

**Music at MIT Oral History Project**

**Samuel Jay Keyser**

*Interviewed*

*by*

**Forrest Larson**

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## Contributors

**Samuel Jay Keyser** (b. 1935) joined the MIT Department of Philosophy and Linguistics in 1977, and is now professor emeritus. He was a founding editor of *Linguistic Inquiry*. His research interests include history and structure of the English language and syntactic theory. An active trombonist, he currently performs with the Aardvark Jazz Orchestra, The New Liberty Jazz Band, and The Dave Whitney Orchestra. Previously he played with the MIT Concert Jazz Band and The Intermission Trio. He has also published poetry and a memoir.

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

Interview conducted by Forrest Larson on December 2, 2010, in the studio of studio of MIT Video Productions. Second of three interviews. First interview: September 22, 2010; third interview: December 17, 2010. Duration of the audio recording is 1:52:04.

### Music at MIT Oral History Project

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

## 1. Acquiring current trombone

FORREST LARSON: It is my pleasure to welcome Samuel Jay Keyser. He is Professor Emeritus in the Department of Linguistics and Philosophy at MIT. He is a poet and also a well-regarded trombonist. It is his musical life that provides the context for most of the topics discussed in this interview and in the previous one.

I am Forrest Larson. We're in the studio of MIT Video Productions. The date is December 2nd, 2010.

Thank you, Jay, so much, for coming for this second interview.

SAMUEL JAY KEYSER: Pleasure.

LARSON: So tell me about the story about how you acquired your current trombone. There's quite a fun story about that.

KEYSER: Well, I have had—for the past ten or fifteen years I've been playing a variety of trombones but about five or six years ago I went—with my wife, I took a trip on the Rhine.

LARSON: And what's your wife's name?

KEYSER: Nancy. Nancy Kelly. Nancy loves to travel. She is a travel addict. Whereas I hate to travel. And in fact I wrote a book about it. It's called *I Married a Travel Junkie*, which is essentially a book about why in the world would I follow a woman around the world who loves to travel when I hate to travel. I've—

Since we've been together, I guess I must have visited over 40 countries. And one of the trips that we took was a trip along the Rhine and the Mainz up from Budapest to Amsterdam. And when we first got on this boat I happened to mention to the purser, who had sat down at our table at some meal, he was just being friendly and we were chatting and I mentioned that I play trombone. He said he did, and he wanted to know if I'd brought a trombone along. I said, "No." I brought my mouthpiece, but a trombone is a pretty cumbersome instrument to take along, and also it's pretty loud.

And we went on talking for a while. He excused himself and ten minutes later he came back with a trombone. And he said, "Here, use mine." And he said, "You can practice in the swimming pool." Because below deck there was a swimming pool and nobody used the swimming pool.

So I took his trombone down there and I fell in love with it. It was a King 3B. And so I said to him, "Can I buy your horn?" And he said, "No. I really—I use it. I like it too."

So from then on, I've been looking for a King 3B. And they're hard to find, because although there are a lot of them around there's only a certain vintage that really works well. And I tried out a number and they all struck me as being too stuffy.

And then finally I was at a rehearsal, and there was a trumpet player who was subbing in this rehearsal who happened to work at Osmun [Music, Acton MA]. And he said that they had just brought in a bunch of instruments from Kansas City that

belonged to a military band, that the band was upgrading its instruments and there was an instrument there, a King 3B that had been sitting in somebody's locker for seven years unused.

So I went and I tried it. It felt wonderful. I asked him if I could borrow it over the weekend; I happened to have two gigs. He said, "Sure." I tried it and I bought it. And it's been a great horn for me. I mean my upper register has improved enormously just by changing my instrument. So there are notes that I can hit now that I could never hit before. I mean, high E flat—E flat above the staff, bass clef.

And I'm working on turning these into usable notes. I mean, the E flat is becoming usable. And I can hit the E and the F, which I could never do before. And so it's been a real joy. And one of the reasons is that I can now say that I can do something at the age of 75 that I couldn't do at 72. [laughs] Usually it's the other way around.

LARSON: Wow. So tell me about the character of this horn and how it's different from some of the others that you've played.

