath you, an arrangement?

**Wilson:** Oh that's still my favorite. My favorite thing is a full orchestra, symphony orchestra. One of the dreams as a kid was to be standing on a mountaintop with a symphony orchestra behind me, the wind blowing my hair. That was – there's nothing – nothing could take the place of that. That's unique and beautiful. As much as I love working with a rhythm section – you notice that through the years I've either worked with a big band or three pieces. I have never really – except for Cannonball, I've never worked with quintets. Give me the three, just the basics, or give me all of it. And there's nothing like hearing that full orchestra behind me.

**Levy:** Does it change your – the performance?

**Wilson:** I have no idea. It just makes me feel good inside to hear the band. I don't know that it changes what I sing, because I'm pretty sure that's pretty much – that's the same, but it's just what it does for me to hear that full orchestra. It doesn't – I would like to be in the audience, watching, sometimes, especially when you have one of those great orchestras. I would love to be one of those people sitting in the seats, to see it.

**Levy:** Having come out from – basically all this time with a trio or with the band, and now you're in a studio with Billy May and an orchestra.

**Wilson:** With an orchestra, yes.

**Levy:** What was that like?

**Wilson:** It was what it was supposed to be.

**Levy:** It's exactly what you expected?

**Wilson:** Yeah, except that Billy May did not do the right – he didn't write the chart for one of the songs. He had taken it and made it something else. It never occurred to me,

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never occurred to me, that you're going to question Billy May? You're going to question? Yeah, I questioned it. I didn't like the arrangement.

**Levy:** That's interesting.

**Wilson:** So it was rewritten, because that is not what you got from Ray Bryant. That is not what was the demo. That was not what it was supposed to be. It never occurred to me that I had no – who did I think I was, telling Billy May the chart is not right? But I did. I just never think about stuff like that.

**Levy:** And this is based on your gift. You did not have any musical training?

**Wilson:** No. When my parents took me to a singing teacher, they said I was too young and my voice would change, which it did not. So I never really had any musical training.

**Levy:** When you were in a studio, when you heard whatever you heard, were you able to say anything besides, "This isn't it?" How do you communicate when you don't have the technical training? How do you communicate with the people that are working with you?

**Wilson:** If you have good people – like Billy May, Dave Cavanaugh, John Levy, and I, we all sat down together. It was no – it never occurred to me that it should be any different. This to me was the way it was supposed to be.

**Levy:** Favorite arrangers?

**Wilson:** Gerald Wilson and Jimmy Jones. I got a letter from Billy May once. It said that he was glad that God allowed him to live at a time when we could record. I'm trying to remember the song that it was about. But that was nice to hear.

**Levy:** He did your *Lush Life* album.


**Wilson:** That was what he was talking about. That was the one. That's still my favorite album.

**Levy:** John Levy's too.

**Wilson:** Yeah, that's my favorite album.

**Levy:** Even Shearing came on board for an orchestration.

**Wilson:** *Hello Young Lovers*, George Shearing. Beautiful charts. I'm trying to remember who worked with him, who wrote the charts out. I can see him, but I can't call his name.

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But I loved George Shearing. He was precious. We did – when we worked at Carnegie Hall – I think it was – I don't know who we were celebrating. Celebrating somebody's birthday. I don't think it was mine. Anyway, Shearing played the music that many years later exactly the way it was played on the record.

**Levy:** That was Shearing's birthday.

**Wilson:** Okay. That's what I thought.

**Levy:** His 80th.

**Wilson:** Yes, Shearing's 80th birthday. That he would come in and play the things that we did 40 years ago.

**Levy:** Let's talk about that album and also about the Cannonball album. The Shearing album was '61, the Cannonball album was in 1962, and suddenly, Nancy Wilson is a jazz singer. How did you feel about that?

**Wilson:** I wasn't that thrilled. I was not thrilled. And I have not changed my mind about that. I'm a song stylist. Whether I recorded with Cannonball Adderley and George Shearing or not, I'm still a song stylist. I didn't – I knew who the great jazz singers were.

**Levy:** Which were who, in your opinion?


**Wilson:** Ella. And Sarah Vaughan had pipes that – you know, please God. But they all went in a different way. They would go with the music. They knew more about music than I did. I don't know squat about music. I don't know anything about it. I don't read it. I can't play it. I just have ears. They were more musicians. And Carmen was a musician, Sarah. They were jazz singers, to me. Then, as I say, I sang a lot of pop things. But it took a long time before the jazz singer happened. They didn't – I was still working in supper clubs for many, many years after that.

**Levy:** In addition to *Guess Who I Saw Today*, there are a lot of songs that are still in your rotation, if you want to call it that, today. I'm thinking about – I don't know – *Green Dolphin Street*.

**Wilson:** *Never Will I Marry, Save Your Love for Me, Masquerade.*

**Levy:** *Sleeping Bee.*

**Wilson:** Yeah, that's an easy one when you need something uptempo to break with.

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**Levy:** Do you ever get tired of these songs?

**Wilson:** No, no.

**Levy:** How can that be?

**Wilson:** I pick songs that are good. If you pick songs that are good, you don't get tired of them. If you pick a song that works – especially with the rhythm section that I have, *Sleeping Bee* would be – with a bass player, when you have a great bass player, *Sleeping Bee* works every time. I don't remember half of the material I've recorded. That's for sure. People keep asking me, do you remember a certain – no, I don't. And I don't feel bad because I don't. I can't retain all of this. It's impossible. When you realize how much there has been, there's no way I could remember all of these things.

**Levy:** And yet I've heard you pull a few out of the hat.

**Wilson:** That's God. That's not me, because I can't remember – getting older is – my memory was never that great to begin with. In fact, because I didn't – all of it was so natural that it didn't register. Do you understand what I'm saying? It was a natural kind of thing, the work, the singing, the songs that were picked, and it wasn't something that I gave a lot of thought to. It was just there.

**Levy:** So you don't have to work at keeping material fresh for yourself or for the audience?

**Wilson:** If I were working 40, even 36 weeks a year, maybe I would do a lot of changing. But I'm only working four times a year. What – no, I'm not . . .

**Levy:** At this point.

**Wilson:** At this point, I'm not going to . . .

**Levy:** But back then.

**Wilson:** Back then, if it was working, we left it alone.

**Levy:** What does it mean when you say, it worked, the song works?

**Wilson:** It's got a great story. It's more than just singing notes. It's telling a story.

**Levy:** Your manager at the time, still your manager today, but back then, he signed with you with an agent at General Artists Corporation, a guy named . . .

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**Wilson:** Jerry [?C].

**Levy:** Jerry [?Florenca]. **Perrenchio** I remember reading something about a difference in marketing, that he wanted the slinky, sexy, low-cut, that you had a closet full of, if I have this right, Walter Bass matte jersey dresses with Dolman sleeves, in every color. First, the lighter side of this. Talk to us about your taste in clothes, then and now.

**Wilson:** It's pretty much the same. I just saw an ad in – when I was being honored, there was an ad with the Walter Bass – no, no, the content page of *Ebony* magazine has me, full page picture of Nancy Wilson in a Walter Bass. I bought it. I remember that I bought it at Sidney's. Someone said, how could you remember something like that? But it was me in a Walter Bass matte jersey gown, and it's a full page on the table of contents. That's the background on the table of contents, is a picture of me in that gown. I've always liked good clothes, though. I love beautiful gowns.

**Levy:** Do you – where do you shop?

**Wilson:** I haven't been in a store in so long. When I was shopping, I shopped at Sax Fifth Avenue and Neiman Marcus, when I was shopping. I have no desire. I don't have the patience anymore to shop, and I don't really need to. I have so many things that I'll never get around to. Nothing's worn out. I have two cargo vans full of things, that are on my property. Then every closet in the house is full. So I don't think I'll be doing any shopping anytime soon.

**Levy:** Do you have any favorite designers?

**Wilson:** These days – well, Angela Dean, who has been very good to me. B. Michael. I used to love Halston. And that's – what's the guy's name who used to do Halston? He's got his own, and he – oh, wow, I can't think of his name. Cannot think of his name.

**Levy:** You're out of my league now.

**Wilson:** Oh, wow. Well, I can't remember his name, but anyway, he used to – after Halston wasn't there, he was there. **[Ms. Wilson later remembers Kevan Hall.]**

**Levy:** Your taste, is that also part of the gift? Who did you – how did you come to develop such a sense of presentation?

**Wilson:** It wasn't anything that you think about. It's really kind of natural. It wasn't something that I – today, there's somebody around you to tell you when to open your

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mouth, when to – back in the day, you were your own person. You were your own self. Nobody was sitting there telling you how to dress and what to do, not really.

**Levy:** Magazines? Television? Where did you – I mean, you didn't learn about this picking tomatoes.

**Wilson:** I've never even thought about it. I've always worn nice clothes. Even in the pictures I see of myself as a kid, my jeans were just so. I just never – it wasn't something that you consciously thought about. It just is.

**Levy:** When you launched this career, let's say in the '60s, and things are hot and happening, and you've already expressed some business savvy here – you knew what you wanted, you knew who you wanted, you knew why you wanted – did you give any conscious thought to shaping your image? Or what today they might call branding?

**Wilson:** No. I never had a stylist. I didn't have someone to tell me which way to go and what to do. We didn't do that, back in the day. That's a new thing. That was not something ever that I – I just never had that kind of sense that I needed someone to tell me what to wear, what to do.

**Levy:** But you told you those things.

**Wilson:** I just did it, yeah. I know what is pleasing to my eye, and if I like it, I think that the rest of the fans will like it. I don't like every gown I see. I've just been lucky to have a sense of taste.

**Levy:** What draws you? Color? Shape? Texture?

**Wilson:** No, I haven't ever thought about it.

**Levy:** You just like it and you . . .

**Wilson:** I just see it. I see it and I like it or I don't.

**Levy:** If you're not paying any particular attention to what, as you say, today they call it branding, I have heard you over the years, at different times and different circumstances, say, no, Nancy Wilson doesn't do that, or Nancy Wilson wouldn't say that, or Nancy Wilson wouldn't sing that. Are there Nancy Wilson rules? Or is it just all gut?

**Wilson:** It's all gut. There's no rules. It's all – it's natural. It's not something that I've ever consciously sat down and thought about.

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**Levy:** I've heard you referred to, these are some great phrases, "a professor emeritus of body language," "a consummate actress," or in your own words, a ham. Is there a way that you approach a song?

**Wilson:** I've never given it any conscious thought.

**Levy:** Is there a difference for you, singing on stage versus in the studio?

**Wilson:** Yes.

**Levy:** What is the difference?

**Wilson:** One can be quite boring.

**Levy:** Which one?

**Wilson:** The recording can be very boring. I like to get on the stage and do the thing and just get it, just do it. In the studio it's a lot different. I rarely ever do more than three takes of a song.

**Levy:** Maybe it depends on what day that question gets asked of you, because I have heard a different response from you on this. I have heard you talk about being able, in the studio, without an audience, to "go there."

**Wilson:** Oh, that's the same thing as being the actress, the song stylist, the singer. She goes there. That's on stage and in the studio. Go inside that song and make it happen.

**Levy:** So you don't have to have an audience to make it happen?

**Wilson:** No, no.

**Levy:** And you never had acting lessons either.

**Wilson:** No. I did ask a prominent actor, when I was getting ready to do something for television, a dramatic role, what is there about it? He gave me the words, "Just go there." I've used that. It was [?] who told me that. He said, "Just go there." So that's what I do when I sing. There's no way to prepare to go into an acting role without ever having done it before. So he just said, just go where the lyric, where the – what is the word I'm trying to think of? What were the words that are on the paper? Go where they take you.

**Levy:** So, in the studio, you can go there, if you need to. With a live audience, that gives you a little something else. Let's talk for a minute about some of the camaraderie and the

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shows, packages, that you got to participate in the '60s, where, say, John put together a show with different people on the bill. I haven't seen anything like that in recent years. Tell us a little bit about that camaraderie, what it does for you as a performer, in terms of, it's a different kind of a show.

**Wilson:** When we would do shows together, it wasn't – they weren't separated. I did what I do, Cannonball did what he did, and then we would do a few songs together. But you didn't have to change in order to – because I always had my own rhythm section. The only time that that did not happen is when I would come back out with Cannonball. We would use his quintet. The bottom line is, I didn't have to change and adapt to somebody else's – the way they were. We – I had my own, and that always worked out nicely.

I remember waiting with George Shearing back in the day. I always had – I remember Jimmy Bond not – that's the only time I was ever really upset before going on stage. The bass player wasn't there. So I used Shearing's. I'm trying to remember who it was. Jimmy Bond's name comes to mind. But I think Jimmy was playing with Shearing, and he played for me that night. I can't remember who my bass player was or who was not there.

**Levy:** Did that kind of camaraderie give you a different feeling? Do you miss that sort of thing today? It just seems like such a different sense of time and place.

**Wilson:** It wasn't, not really. I don't change from day to day. I am what I am, and that's whether I was working with Cannonball or Shearing or Ramsey [Lewis]. I love Gene Harris of the Three Sounds. We never got a chance to work together too often, but when we did, it was memorable. But I don't change up, just because it's different people. I'm still who I am and do what I do and was very blessed and fortunate that it is what it is.

**Levy:** Do you remember anything about the shows at the Apollo?

**Wilson:** I remember the chair with Oscar Brown, Jr., in it.

**Levy:** Tell us what that means.

**Wilson:** Oh God. We were doing a thing called The Free Sounds.

**Levy:** That's right. Free Sounds of '63.

**Wilson:** It was Oscar Brown, Jr. I can't remember. It was Cannon?

**Levy:** Um-hmm.

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**Wilson:** Oscar did what he did. I did *Miss Otis*. No, not *Miss Otis – Just Because We’re Kids*. I had on sneakers. I came out and did *Just Because* – this was the first time it had been done in a long – or it had been done. John put together – we were doing a little production. *Just Because We’re Kids*, I had a little ball and had my little short skirt on and went back to being a little kid, and when I did *Guess Who I Saw Today*, I sang that, and at the end of it, I turned the chair around. Oscar Brown, Jr., was “you.” We did that for several years with different people. It was a lot of fun. I wouldn’t want to do it today, because there was too many changes of clothes and wardrobe, different posturings. That was work.

**Levy:** But it appealed to your actress side.

**Wilson:** Yeah.

**Levy:** By ’64, when you won a Grammy, *How Glad I Am* . . .

**Wilson:** Which nobody wanted me to record, except me.

**Levy:** Who not? And why?

**Wilson:** They thought it was too r-and-b.

**Levy:** And it in fact did win in . . .

**Wilson:** It won the r-and-b Grammy. “No, this is not you.” “Well, I’m sorry. I like the song, and I’m singing it.”

**Levy:** Arranged by Gerald Wilson?

**Wilson:** I have no idea. I don’t think so. *How Glad I Am*. It wasn’t Gerald Wilson. Oliver Nelson, maybe? **[It was Sid Feller.]**

**Levy:** That I’d have to look up. I’m not sure.

**Wilson:** I don’t know. I should know that. See, that’s – I really should know that. I don’t.

**Levy:** Did you think – what did you think about the fact that it was “r-and-b”?

**Wilson:** I didn’t think anything about it. I sing what I want to sing. I just sing songs. That whole – that’s why I say song stylist. Everybody else goes someplace else. I just sing songs, and I don’t put a label on them.

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**Levy:** But do you care that other people do?

**Wilson:** No. I could care less.

**Levy:** All right. Do you object to being called a jazz singer?

**Wilson:** Not today. I'm 73 years old. I'm black. What else am I going to be? I've outlived my pop days. Still singing the same songs the same way as I did 40 years ago, and today it's jazz.

**Levy:** We mentioned Oscar Brown a few minutes ago. I think it was '64. You guys did a show at the Waldorf Astoria in New York.

**Wilson:** We did?

**Levy:** I think Oscar opened for you.

**Wilson:** Okay.

**Levy:** No memory of that?

**Wilson:** No. I do know that that wasn't one of my favorite rooms. It had the panache and all that stuff, but it was not fun to work.

**Levy:** Sound? Feeling?

**Wilson:** Just was not a great room to work. It was not like the Palmer House. It was nothing like the Coconut Grove. Of all of the supper clubs that I've worked, that was my least favorite.

**Levy:** And you don't remember the engagement itself at all?


**Wilson:** No. I've tried to forget it.

**Levy:** Aha.

**Wilson:** I don't like the room. It just was not . . .

**Levy:** What I had heard was that it just didn't go over too well . . .

**Wilson:** No, I didn't hear that.

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**Levy:** . . . and that that's when the Luther Henderson – Marty Charnin team was brought in to write a show just for you.

**Wilson:** Oh gosh, see, that part I don't know.

**Levy:** And that's what was the Coconut Grove show.

**Wilson:** Yeah. The Waldorf was after the Coconut Grove. You sure about that? I don't remember that. I remember it being afterward.

**Levy:** Let's talk about the Coconut Grove, because that was an amazing show.

**Wilson:** It's a great room.

**Levy:** Does that mean, in Nancy-Wilson-speak, "intimate"?

**Wilson:** To be as large as it was, it was intimate, yes. It seated 1100 people. It was a big room. It was not a small, intimate room at all, but it was intimate. It was the best room I've ever worked in in my life, Coconut Grove.

**Levy:** You had a special show, written just for you, which is the first time that was done, I think?

**Wilson:** For me, yeah.

**Levy:** What do you remember about the show? Because it turned out to be a very big deal, in the end. So, did you know going into it, that this was going to be . . .

**Wilson:** I knew walking down the – through the kitchen. Before I ever hit the floor, I knew it was going to be. You see me walking through that kitchen. There was no doubt in my mind what it was.

**Levy:** Based on the rehearsal that afternoon?

**Wilson:** No. Just that it was right. It was right.

**Levy:** A star-studded audience.

**Wilson:** Yeah.

**Levy:** It was a very Hollywood moment.

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**Wilson:** That part you know better than I do.

**Levy:** Arnie Ar[?] **Army Archerd** was the host of the evening.

**Wilson:** That was good.

**Levy:** And there were a lot of celebrities in the audience. Kenny, your husband, was playing, Ronnell Bright on piano, and a band.

**Wilson:** Freddy Martin. I'm pretty sure that's – yeah, Freddy Martin's orchestra.

**Levy:** I think so. Because this show was written for you, and this is a little different from everything leading up to it, did you prepare in any way differently for that show?

**Wilson:** No. I was just happy to have songs like *Don't Talk, Just Sing* and *Ten Good Years*, because that was the complete package.

**Levy:** Meaning?

**Wilson:** Not just standing there singing a song, but when I talk about telling a story: it was humorous, it had every quality that I wanted, it was funny, and *Bill Bailey* was just unbelievable. I should still be singing that, or start singing it again. But that's only good – that works with a big band. It was wonderfully written by Luther and Marty. I'm gonna throw some corn flakes in my coffee. I remember that.

**Levy:** It's interesting. You pull out a line, because at some point we're talking about a song and a story. I'm wondering if any particular songs, other than *Guess Who*, or even lyrics, stick in your mind as just an amazing example of the height of songwriting.

**Wilson:** Oh, wow. No, it wouldn't come to mind now.

**Levy:** If something comes to your mind, just digress to it.

**Wilson:** Okay. I remember there's a song that Johnny Mathis did, and I did it. It was a great song. But I can't remember right now. Oh well. *Over the Weekend*.

**Levy:** Oh. That is – well, all the songs on – what the one about the [?]? Is that *Midnight Sun*? The songs on *Lush Life* that have lyrics are amazing, including the one you just mentioned.

**Wilson:** That's a great song, yeah.

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**Levy:** I heard a quote from you. I don't remember where this one came from. You said it's one thing to sing and it's another thing to have fun doing it. Can you elaborate on that?