KEYSER: Well—

LARSON: Besides the range.

KEYSER: It just plays easier and it doesn't fight back as much. There's no—there's no resistance in the horn and it's got a very nice fat sound and it just sits easy with me. That's really—I think in many cases for trombone players—it's like finding a shoe that fits. I mean, part of what makes your sound is the shape of your anatomy, your vocal tract. And can you find a horn that fits that? Plus, of course, the shape of your lips.

And it's just luck if you find a horn that really fits you. Some musicians spend their whole lives going through horns. Many have, you know, huge numbers of trombones. And they think in terms of one kind of horn for one kind of job and one kind for another, but I've never been that fastidious. I just wanted to find a horn that felt good. And this one has everything I want.

LARSON: Did you have to go try out different kinds of mouthpieces?

KEYSER: No. I happened to have a couple of mouthpieces at home that were really good for me. And I picked one that worked with this horn.

LARSON: That's great.

KEYSER: Yeah, I think it was basically luck.

LARSON: Wow. You have a high regard for the playing of Tommy Dorsey. Tell me about some of the qualities in his playing that you particularly like.

KEYSER: Well, his tone was immaculate. He had a—just a gorgeous tone. And it was effortless. Tommy Dorsey played like a feather falling from a—from a height. It was just completely effortless.

There's a story that Frank Sinatra, who used to sing with Dorsey's band, said he learned how to sing by watching Tommy Dorsey's back. And what he meant by

that was that he would see how Tommy Dorsey phrased, and you could see his back muscles move when he was taking another breath.

Now you just go and listen to any recording of Tommy Dorsey playing his theme song, "I'm Getting Sentimental Over You." I think it was written by Ned Washington. I'm not sure. But I know it was written in the key of F. And he did it in D. Because that way you played it up high so he could hit this note, this D fl—high D flat, that at that time not a lot of horn players were playing. And when he goes up, it's just effortless.

And if you listen to it, I challenge you to tell me where he takes a breath. You just can't hear it. And that's because he was a master of circular breathing. And he had just learned to do that and he did it so naturally that his playing was just incredibly smooth and lyrical.

And there's been a lot of players since then that have wonderful tones, higher ranges, greater technical facility, but I don't think I've heard anybody play "I'm Getting Sentimental Over You" with that kind of just seamless artistry.

LARSON: Wow! It's interesting, you mention that Frank Sinatra learned about phrasing from him. Oftentimes instrumentalists learn from singers.

KEYSER: Yeah.

LARSON: And it's interesting it went that way.

KEYSER: Yeah I've heard that too.

LARSON: So, the other week you were telling me about—you like the work of Carl Fontana.

KEYSER: Yeah.

LARSON: A very different player, but—

KEYSER: Oh yeah, yeah.

LARSON: Tell me about what do you like with Carl's playing?

KEYSER: Well, Carl Fontana is a consummate improviser. For one thing, he can play all over the horn. In other words, he has the technique to play all over the horn. He has doodle tonguing down so that it's just, second nature.

So, he has all of the technical skills. But what he does on top of that is he just doesn't play licks, which a lot of jazz musicians do, just one set of licks after another. He actually plays music. So he'll do a tune, and he will turn it into another song. Sort of like Paul Desmond did with Dave Brubeck. I mean, his improvisations, you could notate them and there you've got another song. So Carl Fontana's musicality on top of all of that technique was really, I thought, superb.

And I remember one record in particular. It was [at the] Monterey Jazz Festival and the players were Jake Hanna on drums, Dave McKenna on piano, Carl Fontana on trombone. I think Plas Johnson came in for a couple of tunes on that particular set. But one of the things that he did was a tune, "Just Friends." That was the name of the tune. And at one point in the tune, everybody drops out. And it's just 32 bars of solo trombone. And it was a mind-boggling performance. Because the time

was impeccable. He was right on top of the chords. And he played it with such rhythmic agility that you would have sworn there was a rhythm section behind him. So he was quite a phenomenon.

LARSON: And it's interesting how he'll take a tune, and really stay with the tune through the improvisation. There's a thing on the web with that song called "If I had a Brain."