**Wilson:** I can remember going to my grandfather's funeral, getting on a plane and going back to Philadelphia and singing, doing my show, and I had fun. I can remember going to an aunt's funeral and having to get back in time to go to work, and the show became more special because of that. I don't know whether I put more into it, or maybe I was – but it never brought me down. I went out and did a show for them, not necessarily the audience, but for them.

**Levy:** You're noted for your rapport with an audience. What does that mean to you?

**Wilson:** It means I'm doing something right. I would hate to think that I would go out and work for an hour and a half, hour and twenty minutes, or whatever, and not be able to relate or touch somebody in the audience. I would hate to just be up there going through the motions.

**Levy:** I perceive there's a difference between a singer who can touch someone in the audience emotionally, reach them, but someone who makes you think that they're your best friend or they're singing just for you, is a whole other thing. And you . . .


**Wilson:** Yeah, I get that.

**Levy:** You do get that.

**Wilson:** I get that. It's just for them.

**Levy:** Is that a good thing? Is that deliberate? Is it hard?

**Wilson:** I never thought about it one way or the other. It just happens. It just is. I don't know. Five minutes before the show hits, I'm in mode. I'm in Nancy Wilson mode, and I just go do it. Everything depends on the audience. I just recently did a show, when I went out the last time, that was like, oh my goodness, a waste of my time. It really was. I'm not going to say what it was, but I looked out and saw a sea of white hair and knew, oh my God, I'm in serious trouble here. There is no way that these people are going to – there will be a few, but the bottom line is, this is not my house. So let's just do it. There was no way to – I can't remember never having any kind of communication or contact with an audience like I had that night. There just wasn't – it just wasn't there.

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**Levy:** You have an ability that I think is very rare. Within a very large concert hall, it feels like your living room.

**Wilson:** Yes.

**Levy:** And the audience feels like you're a personal friend, which I think is very special. But I wonder if it has a down side for you? Does it . . . ?

**Wilson:** It does.

**Levy:** What is that?

**Wilson:** It drains me. It just takes all my – it's like, when it's over, they have taken so – I give so much and then – and I'm not one of those people who cuts people off. I'm not rude ever. But it takes a toll on your body and on your emotions, yeah. I would be less than honest if I said it didn't.

**Levy:** You were a top seller for Capitol Records, supposedly second only to the Beatles.

**Wilson:** Which I don't believe for a minute, but . . .

**Levy:** But you must have been up there.

**Wilson:** Yeah. I don't know where that came from. I'm really tired of hearing about it. I've heard it.

**Levy:** What I'm wondering about is whether that too puts an onus or responsibility on you? Did you ever feel the weight of that or feel responsible for anything?

**Wilson:** No, no, never gave it a thought, never thought about it. When you're living your life, you just live it day by day. You're asking questions that are – I've never given those things any thought. It's like – it's too much like work.

**Levy:** Well, did you give any conscious thought to how to balance your personal and your professional life?

**Wilson:** Oh yeah. That happened long before. That was in the first conversation I had with John Levy. John knew all along that whatever my life is going to be, my life comes first, and he was just like my dad. He was very much like my father. Not like him, but he was a father to me. So I knew that he knew that I could not – I would not be able to – there's certain things I just would not do, because it would take me away from being me.

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**Levy:** Did you set any boundaries between family and business? Or it's just as it comes?

**Wilson:** As it comes. But because the agency and John knew, there was never any – there was one time when there was too much work, and I called a halt to it. But the bottom line was, everybody knew that my priorities were my family.

**Levy:** Since it's on record, we should just mention that there was a moment where I think it was your husband and your lawyer wanted to take control.

**Wilson:** That was my husband.

**Levy:** They took over management of your career for a moment.

**Wilson:** Just for a moment. In fact I remember telling John, it'll just be a minute. I was trying to keep the marriage together.

**Levy:** That's what I wanted to ask. Is this where the personal and the professional clash, and you have choices to make.

**Wilson:** They did, yeah. At that point in time, I wanted to keep the marriage together, keep the marriage happy. "I think you're wrong. I know you're wrong. I know what's going to happen. I'll be back with John." There was no doubt in my mind. But I wanted to give him – "Take your shot. Take your best shot."

**Levy:** This is a great opportunity now to tell some of the young people about the less than glamorous side of the entertainer's life, because this is around the time when things were very hot, and you were, as you said, working way too many weeks and shows and nights. Tell us a little bit about what life on the road can be like at its worst.

**Wilson:** At its worst it's just getting on airplanes and flying, sitting in airplanes. It's the boredom of it. I don't have a problem in a nice suite in a hotel. That's one of the nice things about it. But it can take you away from the things that you want to do. It can take you away from your family. It can take you away. It isn't – it's not fun. It's great on stage, but getting on stage is the problem.

**Levy:** I've heard that you, at least at one time, have been very happy to never eat another turkey club sandwich.

**Wilson:** Oh yeah. I'm so sick of seeing the same menu. I was in tears once, looking at the menu. It was the same menu that I'd seen for how many years. I'm not a food person. Consequently, in trying to find something that I could eat, and would eat, but after a long time of having the same sandwiches, it was like, oh, I can't eat another one. In fact I

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don't think I've had one in years, on purpose. But I do recall looking at a menu and just breaking out. The tears rolled down my face. I cannot take this same stuff day after day after day.

**Levy:** Inquiring minds want to know what you do like to eat and how you have kept such a fabulous figure.

**Wilson:** The figure is not a problem. As I say, I'm not a food person.

**Levy:** But you're a hell of a cook.

**Wilson:** Yeah, I'm a great cook, but then, that doesn't mean that I'm going to eat all of that food. I like beef, and I like chicken. I would rather have it fried, which is not good for you, than baked, but then again, at this point in my life, what difference does it make? I'm going to eat what appears to be appetizing. I will go get fast food in a minute, because I'm alone. When you're alone, it's very difficult to cook the foods that you want to cook for just you. So I will go get a hot pastrami sandwich or something from a great place I go to. But I'm not a person who wants to sit down at the table and eat. I just eat on the run, eat whatever takes my fancy that day.

**Levy:** In the '60s still, looking as amazing as you did and do, you did a lot of television. I think of one – I think it was an Andy Williams show clip that I saw, where he couldn't keep his eyes off of you.

**Wilson:** Well, I have no response to that.

**Levy:** As I look back at these shows, things like *Hollywood Palace*, *The Andy Williams Show*, *The Joey Bishop Show*, *The Carol Burnet Show*, *The Ed Sullivan Show*, *Flip Wilson*, *Smothers Brothers*, *Danny Kaye*, *Red Skelton* I think, it seems like this was a time – and I can see it from the '60s into the '70s – it seems to be in the midst of an evolution, not so much of you but of the culture and the times. The variety shows seem to have been primarily hosted by white men. Carol **Burnet** **Burnett** seemed a special . . .

**Wilson:** She was larger than life. That was – I did that show more than anybody's show. I loved it.

**Levy:** You did that six times that I found.

**Wilson:** I loved it.

**Levy:** Do you remember anything about that show. I think Lucille Ball was on at least one of those episodes.

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**Wilson:** Not really. It's been a long, long, long time ago. I remember – I think **Diahnne Diahann** Carroll was on one of them. I remember a remark made. I can't remember what the remark was, but there was – and *The Smothers Brothers*, with the frog. That was one of my favorite things.

**Levy:** These were scripted skits?

**Wilson:** Yes.

**Levy:** So you'd have to learn lines and rehearse.

**Wilson:** Um-hmm, yeah, but it was fun. It was fun, an awful lot of fun. I miss variety and wish it would come back. I would prefer that over reality. Wow, the reality shows are just unbelievable.

Carol Burnet would just **wipe whip** up an audience. She would just kill an audience. She would go out. She was very much like me: open, friendly. Before the show ever got started, she was out there talking to the audience. We had a ball doing those shows, just had a great time.

**Levy:** Were you aware, at the time, that things were changing, that Carol **Burnet Burnett** was different, and that Flip Wilson was making changes?

**Wilson:** I never thought about it, really. It wasn't going to affect me one way or the other. That's selfish, but it's the truth.

**Levy:** What about the drama shows? Those were mostly in the early '70s. I think you even got nominated for an Emmy.

**Wilson:** I got nominated for an Emmy for *Hawaii Five O*, and said I would not do the script, because she plays a heroin addict. If she did not die, I did not want to do the show. I did not want it out there that you get away with something that negative, that bad. I remember Danny Arnold was the director. He, in my death scene, put chairs all over the stage, and I had to walk, with my eyes closed, across and off the stage into all these chairs. I was black and blue. I was so bruised. But it was a beautiful death scene. It was wonderful.

The other one I think that I liked, another one of the scripts that I liked so well, is the FBI.

**Levy:** Let's take a quick break.

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We were talking about television. Let's just talk a couple more minutes, because we were starting to talk about the dramas. There was actually – there were two back in the '60s, before *Hawaii Five O*. There was *Burke's Law* in '65 and then *I Spy* in '66. So that would have been a Cosby thing?

**Wilson:** Cosby – Bill – and Robert Culp.

**Levy:** Then came the 1970 *Hawaii Five O*, which you talked about, the death scene. Your character's name, by the way, I think was Evie Jordan. Also that year was *Room 222*. Some of these I barely remember myself. '72 was *O'Hara: U.S. Treasury*.

**Wilson:** That was fun. That was a lot of fun.

**Levy:** What makes a show like that fun for you?

**Wilson:** It was a good script. The best time I've ever had doing dramatic television was *Hawaii Five O*, when my mother could not come back and watch any more. It was that heavy, that she could not – she and Kacy came to the set for a couple of days. Then, when she realized the part and what was going on, she would not come back. She couldn't stand watching me go from being her daughter, sitting there talking to her, to this person that I was portraying. She could not take it. So they didn't come back.

**Levy:** That Emmy nomination also says a lot about your dramatic skills, yet another gift with no training. The other story at that time also was *Police Story*. Were those guest spots a big deal for a singer, a black woman, back in that time?

**Wilson:** I have no idea. I don't think being a black woman had anything, because I had already done *I Spy* and a few other things. So they were well aware of that. I did not go into acting, simply because there was so many actresses there that that's their craft. I was a singer. I would not go after somebody else's role, that kind of thing. But when certain scripts come along, you had to take them, the scripts are so good.


**Levy:** You did two movies, I think, in your life, maybe more.

**Wilson:** I can think of two. One was with Fred Williamson.

**Levy:** That was *The Big Score*.

**Wilson:** Is that what it was? Okay.

**Levy:** 1983. I was actually with you at that time. Richard Roundtree.

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**Wilson:** Yeah, *The Big Score*. That was Fred Williamson. The other thing I did was . . .

**Levy:** Was it the one where you played a principal?

**Wilson:** That's *The Meteor Man*, yeah. That's what I was trying to think of. Robert Townsend.

**Levy:** 1993. No others.

**Wilson:** That long ago?

**Levy:** Yeah.

**Wilson:** I can't think of any others.

**Levy:** Did you enjoy that kind of work?

**Wilson:** I loved it.

**Levy:** You did?

**Wilson:** Yeah. I was in the last Ronald Reagan movie. I sang in that. I sang a song called *Too Little Time*. The day that I had to record it, John Kennedy was shot. I had to go in and record it and then, a couple of weeks later, come in and put the face to the music. That's one of the hardest things I've ever had to do in my life, was to capture – you can imagine, because I was in the bathtub when the news came, on my way to the studio. Going through that kind of trauma, to have to go in and sing a song called *Too Little Time*, and then to have to come in a couple of weeks later and put the face to it – that was one of the hardest things I ever had to do.

First of all, I can't do background for myself either. My daughter Samantha, she does background unbelievably, so good. Me, I can't sing things the same way twice. Eventually it will be similar to, but the bottom line is, trying to do background is, uh-uh, not for me.

**Levy:** We talked earlier about vocalists who have influenced you. Now I would like to ask you if you have ever had, in your lifetime, any idols in any field, anybody that inspired you?

**Wilson:** Dorothy Height, one of my favorite people. Mary Wright Edelman. She works with young people, kids. That's one of my favorite people. Of course Martin – Martin

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Luther King. Those are my – Dorothy Height was just phenomenal. I think she would be the person that I would say inspired me the most.

**Levy:** When did you – do you recall becoming aware of her?

**Wilson:** No, it seems like I've known her forever. And then being a Delta, also, in the soror[ity]. She's been a name that I've known for a long, long time. Her work is – one of the nicer achievement awards that I've received is the Height award, and it's gorgeous to look at, too. But she was a special woman, a very special person.

**Levy:** You've been blessed in so many ways, but among them, it seems that you didn't really experience too much of the racial color barrier career-wise.

**Wilson:** No, I didn't, not at all. That's why I'm so grateful to people like Lena, Nat Cole, who made it all possible.

**Levy:** You escaped the color barriers.

**Wilson:** I really did. Like I said, there's only the one time at Kitty's Show Bar, when I said, "If you need reservations, I'm making them," and that was the end of that. But in the job area, in working, everybody had already paved the way.

**Levy:** And yet, in the '60s and '70s, you felt it important to be very involved in civil rights activities.

**Wilson:** Yes, because I also felt and knew that I'm being treated one way while my brother is being treated another. See, Nancy Wilson's been Nancy Wilson for a long time. But I don't believe that doors were as open, as wide, for my brother as they were for me. And midwest Ohio was not notorious for being segregated. It was always kind of integrated. I grew up where the whites down the road, you didn't have a problem with them, because they were your cousins. So I was just blessed. Came along at the right time.

**Levy:** What activities did you involve yourself in?

**Wilson:** We're not going to go there, are we? Jesus.

**Levy:** At least go to the march.

**Wilson:** The march was one thing, but then the funeral was another thing, and then the Poor People's march. That one – and being there for Martin's lieutenants, making sure that they were housed and fed, and going to the Justice Department to make sure that they

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were protecting blacks running for elected office, just to see to it that these things were done. And going to Selma. I remember the rifles that pointed at my head. But I had to do it. I just decided one day, I was going to Selma. And why? Because that's where I need to be. As one of the first 30 footsteps in the Martin Luther King walk of fame, that's because – they said, they were looking for artists and people of prominence to show up, and they couldn't find me. They realized they couldn't find me, because I was already there.

**Levy:** You were what I might describe as a quiet activist. I don't think many people are aware of all the behind-the-scenes things that you did. How did you come to be a member of the Minority Business Advisory Council under the Nixon administration?

**Wilson:** Nixon appointed me. Don't ask me why. I was also on the education, when Lyndon Johnson appointed me. And I didn't do anything to work at it. It just was offered. It was there. I guess they thought I might be too quiet, and they found out I wasn't.

**Levy:** What was involved in these things?

**Wilson:** A lot of meetings, and what I found out was going over things that the previous group of people had done, and I saw no reason. Why are we going over their work? Let's move forward instead of standing still and keeping repeating the same thing over and over. There was one other person on the board who felt the way I did. We made a little stink about it. Why are we going over the work that the last three years of people had done? Let's take it from there and move on. That was my only fault with all of that. They were just repeating the same thing over and over.

**Levy:** But you felt you were able to make a difference?

**Wilson:** In a lot of young people. I went into high schools, and I did a radio show called *To Your Baby's Health*, when Samantha was little. That helped young women who were pregnant and didn't have anywhere to turn and whatnot. That was sponsored by Johnson & Johnson. That was fun, but I remember being someplace, and a youngster – little – I'm talking young girl asked me about having a baby and leaving it in a trash can and whatever. Oh, it broke my heart. It's like, what? What could she be thinking about at that age? She couldn't have been more than 10, 11 years old. So that's why I did *To Your Baby's Health*.

**Levy:** And even though this is jumping ahead a bit, most recently you were involved in the National Minority AIDS Council.

**Wilson:** Yes. That's necessary, and a lot is being done, thank God, finally, but it isn't in the forefront the way it was. Everybody feels that because we have some medications and

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whatnot, it's not that big a problem. It should not be happening. It should not be being transmitted at this point. We've been – we've known it's around long enough to understand that this is a dangerous situation, and we're still getting so many people who are being infected. That distresses me. It really bothers me.

**Levy:** What have I missed here in the causes that you have championed over the years? What are the things that Nancy Wilson is passionate about?

**Wilson:** The high schools. I've gone into just about every major high school system in L.A. I went into – and as I said, just being concerned about babies, young girls having babies out of wedlock, this whole welfare system that perpetuates the same thing, over and over. That bothers me quite a bit.

**Levy:** Let's talk a little bit about some of the organizations whose work you've quietly supported. By quietly, I don't mean secretly, because many of them appreciated you publicly by honoring you. I'll name some of them. We can talk about any ones that you want. I'm thinking about the Urban League. I'm thinking about the NAACP, The Brotherhood Crusade, UNCF [United Negro College Fund].

**Wilson:** Oh yes. I did the very first telethon. I was the hostess for the first UNCF telethon. My co-host was Clifton Davis, before Lou Rawls got involved. So that was a special thing for me. And having been on many of the black campuses, it's just wonderful to support them. I've also discovered that – and it disturbs me – that 80% of black students in college are female. There's a problem there. That's not – where are my men? Where are my guys? That's distressing. I found that out going to meetings. I find out stuff like that. That threw me for a loop. I was at Howard University when I got that information. Wow. Well, at least I'm remembering some of the things.

**Levy:** What do you say to a young person who says, "Well, you didn't finish school"?

**Wilson:** Yes, but I am also a doctor. I have doctorates, two. I have been a professor at a university. So I did finish school. I finished my school. I don't advise any young singer today, if she has an opportunity to go – I had a scholarship. That's the only thing that I felt I should have used it, since it was given to me, but I also felt that if I didn't use it, it would be given to somebody else who could use it. Since my work was already formed, it was – it would have been – it was selfish of me, I think, to continue school, because I had already – I was already doing what I was going to be doing. But I don't advise that today. Today's a lot different.

**Levy:** Do you want to go back to any of the organizations, the Whitney Young award from the Urban League?

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**Wilson:** Oh my goodness. There are a lot of awards, all right? But I will tell you one thing. Just recently, I was honored by The Brotherhood Crusade. The Brotherhood Crusade, I have been with and known since they started, and I did one of the first fundraisers that they ever had. They gave me – they had an evening honoring Nancy Wilson a few weeks ago that was the most magnificent thing I’ve ever seen. Of all the honors and awards and dinners and all that, this one was absolutely magnificent. The pictures, when you walked in the hotel lobby, on the table. Nancy Wilson was everywhere. The invitation was something I’ve never seen. It was gorgeous. The Brotherhood Crusade is a wonderful – Danny Bakewell is a wonderful young man. Well, he’s younger than me. That’s why I say young man. But I’ve always – I was very much involved when the Crusade started, and they know they can call on me for whatever.

**Levy:** In 1974 you had an album called *All in Love is Fair* and a huge billboard on Sunset Boulevard.

**Wilson:** Really?

**Levy:** You never saw it?

**Wilson:** I don’t know. I might have.

**Levy:** I was going to ask you what it felt like to drive down Sunset Boulevard and see you larger than life.

**Wilson:** I don’t know. I swear I don’t remember. You know, when you’ve lived a life as full as mine, and as long, and done as much as I have, it is very difficult to isolate and remember things, bring up – one of these days, maybe I’ll be able to get it together, but right now I can’t remember. I’m glad you told me that. That’s nice to know.

**Levy:** There’s a picture of it in John Levy’s biography.


**Wilson:** Well I saw it and just didn’t pay any attention.

**Levy:** At Lark at Arnold. **And Larkin Arnold**

**Wilson:** Oh God, **Lark and Arnold Larkin Arnold**, Capitol Records.

**Levy:** Yeah. A lot of people – not just entertainers, although there’s plenty of them, but even fans – have cited you as a role model, and I’m wondering how that feels?

**Wilson:** As long as I stay me, I think I’ve lived a life that can be looked at with pride. It’s a tremendous responsibility. I remember telling my mom one time that it was such a – it

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was a burden, being loved, and she didn't understand what I was saying. She said, "God will only do – he will only give you as much as you . . ." I said, "Mom, God is not the one who's putting all this pressure on me." It's living. It's not anything that He's doing. And it is quite a responsibility. I don't consciously think about it at all, but I do know, and I am proud of the fact, that I have lived a life that people can say, wow, she was pretty cool.