KEYSER: Yeah, sure.

LARSON: And he stays with that and pulls it in just an amazing way. And as you said, he doesn't just kind of fill up notes. He really stays—

KEYSER: You know who was a master of that was Lester Young. If you listen to Lester Young on the saxophone you'll see that although he improvises, he always stays close to the tune so that the tune is never submerged. And that's a real gift, to be able to know which of the notes are really the central notes of the tune. And to hit them at just the right point to recall the tune. And Fontana was like that as well. I think he was—

I met him once. He was doing a gig at Harvard University. My old trombone teacher, Tom Everett, who runs the music—jazz and marching band program at Harvard, had invited him to play with the Harvard band. And afterwards Tom invited me to go backstage and meet him.

And he was—I don't know how to describe him. I remember he had a bull's neck. He looked like a prize fighter. He wore a turquoise string tie. And he was one of those guys who has a pickup truck with a gun rack in the back. He lived in Las Vegas. And he said to me—Tom introduced me as his student—he said, "Well, the next time you're in Las Vegas bring your horn and we'll play."

And I said, "Yeah, sure." I said, "Thank you very much" to him. I said, "That's a real honor." In my head I'm thinking, "Yeah, I'm going to get up there next to you," you know. Like I'm going to dance with the prima ballerina of the American Ballet Company. [laughs]

LARSON: So you had studied with Phil Wilson. Tell me about some of the things about his playing that you liked.

KEYSER: Well, Phil is another one of those monsters. He was all over the range. Doodle tonguing he was in charge of, and he was a great improvisationalist. But I think one of the things that Phil Wilson did was—that I admire most—was a CD that he made with Makoto Ozone. And it was just trombone and piano. And at the end of that he does "Giant Steps," which is a very tough jazz tune, a lot of changes. And it was a tour de force to listen to them go through that. I mean it's a delight to listen to it because obviously he and Makoto were so close that where one stopped some very complicated figure, the other would pick up again.

And so I think that what really blew me away was—about his playing was—how complex it was and how—just what a master of the instrument he was. I mean he just knew his way around that horn. There wasn't anything it couldn't—it could do that he couldn't do.

LARSON: Mm-hm. Some jazz musicians talk about emulating the human voice. And the trombone seems to have a particular kind of natural gift for that just because of the design of the horn. Tell me how you think about the, kind of, modeling the trombone with human voice. Do you think of that or are you thinking of a more instrumental kind of approach?

KEYSER: Well, of course the—probably the best example of what you're talking about is Jack Teagarden. If you listen to Jack Teagarden, not only does he—is he a great player, but he's also a great singer. And what's wonderful about listening to Teagarden is that he plays the way he sings. So now you ask me, "do I do that?" No. I'm not really a singer, and I don't—I do sing, occasionally. But it's not something that I—that I'm very good at.

What I do when I play is to try to play the soul of the tune. So I have some sense of where the emotion is in the tune. And that's what I try to—my—I try to express on the horn how that tune makes me feel. And that's often an assessment of not only the tune but the words of the tune.

LARSON: I was just going to ask, there are some jazz musicians who say it's really important to know the lyrics of the song and to be conscious of that as you're playing.

KEYSER: Well for me it's a big help. So if you're going to do something like "Bill Bailey": "Won't you come home Bill Bailey, won't you come home, she moans the whole day long."

Well, that's saying something. And so when I play it I play it sort of dirty. You know, if you do something like "Here's that Rainy Day," which is a very sad tune. I mean, and it's nice to listen to, say, a Sinatra version of it. I try to express the emotion that Sinatra portrays when he sings the tune.

## 2. Approach and technique

LARSON: Tell me about your approach to vibrato.

KEYSER: Well, uh—I have developed a lip vibrato, which I use probably too much. I don't know how I acquired it, but I can do it. And I use it a lot.