**Levy:** In an interview recently, a gentleman wrote, "There is always a ministerial quality to your approach," the ministry of Nancy Wilson. Is there a message that you feel should be shared?

**Wilson:** If you think about all the shows and all the songs I've sung, you will see faith involved in all that I do. I do have a feeling, and I do have a presence of the Supreme Being. I know it. I embrace it. I love it. The bishop who was the Lutheran bishop wanted to know when I was going to go into the pulpit? I said, "Nelson, you have your pulpit, and I have mine." And sometimes that's exactly the way I feel about going on stage. It is a pulpit. You can do good work with it, or you can do bad work with it. I have always tried to do the good part.

**Levy:** We talked earlier about *Skyline Melody*. That was your t.v. show at age 15. In 1974 you hosted a talk/variety show of your own. *The Nancy Wilson Show* was on KNBC in Los Angeles. It won an Emmy. Tell us what you remember about that show.

**Wilson:** Getting off a plane after having worked someplace on Saturday night and having to get into the studio to do a show on Sunday evening. That's what I remember. It was difficult to get there to do it, because generally I would be working someplace on Saturday night, someplace east, and I had to be back in the studio on Sunday to do the show.

I remember that we had many, many, many different varieties of guests. We didn't just have – we had sports. We had entertainers. We had politicians. We covered the gamut of existence, really. We had a great, great lineup of guest stars, people who came out. We had athletes. We had movie actors. We had politicians. We did it all. I was very proud of that show. It was in the spot where *Saturday Night Live* is now.

**Levy:** You did 26 shows. That's two – you got picked up after the first 13. Was it hard to prepare for that? I know you were tired, flying in, but that's a lot, to interview people from all those different walks of life.

**Wilson:** I had – Diane Louie [Nancy self-corrected name below] was my stage manager. I was good to go. She had everything scripted. Everything was laid out for me. I didn't have to – it was not difficult at all, actually once the show – in fact Amos Cookies,

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they did their – they came and gave cookies, and he was trying out his recipes. So there was a lot of good stuff that came out of that.

**Levy:** It was produced by Leroy Robinson, directed by George Michael, who is now on *20/20*, and I think Darlene Chan was involved.

**Wilson:** I said Diane Louie. I meant Darlene Chan, who was my stage manager. Diane Louie writes music for me.

**Levy:** That must have been a pretty darn good show, if you got bumped by *Saturday Night Live*.

**Wilson:** We got bumped by *Saturday Night Live*, right.

**Levy:** '74, which is the year that that show was on – it went '74 to early '75 – '74 was your second whirlwind romance.

**Wilson:** Oh yeah, right. I mentioned – John remembers this – a psychic came on the show and was talking about me getting married and all that stuff, and John would start laughing. He said, “There’s nobody that [?]. Are you kidding?” Both of us – that’s the furthest thing from my mind. A couple of months later, I was married, but it was like, you can’t be serious.

**Levy:** You’ve got to go find that psychic now.

**Wilson:** I’m trying to – Kenny somebody. Kenny Kingston?

**Levy:** Um-hmm.

**Wilson:** Yeah. Because John started laughing and said, “Well I know that’s not going to happen.”

**Levy:** You met him, you married him 30 days later, and you went on to have two daughters, and you kept recording, and you kept touring, and you kept going. Your last two albums for Capitol Records came out in 1980. From then on, the recording pace of the first two decades at least slowed down just a little bit. Between 1981 and 1997 you did a bunch of interesting collaborations and guest spots, which we’ll talk about too. But you also did 10 more albums on your own, six of which I think were produced by Kiyoshi Itoh for Columbia, Epic, Sony. But before that one happened, you did a 1981 trio album called *At My Best* with Mike Wolff, John B. Williams, and Roy McCurdy.

**Wilson:** I’m glad you remember that one. Do you have a copy of it?

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**Levy:** I believe so.

**Wilson:** Would you . . . ?

**Levy:** Yes I will.

**Wilson:** Thank you, because I don't remember it at all. I don't remember it today. Let's put it that way.

**Levy:** It was for a little label. I think it was called ASI. I have no idea how this came about.

**Wilson:** It did very well, as I recall.

**Levy:** I do think it did. I brought it up particularly because I thought it was a good way for you to talk about "my gentlemen." There have been many. So I throw it open to cover from wherever you want to start. You can go back to Don Trenner, if you like.

**Wilson:** Must I?

**Levy:** No.

**Wilson:** That's a long – I talked to him not too long ago.

I've always had great musicians with me, great conductors. I'm very fortunate that at this point my drummer has been with me 28 years; the bass player, aside from when I allowed him to go do a t.v. show, for 28 years.

**Levy:** Let's give their names. We're talking about . . .

**Wilson:** John B. Williams on bass, Roy McCurdy on drums. **Lou Llew** Matthews, we're getting up there in time, 18 years or so. He's my conductor, and he has produced and arranged a lot of the things I've done for MCG – Manchester Craftsmen's Guild. I got that part right. Ronnell Bright, I remember well. I can't remember too many. The guys have been with me for so long that for me to try to remember who was with me 40 years ago is . . .

**Levy:** Yeah. The main ones were Don Trenner, Ronnell, and Mike Wolff.

**Wilson:** Michael was with me five or six years.

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**Levy:** Phil Wright.

**Wilson:** He was with me five years or so, yeah. See, I wouldn't have thought of that. I'm glad you got all that together.

**Levy:** But tell me about what "my gentlemen" really means, because it's not just a phrase you throw away.

**Wilson:** They're with me. They allow me to feel comfortable enough to arrive onstage without a rehearsal, without worrying about anything, knowing that I can change the show if I want to. I can switch stuff around, because they're there, and they've been there with me and supported me, supported both emotionally and physically. They've been there. I know my guys well. And when I say gentlemen, I mean that. They are gentlemen, as opposed to just "the fellows." They are cordial, always dress nice. I remember, back in the day, when people would go on stage without anything on. Most people expect to see my trio in a tuxedo, but once in a while – once in a while – if we're doing a jazz thing, we don't have to wear the tuxedos. But they are – it's a presentation. I want them to look like gentlemen with their tuxedos. That's the difference. I didn't want to work in the sawdust, years ago. I wanted to be in a supper club. I did not want to be in the rooms that had sawdust on the floor and whatnot. I just couldn't see that. If I didn't have to do it at 15, why would I want to do it at 25?


**Levy:** What stands out for you in your memory – and I can give you songs if you need it – but I'm thinking about some of those lush albums that Kiyoshi produced with charts by Masahito Satoh. There are four or five, six albums in that batch that were almost harkening back to the early '60s Capitol material. What stands out for you in those days and memories and times?

**Wilson:** Right now, just that we did them. Don't start me lying about how we did – well, a lot of them were done in Tokyo. That's what stands out, that they were done in Tokyo, that Kiyoshi also liked the same kind of music that I liked. We did a couple of things in Los Angeles, but the bottom line was just to continue to do good material. That was my – that's always been my – about recording – is recording material that's substantial.

**Levy:** You also did some music videos with Kiyoshi. My recollection is that the – this is when MTV – or VH1 . . .

**Wilson:** VH1.

**Levy:** . . . was starting up, so that we finally had some "jazz" on t.v. in a music video format. Isn't *Forbidden Lover* around the time when you finally got a chance to actually lay down on the piano?

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**Wilson:** Was it *Forbidden Lover* or was it that song . . .

**Levy:** *I'll Be a Song?* No, it was the music video with Carl Anderson. We did two songs from *Forbidden Lover*.

**Wilson:** See, you remember more than I do. I don't remember. I don't remember it at all. I remember recording with Carl – singing with Carl, not necessarily recording with him.

**Levy:** It was a studio in Culver City, and the director with the frizzy hair, and Doug Dilge.

**Wilson:** Okay. You lost me.

**Levy:** What I remember, because I've heard you talk about it in interviews, but not related to this video, was the vision you had of draping yourself across a piano, the drama of it all, and for the first time, Nancy Wilson got to do a music video that was all of that.

**Wilson:** Okay. I need to see it.

**Levy:** You need to see it.

**Wilson:** That's for sure.

**Levy:** You'll love it. I promise.

You did some live concert video performances that Kiyoshi was involved in.

**Wilson:** Carnegie Hall.

**Levy:** Yes, the Carnegie Hall show, and then one down at the Bottom Line in the Village, *East Meets West*.

*[Ken, there may be video of one or both of these shows in the Levy archives]*

**Wilson:** I don't remember that one. The Bottom Line? Did I work the Bottom Line?

**Levy:** I think that's where it was. It was a public show. It was for the video.

**Wilson:** I don't remember that.

**Levy:** Remember anything about the Carnegie Hall gig?

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**Wilson:** Yeah. Purple dress.

**Levy:** We're back to the style.

**Wilson:** Back to the style. Purple gown. It was gorgeous. Lew **Llew** [Mathews] was around then too, and Masahiko. I had both of them out there.

**Levy:** That's right. And Carl Anderson was on [?].

**Wilson:** I love Carl Anderson. His voice is like – there would be a time when you couldn't tell where his stopped and mine started. We sang – we were singing – what was Carl's big song?

**Levy:** *Ferris Wheel*.

**Wilson:** Yes, we sang *Ferris Wheel* at Carnegie Hall, and Carl and Nancy left the building. I've never been that involved in the music. We were not there. We were someplace . . .

**Levy:** On a ferris wheel.

**Wilson:** On a ferris wheel. It was the first time I can remember really saying, I left the building. I was – we were somewhere else, and it was magnificent. It was wonderful. I loved working with Carl.

**Levy:** A good place to jump off to some other people that you've worked with over the years.

**Wilson:** You come up with the names if you're expecting me to remember.

**Levy:** James Ingram.

**Wilson:** See, that's what I'm saying. Thank you. Let's see. Daryl Coley.

**Levy:** Peabo and Daryl Coley, the two vocalists.

**Wilson:** Daryl Coley, Peabo Bryson. Daryl Coley was on the Ramsey Lewis album. Where'd I work with Peabo?

**Levy:** I forget which album.

**Wilson:** It was on an album, really?

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**Levy:** I think there's one track on an album.

**Wilson:** You sure about that?

**Levy:** No.

**Wilson:** I'm not either.

**Levy:** I'll look it up for you.

**Wilson:** I remember doing a couple of shows with Peabo, but I don't remember recording with him.

**Levy:** That would be it. Is it hard to sing with another person?

**Wilson:** Well, let's put it this way: before Daryl Coley, Bernard **Benard**— what was his last name?

**Levy:** [?Ardmer] **Igner**

**Wilson:** Bernard **Benard**[?]. They had brought him in to sing this song with me, which I had no clue what ever possessed them to think that that would work. There's such a big, big difference in the tonal qualities and all that. So that didn't work at all. That's how I found Daryl Coley, because that was — oh, I love his voice, and we mesh, we blend. And James Ingram and I are like — it's like, on fire. I love singing with James Ingram. He's a dynamite — he's a great, great singer. I love him a lot.

**Levy:** You've done some unusual collaborations, unusual in that they were just one-offs. You did some things with the Crusaders.

**Wilson:** That was big. That was big. What was the name of the song? It was big. I know that.

**Levy:** It went right out of my head.

**Wilson:** Oh, I sang it for years. Oh God — what? — *The Way It Goes*?

**Levy:** Yes.

**Wilson:** Whew. That would have broken my heart, if I didn't remember that. That was — that got — that was big for the Crusaders. That was big.

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Who else did I work with?

**Levy:** There was some unusual compil- – Chick Corea, Return to Forever.

**Wilson:** I'm glad that you're remembering – have all this written down.

**Levy:** You were invited to do one or two songs, [Stephen] Sondheim, in the collection, which was . . .

**Wilson:** That was where Peabo Bryson came in. It was a Sondheim song we did together. Don't ask me the name of the song.

**Levy:** I won't ask.

**Wilson:** But when you mentioned Sondheim, I remembered, that was where Peabo Bryson came in, and I don't remember the name of the song. **[The duet was *Loving You on Color and Light: Jazz Sketches on Sondheim, Sony 1995*]**

**Levy:** There was the Boston Pops. That was a recording.

**Wilson:** Yes. It was fun. That's my big orchestra. That's my milieu.

**Levy:** Then there was a very unusual album with Barry Manilow.

**Wilson:** It was big.

**Levy:** It was very big. It was very unusual . . .


**Wilson:** *With My Lover Beside Me.*

**Levy:** That's right. What do you remember about that album?

**Wilson:** That there was Mercer lyrics – Johnny Mercer lyrics. Barry is delightful, fun to work with, easy. I was asked to do this album in an elevator in Osaka.

**Levy:** Really?

**Wilson:** Ran into the producer on an elevator, and he told me that Manilow was getting ready to have this thing he wanted to do and would I be interested in doing a Mercer album with Barry Manilow? Who's going to say no? Barry's delightful to work with. This was easy, a piece of cake. Here again, you get to know the material.

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**Levy:** That's some beautiful material

**Wilson:** *When October Goes*. Oh, wonderful, wonderful material.

**Levy:** That's one of the ones I heard you pull out of the air at an audience request, after not doing it for many, many years.

**Wilson:** I did it not too long ago.

**Levy:** Yes, in Oakland.

**Wilson:** I hadn't done it in forever – in years.

**Levy:** Actually, it was Seattle.

In late '80s and '90s, you kept doing television, but you also did another show of your own. This time it was a syndicated program.

**Wilson:** Right, *Red, Hot, and Cool*.

**Levy:** Tell us about that show.


**Wilson:** We filmed it at the Biltmore Hotel. It gave – there was no doubt about it. It was a jazz show, because we had an awful lot of jazz artists on. One of the reasons that I liked doing it so much, is it exposed the audience to – because I was in a position to do this show, I could bring people on who were in the jazz field, who didn't get exposure. That was one of the good things about it. It was fun to do.

**Levy:** Do you remember the format? You always did a song. Then you would showcase the guest . . .

**Wilson:** Somebody else.

**Levy:** . . . somebody else, the guest. Then sometimes you would do something with them. I can't remember if it was a half hour or an hour.

**Wilson:** That's what I – you just read my mind. I was trying to think if it was a half hour or an hour.

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**Levy:** I think it was a half hour, and I think we might have done two a day in that time. I do remember some of the guests. There was some obvious – Joe Williams was one. You might have had Lou Rawls also.

**Wilson:** We did.

**Levy:** But we had Gerald Albright, and we had Supersax.

**Wilson:** It was a good show, until they started putting it on in weird hours.

**Levy:** What do you attribute – is that the, “Oh my God, it’s a jazz show. We’ll put it on at 2am”?

**Wilson:** Probably, yeah. Jazz was not getting fair play at all. Back in the day, on AM there was jazz everywhere, and on FM it was definitely jazz. I can’t – it’s so hard to find in Los Angeles a jazz station. Of course there’s Sirius and XM now, but you have to look to find the kind of music that I sing. To find me on the radio is very difficult. To even find me in the stores. They’re playing my Christmas album all over the place, in Nordstroms and all these different stores. So right now I’ll be quite popular, between now and Christmas.

**Levy:** I heard you at Marie Callender’s this morning.

**Wilson:** Then you know I’m telling you the truth. People are calling me up. “Listen, I just came out of Nordstrom, and they’re playing you.” “I just came out – they’re playing” ...

**Levy:** Let’s talk for a minute about the fact that it took until 2001 for you to record a Christmas album.

**Wilson:** Never thought about it, but I realized that I hadn’t and it should be done. I gave that album to MCG. Manchester Craftsmen’s Guild is an absolutely wonderful organization. They help the community. I also have a personal interest in Manchester Craftsmen’s Guild, because it came out of the Bidwell Cultural and Training Center, which is where my husband – what my husband was running when I met him. So Bidwell and Manchester and I have got this really close affinity. I figured if I was going to do a Christmas album – it was just nice to do it and give it away, as a way of saying thank you. And I knew that they needed it. They do such good work that – and then they came. We started doing other things and started winning Grammys. So it changed. It changed a lot. The very fact that I gave that album away made some really good things happen, as a way of saying thank you.

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**Levy:** I'm going to dip back to just before 2001 for a minute, just to touch on a couple of t.v. shows, which is where we had been. In '89, we're back with Bill Cosby.

**Wilson:** I played somebody's mother. I can see myself peeping over the banister. I just saw it. So that's why I know about it. I just saw it on a DVD that they played at the Brotherhood Crusade. Bill and I, we've always – he used to open for me. In fact his – and also, his first date with Camille – with his wife – was to come see me. So we have a long – and also, my dog **Jay Jake** came from Bill. He sent me my dog. But it's just nice to have friends that you can consider that – that you – it's just – I don't have any enemies that I know of. So that's – I'm grateful for that.

**Levy:** You did a couple more television roles in the '90s and a little bit into 2000. You did *New York Undercover*, in which you played yourself, and you did *Moesha*, playing yourself, I think.

**Wilson:** Yeah, I played myself. And I did – when did I just do Mo'Nique? I played a mother.

**Levy:** *The Parkers*.

**Wilson:** *The Parkers*. That's Mo'Nique.

**Levy:** And *The Sinbad Show*.

**Wilson:** Oh, *The Sinbad Show*. I was a regular.

**Levy:** Um-hmm. Again, mother – his mother.


**Wilson:** I was his mother. I played. Ray J was my grandson. Ray J, Brandy, Moesha. Ray J was my grandson on *The Sinbad Show*. Brandy, I remember walking out of the mall, and she started singing. It just blew me away. She was so good. That was fun, doing *The Sinbad Show*. That was a truly – if you know anything of Sinbad's nature, you would know that you would have a ball doing that show. That was wonderful.

**Levy:** In those later years, doing t.v. like that, did you ever regret not having done more of it throughout the years?

**Wilson:** No. I don't have time for regret.

**Levy:** Let's go back into the new millenium.

**Wilson:** Are we getting close?

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**Levy:** We're close. We're in 2000 now. We just talked a bit about MCG and the Christmas album. You alluded to the two albums that followed, both of which won you Grammys. The first one has a title that couldn't be more perfect for describing your overall approach.

**Wilson:** Yes. *R.S.V.P. (Rare Songs, Very Personal)*, though that's not true. Most of the songs I do are not personal. If they were personal, I would never have – that's one thing people ask me. I said, that's where the actress comes in, where you go there. You don't take this personally. You can't afford to. If every time I sang a sad song, I had to get – so you don't take it with you. You don't do that. Not if you have any sense.

**Levy:** But you have to have the understanding or empathy or the story.

**Wilson:** Oh yeah, but you can do that without getting hit. You don't need to be bludgeoned to understand pain. At least I never did. I always have empathy for other people and know what they're going through, and that allows me to go there again, because basically, that's what it is. It's going there. It's going without – outside yourself, and becoming whatever you're supposed to be within that particular song.

**Levy:** Any favorites from those albums? Some really interesting material.

**Wilson:** I'm just trying to think what's on them.

**Levy:** *An Older Man . . .*

**Wilson:** . . . (*is like an elegant wine*). I did that on the floor for a while.

**Levy:** And *Knitting Class*.

**Wilson:** That's cute. I've never sung it other than in the studio, because Roy McCurdy loves that song.

**Levy:** *Why Did I Chose You?*

**Wilson:** That's one of my favorites, *Why Did I Chose You?* And the other one from – oh dear. I did a song with the Brazilian.

**Levy:** Ivan Lins.

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**Wilson:** Ivan Lins. What was that song? I can't remember. What is the second song I do in my show now? *I Wish I'd Met You*. Whew. Getting ready to really lose it there for a minute. *I Wish I'd Met You*. I love that. That's from the *Turned to Blue*.