I did a piece on NPR [National Public Radio, July 14, 2005] about playing the trombone; how I started to play the trombone and why. And in that piece I played about eight bars of Tommy Dorsey's theme song, "I'm Getting Sentimental Over You," and there you really can't use the lip vibrato, you should use a—an arm vibrato. And I remember after I had done this piece I got an e-mail that said, "Did you know that you are the major topic of conversation on *The Trombone Forum*?" And I said, "No, I don't even know what *The Trombone Forum* is." Well it turns out it's a [Internet] chat room for trombone players.

And sure enough I joined it. I went on and I discovered everybody was talking about the NPR thing, the guy who played trombone and why he picked it up and all that, at this late point in his life. And I got an e-mail from a guy whose name was

Walter Barrett. I remember his name. I can't remember—I think he was in Ohio, but I'm not sure about that. He's a trombone player. They all were. He was a teacher.

And he said, "You know, you did a pretty good job on the—'I'm Getting Sentimental Over You' but your vibrato was wrong." And he included some videos of Tommy Dorsey playing it. And he said, "What I want you to do is to watch his forearm. And you'll notice that when he does vibrato, it's very fast. And the way he does that is by locking his forearm, making this whole area locked. And he does that. And when you lock it and do that you can go very fast." If you just use your wrist it's slower. But if you lock the forearm, then you can get a faster—

LARSON: It's like with string players, the same thing. There's a wrist vibrato and an arm vibrato.

KEYSER: Ah, well—

LARSON: It's the same thing.

KEYSER: I didn't know that. But then I discovered that there are—then I thought, well which is the best vibrato? I mean is it the lip vibrato? Is it the this vibrato? Is it this vibrato? And I managed to find somewhere on the web a discussion about vibrato by Bill Watrous, who is another one of the monsters of the trombone. And Bill Watrous said that he uses all of them. And he says that they're all, you know, useful. And he even combines them. He'll combine a lip vibrato with a forearm or a wrist vibrato or a forearm vib—

And so I felt pretty good about it. I said, well I've got all these vibratos now and I just will use them as I see fit. But just between you and me, I think I've—I ought to stop using lip vibrato as much as I do.

LARSON: Mm-hm. Tell me about using growls and smears and tonguing noises and stuff like that. That's a long tradition with the trombone.

KEYSER: Yeah, I do that. I love doing that. I mean that's—You get a lot of raucous, down and dirty sounds out of the horn. And the way you do that is, I mean, you get the growls by just tongue trill: RRRRRRRR. If you go BRRRRRR it comes out GROWL from the horn. Or the slides—its—the trombone is built for glissandos. And then the plunger is a great—

LARSON: You're a master at the plunger.

KEYSER: Well I love the plunger. I mean, because somehow or other I used to think that I used the plunger because I was hiding behind it. I was insecure in my playing. And so I thought well this—the plunger will cover up a lot of sins. But I've—think I've gotten beyond that now and I think I just use the plunger 'cause it enables me to make the horn talk.

Now there a lot of really great plunger players. I mean, "Tricky Sam" Nanton, and "Dicky" Wells. No, Vic Dickinson and "Dick" Wells. But basically Vic Dickinson and Tricky Sam. Now Tricky Sam used to put a pixie mute into the horn. It's a long, narrow mute. And then he put the plunger on top of the pixie mute. And he could make the thing say mwaaaayaaaaah. And how you get it to do that, you manipulate your tongue inside your mouth while you're blowing. And if you go

myaahnyahhh and do it right, the horn sounds as if somebody is saying, "Yeah yeah, yeah yeah." And if you build that into the blues, it's—can be very effective.

LARSON: Yeah. Do you do much with mutes?

KEYSER: No. I do use a plunger mute. But I find that it's not as versatile for me at any rate as just a plain plumber's plunger. But I do like the plunger mute. And, but, of course if I'm playing, I like to alternate between the plunger and open so that you can hear the contrast.

But also, if the music calls for plungers, I mean, calls for mutes, you've got to use them. So, I think that I'm, with respect to straight mutes and cup mutes—

LARSON: How about the Harmon mute?

KEYSER: Yeah, and the Harmon. I also have a bucket mute. And I like what the bucket mute does. But I don't use the—the mute that I use is the plunger, you know.

LARSON: As opposed to the Harmon mute because you can get kind of "wah wah" with the—

KEYSER: Yeah.

LARSON: That's a different character.

KEYSER: Different character. But it's not as dirty as a plunger.

LARSON: So, well, we briefly touched upon this last time, and it's a hard topic to talk about because, how can you talk about music anyway. But with improvisation are there some basic, kind of, principles that you have when you're thinking about improvisation? Or if say, some young person came to you and wanted you—wanted your feedback on improvisation. How would you talk about that? I know it varies by what kind of tune you're playing and style and all that, but—

KEYSER: Well, I think that I have to tell you that I don't—to really answer—to give the—your question the answer that it deserves I need to know a lot more about music than I know. I know something about music theory, but I don't know a lot. And the people that I know who are improvisationalists, they spent a lot of time at Berklee [College of Music]. They are—they've got the theory down pat.

So, with that as an apology, I think that I would tell you that for me, I don't like to think about it. I just like to do it. And in a way, it's a great relief to me to be able to approach something in a different way than as what I did most of my life as a scientist. So for me, playing jazz is not something that I have a formula for. As a consequence, I make a lot of mistakes.

But the more I play a tune, the more familiar I am with it, the fewer mistakes I make, and the greater the opportunity for me to express what I want to express without thinking about the structure of the tune.

Having said that, here's the standard view. When you want to improvise over a set of chords, one way to do it is to follow what's known as a guide tone. So there's a tune called "Sunday."

[sings] da ba doo bee da da buh da doo ba da da bum a doo ba doo doo. Okay.

The first chord is a C major seven and then it's followed by an F. Now if you know the notes in the C major seven, you know that, for example, the major seven is a B. And the next chord is the F chord. Well, the closest note to the B in the F chord is a half-step up. It's the C. And that's a guide tone. So you take the chords, lay them out, you look at the notes in the chords, and then you trace a path through the notes such that you move the least distance from one chord to the next.

Do you understand what I'm saying?

LARSON: Yeah.

KEYSER: That's it. And that can be the basis of a—an improvisation.

And then there are other rules. I mean there are rules that have to do with, go from the third of one—if you're going through a cycle of fifths, which is a technical thing in music theory—you can go from a—the third of one to the seventh of the next chord to the third to the seventh. So you can bounce back and forth between three and seven and that sort of works.

But that's not how I like to do it. I know about this, but currently I'm working on—well I normally work on a bunch of tunes—at the moment I'm working on "Here's that Rainy Day." And what I do is try to just get the sense of the tonal center of the tune and then try to improvise. That's what I do.

LARSON: Mm-hm. Do you ever quote from other tunes when you're taking a solo?

KEYSER: Not often. I—first of all, it's a pretty good talent to be able to do that and I'm not that good. But sometimes I do. And then it becomes sort of a habit and then you gotta watch out for that. You don't want that to happen. So, for example, there's a tune called "From Monday On."

[sings] do do do dooooo do do do dooo dooo

And it turns out that in the first couple of chords—are the same as "God Bless America." [laughter] So it's fun, after everybody's been improvising and doing these Dixieland, all of a sudden for the trombone player to come in and go,

[sings] bah bah bah bum bahbah.

So I do stuff like that.

LARSON: There was a Carl Fontana thing I heard. He was quoting from *Peter and the Wolf* [by Prokofiev].

KEYSER: I know the one.

LARSON: Yeah. [laughter]

KEYSER: Yeah, I can hear it.

LARSON: It's fun how they sometimes will take classical things and throw it into a lick like that.

KEYSER: Yeah, yeah.

### 3. Linguistics and improvisation

LARSON: So, I was wondering, is your work as a linguist, and the way it's trained your ear to listen to the sound of language and the shapes of words, if that kind of ear training has influenced you as an improviser?

KEYSER: I don't think so. Now I know that I have friends whose—who insist that it does. And I don't like to argue with them. But I think it's really something completely different altogether. I mean, when you're listening to sound as part of a linguistic system, you're focusing on one aspect of sound. But when you're listening to it as music it's completely different. And I think I'm using different cognitive subsystems. And so I don't—now there may be some way in which, because I can hear sounds, I can hear—distinguish the sounds that speakers make in foreign languages, you know, languages that I've never known before, I can still make out what the sounds are.