**Levy:** Also on *Turned to Blue* is the title track. Tell us about that.

**Wilson:** We were able to convince Maya Angelou to – it didn't take much. She would allow us to put music to one of her poems. Of course she said yes, and we were down to about – we had three choices, and *Turned to Blue* was the one that made the most sense. But we went through – collected and went through most of her things, and that was the one we wanted to put to music.

**Levy:** Do you read much poetry?

**Wilson:** No. I read murder mysteries, and medical – Robin Cook. Before I was 18, I think I read every Agatha Christie book there was. My mother was an avid reader. So I got that from Lillian.

**Levy:** It's been such a very long and enduring career that it's truly impossible to delve into every little thing that you did. So I thought that at this point, we'd do a little free association, just names and places and things that popped into mind, to see what pops into yours. And the one thing that we mentioned, but barely, is Ramsey Lewis. Talk to me about Ramsey Lewis.


**Wilson:** Ramsey's a lot of fun to work with. He's always out of the theater before I can get changed, which means I have – I'm the one who has to face all the people. Ramsey is – that's my boy. That's my guy. He – I know he probably has difficulty with some people, but I've never had a problem with him. He's a lot of fun to work with. I enjoyed doing the album with him.

**Levy:** You've done three.

**Wilson:** Yeah, I think it's three, but the one that I like is the last one, which was just the rhythm. We were together, which we were not on the others, which is – they had laid the tracks down, and I sang over them. This one, we were there together, and that was a lot of fun. *God Bless the Child*. It was fun. Ramsey is – I love that – he does some things that really knock me out, when we hear different things and we go with one another. That makes it fun.

**Levy:** Arsenio Hall.

**Wilson:** As he said, "There would be no me without her."

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**Levy:** For those who don't know the story.

**Wilson:** Arsenio opened for me. I never heard the name, didn't know who it was. I say it was Cleveland. He says it was someplace else. But anyway, I heard the last bit of his routine, and I was in hysterics. I was hysterical. It was so funny. The Pips without Gladys. It was just absolutely hysterical, and I told John about it. He opened – started opening for me. Then we got him to come to California, and John made things happen for him. So he always realizes and acknowledges the fact that Nancy Wilson is the one who discovered me and brought me along and made sure – and John Levy was the one who made sure stuff started to happen.

**Levy:** And to this day?

**Wilson:** I just saw him the other day. He's always – he's there. He's always around. If, God forbid, he thought that I was ill or something was wrong, he would be there in a minute, and I know that. He is really truly a gentleman and a nice, nice man.

**Levy:** Did he steal your musicians?

**Wilson:** He stole two of my musicians, yes. I said earlier that John B. Williams had gone to do a t.v. show. That was the television show. It was Arsenio's show. Arsenio was nice enough to ask me. "I need Michael Wolff and" – so I said, of course.

**Levy:** And Roy.

**Wilson:** Roy wasn't there very long.

**Levy:** No, just for a minute.

**Wilson:** No, he was just there. I don't . . .

**Levy:** That's right, Terri Lyne did the show.

**Wilson:** Terri Lyne Carrington did the show. So I just know that he stole – he didn't steal it. He asked nicely. So he had my musicians. But I was happy for them. I was happy for John B., and I was happy for Michael. I saw Michael just recently. Where did I see Michael?

**Levy:** In New York.

**Wilson:** What was going on?

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**Levy:** You played the Allen Room.

**Wilson:** And he came.

**Levy:** He and Polly [Draper] came.

**Wilson:** I would know his boys – his kids – *The Naked Brothers Band*.

**Levy:** Didn't you do a spot on their show?

**Wilson:** No. I did a recording with the boys, the little boy – Michael Wolff's two little boys. They were probably 9 and 7 at the time. We went in the studio, me and Michael and John B. and Roy. The boys had written this song, the kids' song. The littlest one came out and told me that I had sung it wrong. I said, "I beg your pardon?" He said, "You changed the lyrics." I said, "Where did I change – when did I change the lyrics?" He said, "You said . . ." I said, "But you have to understand: I'm a woman. I cannot sing this like a man. I can't say this stuff." He said, "Oh, okay." But he came right – did not feel a thing, coming out there, telling me that "You sang it wrong."

**Levy:** I had not heard that story.

**Wilson:** Oh, you didn't know that? Oh, the little one came and told me I sang the song wrong.

**Levy:** Lou Rawls.

**Wilson:** Bless his heart. I miss him. One of the things that stands out is when we both did one of Cannonball's live albums. We're – both of us are on one of Cannonball's albums. Lou and I have always had – we always had a good rapport, good relationship, especially doing UNCF year after year after year after year after year after year. This is the first time I didn't go, was this past year, didn't go to UNCF. I've been every year for so long. And Mary Dee didn't go either. So, they miss us.

**Levy:** Tony Bennett.

**Wilson:** I'm crazy about him. There was something else we had in common, because when he sings *When Joanna Loved Me*, it just – I love it so much. I love that song. Don't know him that well, but love his voice and love his interpretation.

**Levy:** You guys did a doubleheader some years ago. I think it was in Tahoe.

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**Wilson:** A doubleheader. What is a doubleheader?

**Levy:** You were both . . .

**Wilson:** . . . oh, on the same bill?

**Levy:** Um-hmm.

**Wilson:** Okay. If you say so. I have no memory.

**Levy:** Somewhere there's a video of that too. **[Live at Tahoe, video might be in the Levy archives]**


**Wilson:** Okay. All right.

**Levy:** Carmen McRae.

**Wilson:** Carmen McRae. Everybody had it that I had taken her song and that she was supposed to be mad at me, which she was not, not at all. At the end, I was there. I went to the house, tried to get her to play pinochle. She was a lot of fun. I loved her a lot. Like I felt about Sarah. I was to go see Sarah that same week that she passed, and they said when I – they called me to tell me not to come, because she was too ill. She would always send me messages. “Tell the little one.” They called me the baby. They were always kind. I have nothing negative anywhere about any of them.

And Dinah Washington, oh my goodness. She only relaxed when she realized that I was with John Levy, because it was like, the first pair of jeweled shoes – she had to make sure that I had jeweled shoes. And she was concerned about my agency. But when she found out I was with John Levy, she left it alone. But she was there. I remember Philadelphia in particular, when she came to Pep's Showbar. She wanted to make sure that I was – I also have seen her at her worst, which is usually with a husband or a boyfriend. But with me – because she would turn around and cuss somebody out and turn right around and say, “I'm sorry, Nancy,” and go right back to what – she was a trip. She was fun. She would make – she'd have you laughing.

She and my mother – that's how I ended up getting married that first time, was Dinah Washington and my mother. “Well, you're here now. Why would you wait?” That's the same thing Kacy said. “Why wait until . . .?” So I blame both my marriages on other people. My mother and Dinah Washington, really – we sat there one night. I was just coming in from Australia, and my mother was living in California at the time. The two of them got their heads together and figured, since you're here, and I ended up getting married in Bishop Trout's, the same bishop I've been talking about – at his church. There

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was nobody there but my mother and Jimmy Bond and Jeanne. Those were the only people – and Aunt Jenny of course – were there for the wedding. But that was a night out when my mother and Dinah Washington talked me into getting married. “There’s no point in waiting. You’re here. I’m here. Let’s get it done.” I had forgotten about that part. I blame that marriage on my mother.

**Levy:** One of the words I have written down here, you just mentioned minutes ago: pinochle.

**Wilson:** Oh, I used to love pinochle. It’s a game that takes some skill. You can’t just – it’s not like bid whist. It’s not like tonk. It’s not like blackjack. Pinochle takes some – you got to have a little bit of – you have to count. You have to finesse. It’s quite a game. And I miss it. I have not been able to play it for a long time. Dionne Warwick and I were – we were great fans of pinochle. We would travel miles to be able to play together. I remember we have stayed up all night and stopped playing only because one of us was going on stage at Leo’s Casino. That’s how much we loved pinochle.

**Levy:** While we’re talking about girlfriends, how about Mary Dee?

**Wilson:** I’ve known Mary forever, it seems like. I don’t remember exactly when we met, but she was doing radio then. They just don’t come any nicer, just don’t make them any sweeter, any more concerned about the community. Mary Dee is very much a person who’s out there doing good, making sure that people are well and healthy. We both have been involved with UNCF forever, for a long, long time. We both also decided it’s time for us. We get a chance to sit down now. Let somebody else do it.

**Levy:** Jesse Jackson.

**Wilson:** You don’t really want to hear what I have to say about Jesse. Oh God. He tells me when he does something wrong, it’s my fault. “You made me this way.” Because after Martin died, I told you that we saw to it that John Lewis, Jesse, all of his “crew,” shall we say – so I got to know them all fairly well. And Jesse – when Jesse screws up really badly, and I call him up and call him on it, “It’s your fault. If it hadn’t been for you, I wouldn’t be doing this.” But I know him very well. I’m concerned right now about young Jesse. Something’s going on in Congress, and I don’t know what it is. I just heard that the other day. So I have to – they just lowered the boom on Charlie Rangel, and I think they’re going after Jesse Jackson, Jr.

**Levy:** Is this the race card, coming back?

**Wilson:** I – honest to God, in all honesty, I do not believe that it’s true. I just don’t. The bottom line is – Charlie Rangel did some things that he shouldn’t have done. They

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brought down white Congressmen, white Senators. They mess with them. Just because we're black, we're special? You can't mess with us because we're black? That's not right. So I don't think it has anything to do with the race card. I really don't. I think we're beyond that a little bit. I think that we have to deal with what's going on. Barack Obama's having difficulties, but I think that any President who took over when he took over would be having difficulties, black or white. And they're going to – they picked at George Bush. They pick at – you're the President. You have to be prepared to take whatever they are sending your way. But I'm telling you. I never – fifty years ago I'd not have thought that I would see a black President. So that is one of the proudest moments of my life, when we elected a black President in the United States.

**Levy:** Oprah Winfrey.

**Wilson:** She loves me. She's a good lady. She's a really good lady. I was very proud to be a part of her Legends Ball. And she also does very good work. She's a good – she's got a big heart. Not just a good heart. She's got a big heart, and she is always there. When it matters, when it's important, she – and she does good stuff. She put out some decent movies, and she put [out] the plays. Not just the television show. I'm anxious to see what OWN [Oprah Winfrey Network] is going to be, how the news network show is going to be – the network, period. Not the show. She's going to – that will be interesting to watch.

**Levy:** Since we're in media and black women, Cathy Hughes.

**Wilson:** I have not talked to her in I don't know when, but I knew Cathy Hughes when she owned the radio station in Baltimore, long before TV One. TV One came – I remembered that. Wow, I'm proud of myself. Nice lady, nice lady. Very well – she's got a lot going on up here and has managed to do a lot with what – with very little, starting from nothing to a t.v. station. I'm proud of her.

**Levy:** Gordon Parks.

**Wilson:** I'm godmother to one of his children, and I love *Don't Misunderstand*, which he wrote. He was one of the nicer men you'll ever want to know, handsome, very well read, just an all-around gentleman and a fabulous photographer, of course, but there was so much more to Gordon Parks than his photography.

**Levy:** Octavia Butler.

**Wilson:** Jeez, how did you know I read her? I read everything she wrote. I don't know anything about her. I've just read every book she's ever written.

**Levy:** What kind of books does she write?

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**Wilson:** Science fiction. Wow, where'd you come up with that?

**Levy:** I scoured the bookstores in Seattle for you, to find Octavia Butler books on our first trip to Seattle.

**Wilson:** Oh my God.

**Levy:** Many years ago.

**Wilson:** This is a long time ago, yeah. She wrote science fiction. Her stuff – but it wasn't like aliens and things like that. It was just different, off the beaten path.

**Levy:** Football.

**Wilson:** I just watched the Steelers win last night. I used to really, really love football and watched most games that were on. But then there came a time where everybody that I knew who played football was either cut, waived, and it stopped being fun, because I didn't know anybody anymore. But I'm trying to get – I'm paying a little more attention this year, but there were a few years there where I could have cared less about football, because I was so disappointed that all the people that I knew were gone. They weren't there any more, and it makes you have an empty feeling inside. But now I've changed, as I've – not matured. I've been mature – as I've gotten older. I am now looking at the young folk coming up and I saw – there is a – Auburn is number one, right? That's college. They have a quarterback [Cam Newton]. I gather there's some talk about his father having done something stupid, but I have not seen a young quarterback like that come in college in years. He is the best thing out there, both rushing and passing. He is a force to be reckoned with, and I cannot for the life of me think of his name. But I know about him, and I know he's a quarterback for Auburn, and a black quarterback at that.

I remember back in the day when – before Donovan McNabb, a black person could not be a quarterback. He wasn't smart enough to be a quarterback. It amazes me how many quarterbacks we have starting in the National – in the league now. National League, that's baseball. We have a lot of black quarterbacks now, and they're doing very well. Michael Vick got his act together. Donovan McNabb was responsible for helping him make that transition. Then there's [David] Garrard. See, I know a little bit about football, okay?

**Levy:** Yes you do. You used to follow basketball too, for a bit.

**Wilson:** I still do. Yeah. But right now, it's football time. The Clippers lost their 17th game out of 21 last night. That's not fun. But I still love the Lakers. And I love – there's

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specific ball players who show me something, like LeBron [James]. I've watched Kobe [Bryant] grow from a kid in the pros. He started as – he didn't go to college and all that stuff. He came in cold, and I've watched him mature. It's wonderful to see. And San Antonio's got two dudes that I like a lot. So I do know my basketball players, yes.

**Levy:** You mention people that you don't know anymore, and it kind of gets – you didn't use the word, but depressing in some way. Does that apply at all to the music field and the people who are no longer with us?

**Wilson:** It's tragic. It's sad. It is. I know we're going to lose some people soon.

**Levy:** [James] Moody, among them.


**Wilson:** You read my mind. And that's going to break my heart. He was so – he is just such a sweetheart, and to realize how ill he is. But he would never let on that he was ill. Clark Terry. There's some of the guys that are – I'm going to be missing them, and I'm not really prepared yet to deal with it.

**Levy:** You are – or at least you used to be, but I haven't talked to you about it in a long time – you used to keep a pretty good eye on the up and coming talent. I'm wondering who you're admiring in today's musical world?

**Wilson:** A few years back I started – the only time I listen to anything – I never listened to music at home, and I don't listen in the car. I listen to audiobooks. So I can't tell you who's coming up. I can't tell you. Liz Wright is the last name that I know, that I know specifically, and I know that she's good. But, as I say, I can't get decent reception to hear anybody, and I haven't been in a record shop to purchase in – which I blame – I'm sorry about that. That's not good of me. I should be out there, supporting the music. But I don't hear it. So how am I supposed to support it, if I can't hear it? So I have no idea who is doing what now. And after a while, after I reach a certain age, I just stepped away from the business and just did mine.

**Levy:** But you are a fan of John Legend? No?

**Wilson:** I'm not just a fan. I'm – I got a crush on John Legend. I have a crush on Ludacris. Oh yeah. He is fine. I saw him at the – I don't know what it is – the Oscars or the Grammys, and he came out there in a tuxedo that just blew me away. He looked so good. I like Ludacris. I like – I'm crazy about John Legend. I love his sound, his tonal quality. There's a resonance in there that just gets to me. I like Seal. I can't talk about Lady Gaga and people like that, because that's like – has nothing to do with – who can sing is Beyoncé. She can sing. Not just the showgirl. I mean, when she sang *Listen* in

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*Dreamgirls* – I saw her do it in person – she is – she has a magnificent voice, and it doesn't have to be all of the today's stuff. She's got a long life of music ahead of her.

**Levy:** Have you heard Christina Aguilera?

**Wilson:** She has a brilliant voice. She's got a great voice. Don't know any of her stuff. I've heard her voice, yes. I think she's excellent. Who else is there? I can't think of anybody in the jazz field's name. That's what disturbs me. That really does.

**Levy:** Do you think that the music has changed, for better or for worse?

**Wilson:** Well, you can't put music in there at all. Really, it's not music. I'm sorry. Come on. I'm just dealing with the reality of my age and what not. What is going on today obviously does not appeal to someone my age. I'm trying to be nice about it. I do watch every now and then, and I see certain things, but none of it registers. It doesn't stick with me. I mentioned Beyoncé and her particular version of a song called *Listen*, because it reached my heart. It touched me. But the rest of the stuff is outrageous outfits. Oh, no, no. Pop music today . . .

**Levy:** No melodies?

**Wilson:** No. Will.i.am writes some melodies every now and then, and so does Ne-Yo. And you didn't even know I knew who they were, did you?

**Levy:** No.

**Wilson:** See there. Ne-Yo, he writes a melody. He writes a story.


**Levy:** I just have a few more questions. *Jazz Profiles*.

**Wilson:** I wish I was still doing it. It's still being played, but – I learned more from it. I learned more about the people. I had a wonderful time doing it, because I really got to know people that I only had heard about and people that I thought I knew. There was so much – the scripts were so great, so good. That was something I'm proud of. I'm proud of the Peabody Award for that.

**Levy:** You had a song called *The Greatest Performance*. Looking back over your career, is there a greatest performance of your life?

**Wilson:** Opening night at the Coconut Grove.

**Levy:** Nothing since?

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**Wilson:** Oh yeah, but you asked me to be specific. I'm telling you – because that was what did everything, that changed it. I had played Las Vegas before I played the Coconut Grove. I'd broken the show in before that. But that night – if that night was successful, then I would be where I am today at 70-whatever. It gave me the longevity that you would want in this career.

**Levy:** What is your definition of success?

**Wilson:** Oh dear. A good night's sleep? I don't really know. It's personal. It is not about the business. My definition of success is if I'm content and can sleep at night, and I'm there for my grandchildren. That's what it's about.

**Levy:** We touched on most of the awards. We can't close out without mentioning them. We know you've won three Grammys. We touched on the NAACP image award. There was an Essence award.

**Wilson:** Yes. You're not going to go name all these awards.

**Levy:** Not all of them. Just a few. There was a Trumpet Award.

**Wilson:** I just got one last night.

**Levy:** It's not on my list yet. I'm sorry.

**Wilson:** I just got an award last night. That was for children also.

**Levy:** There are . . .

**Wilson:** I got the first Paul Robeson Award too. That was special to me.

**Levy:** And there are two others that I know were special to you. One of them was, despite its title, still special to you. That was the NEA Jazz Master.

**Wilson:** Oh yeah.

**Levy:** So tell me just a little bit about that.

**Wilson:** That was – you know, you asked me if it upset me when people called me jazz. I'm a realist. I am a song stylist, but let's be real, if it deals with jazz. Being a Jazz Master is really something special, and I was so pleased that we got John in as a Jazz Master. I think it's rather special. I'm sorry to hear IAJE is not still functioning the way it should,

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but there was something very special about all of that. NEA, actually. It's just great, and I'm very proud to be a member.

**Levy:** And have been a participant on the committees.

**Wilson:** Oh yes, yes.

**Levy:** The other award that I think tickled you was Nancy Wilson Way, the street named for you in Chillicothe. Since we began in Chillicothe, I thought we should go back home.

**Wilson:** One of the major hotels is on my Way. That was one of the greater weekends of my life. It was very special to go back and commemorate the 200th year and to be – we had a parade – was drawn by horses and whatnot. There was a ball – costume ball. And then, when they unveiled the street name, Central State's choir sang. The Ohio State University symphony orchestra played. It was quite a weekend. I remember my husband Wiley [Burton] saying that the only thing that came close to it was the birth of his children. That weekend was that special. It was great. I'm hoping to get back to Nancy Wilson Way one of these – hopefully next summer. But it's hard to get back to Chillicothe now, because everybody's gone, or living in Columbus. But I have to go back. I've got to go visit my Mom's. But that's a long way to go.

**Levy:** One last question. How would you like to be remembered?

**Wilson:** I'm going to name one of my songs: *A Lady with a Song* would sum it up for me.

**Levy:** Thank you.

{transcribed and edited by Barry Kernfeld)  
{**corrections and annotations by Devra Hall Levy**}

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