There may be some level at which that ability reflects on my ability to remember tunes, but I'm not aware of it.

LARSON: Do you think improvisation has some speech and conversational qualities like trading fours. Does that feel to you like the conversation or is that just a real different thing?

KEYSER: Well, you know, when you talk about music, uh—when you talk about improvisation, well, let me tell—look. I believe—I'm not sure about this—but I think that the human olfactory system has the ability to distinguish something like 10,000 different smells. Really, maybe more. I mean it may be as high as 50,000. Okay.

So, if you've ever read accounts of what a wine tastes like, you can see that they're really bending over backwards to try to figure out how to talk about it. You know, it has a bouquet of this, or a little finish of that, or—that's because there's no vocabulary to talk—our vocabulary is not rich enough to be able to talk about the distinctions that we can make.

Well, the same thing is true of music. When we talk about music, musicians often use the notion of a language. And they talk about talking to one another.

LARSON: Right, or there's the phrase with jazz musicians where they'll say, "Say something."

KEYSER: Right, exactly. I think that's because our vocabulary for what's going on when we improvise is so limited. We really don't understand it. Well, even when we play music, let alone just improvise.

And so I'm leery of all of those things. There's a lot of people who are doing some work on the similarities between language and music. And there are some similarities, but I think what's really interesting is just how different they are. There is one way in which I think that they are the same: when you speak a language you are acting as if you are in command of a highly complex set of rules. And these rules are rules that you have no knowledge that you know. But somehow or other you've acquired behavior as a child, automatically from the age of—by the age of four.

You've acquired behavior that when linguists try to describe it, requires an incredibly complicated linguistic system. Well, I think the same thing is true of music. That what we must have in our heads is a body of knowledge which is also describable in terms of a system of rules. And that system of rules is very much—must be very much like harmonic theory. Tonal music.

And non-western music, which has quarter tones and different kinds of rhythmic entities, is—I would say has a similar set of rules. Not western tonal but nonetheless a completely rational—can be described by a completely rational set of rules.

The big question is: how are those rules instantiated in the circuitry of the brain? How does the brain represent middle C? We don't know. And what do you do about—I have a friend of mine who is a very accomplished arranger, big band arranger. Well, he has an ability that I certainly don't have, which is best described in this way: If I were to ask you to take a pencil and a pad of paper and sit down and I was going to play a news broadcast in English on the radio and ask you to write down what you heard, you would think that is a trivial task. I mean, you may not be able to get it the first time because the person is speaking faster than you can write, but you're not going to have any problem. You're just going to go back until finally you've done it. Let's say it's a three-minute...

Well, this guy can do it with a big band. So the big band plays a tune and he notates it as if he were writing English. Now that's really interesting. Not everybody has that. And that, I think, is where you separate the sheep from the goats. Those are where the musicians begin. You know what I mean? So I can play an instrument, but I can't do that.

#### **4. Playing music at MIT**

LARSON: I have some more questions on this topic a little later in the interview. I think I'll wait to that. In the last interview you mentioned in New York that you had—when you had come back from England you heard Ornette Coleman, Charlie Haden and Don Cherry. Was that 1957?

KEYSER: Yeah, yeah.

LARSON: And you described being kind of astonished by that. Had you heard any bebop stuff like that before?

KEYSER: No. And this was free—this was actually free jazz. I mean it was beyond bebop. I mean I'd heard bebop, but I hadn't heard this. I mean this was really wild to my ears then.

LARSON: Tell me just a little bit more about that—what that did for you as a musician.

KEYSER: Well, not much. Because I wasn't playing then. I'd given up the horn.

LARSON: But obviously it has stayed with you and I'm sure at some point it—

KEYSER: What it did was—now, it has opened my mind to much wider array of styles. I think I—when I began, I was somebody who was bred into popular music of the time. I'm talking about the '40s and '50s—Doris Day, you know, that sort of thing, and Frank Sinatra, and also big bands.

But this kind of atonal, free, asynchronic jazz, you know, this, and this—the kind of thing which in classical music I suppose you would point to [Karlheinz] Stockhausen or maybe John Cage. For me, the listening to Ornette Coleman and—opened my mind to a far greater range of musical styles. That's—I guess that's the way to say it, yeah.

LARSON: I have some questions later on about playing with the Aardvark Jazz Orchestra and I'll pick up on that. Because I think that would be a way to follow up on that.

Were you—how aware were you to the rise of a bebop in the '40s? Were you kind of on top of that to some degree?

KEYSER: Well, yes and no. I knew—I had very—I mean there were pockets of that kind of music that I knew. Certainly Dizzy Gillespie. Lee Konitz, Lennie Tristano, great exponents of that. But, it—but I think that bebop lost me. Because it became—I lost the music. I mean I heard the technique and I didn't hear the music. And that's why I sort of, I think—hunkered down in big band jazz and in Dixieland.

LARSON: That leads me to a perfect prelude to my next question. The trumpet player Herb Pomeroy, who founded the [MIT] Festival Jazz Ensemble, told me in an interview that he had significant artistic reservations about bebop. He had played with Charlie Parker, so he's not speaking from ignorance at all and he's not a—he's unfortunately passed away now-- but he was not a conservative kind of mind. But he found that bebop was very limited harmonically and kind of emotionally. He said it lacked musical depth. Did you have any conversations with Herb about bebop and some of these issues?

KEYSER: Actually, no. And I'm delighted to hear you tell me that. I didn't know that that was Herb's view. I knew him. I knew him rather well. I play—I played with him a lot. Mainly because it was my ball, and I could call him up and ask him if he was free to do a gig. I wasn't in his class. What was marvelous about Herb Pomeroy was that he never—when I played with him, he played in a way which was at—to accommodate my level. He never compromised but he wasn't cutting me, if you know what I mean. And playing with Herb was marvelous because it was like a musical education.

I remember once we were doing "Pennies from Heaven" and after I'd done my solo, Herb said, "You missed the five of seven chord." [laughs] And I said, "Where was it?" And he showed me. I never missed it again. And whenever I played with him, he was always telling me how to make it better. He was marvelous. He was a great musician. In fact, if you were to ask me who would be my favorite improviser in trumpet, I'd have to tell you it was Herb Pomeroy. He was absolutely superb.

Now Herb believed that jazz was a performance art. So he didn't record a lot, which is too bad. But I happen to have a recording that was made in a restaurant in Gloucester, which is where he lived, of just Herb and a bass player and a guitar

player. And the stuff is—I mean, that's what I would take on a desert island. It's marvelous stuff.

LARSON: Yeah, I have that CD [*Live at Café Beaujolais*].

KEYSER: You do?

LARSON: Yeah, he gave it me a copy.

KEYSER: Ah! Well then you know what I'm talking about. I think he does "Mood Indigo" on that and I think he does "Summertime."

But what Herb stressed was the emotion in music. And music for him, and I think for me, was a way of expressing emotions for which there are no words. And that's why I think I couldn't relate to bebop. Because it seemed to me to be an exercise in technique and not an expression of love, hate, sorrow, disappointed love affairs, whatever.

I'm really interested to know that he felt that way. I feel much more secure in my view of it now. Herb was a master.

LARSON: Are there any bebop tunes that you do play, though, that you're fond of?

KEYSER: Yeah, well I mean they're the ones that you're called to play. I—Charlie Parker's "Now is the Time," you know, that's one that I do. But I'm not a bebop player. I mean when I do it, I do it. But it always ends up sounding like the blues.

LARSON: [laughs] In the first interview you spoke with being inspired by hearing Roy Lamson, who was MIT Professor of Literature, who was a fine jazz clarinetist playing at the post-Commencement exercises. And there was a group that he had called the Intermission Trio. And you later joined them, right?

KEYSER: Yes, yeah.

LARSON: What year was that?

KEYSER: Oh my.

LARSON: Do you know approximately?

KEYSER: Well, let's see, I came to MIT in '77 and I think it was at my first Commencement, when after the Commencement was over—as a department head I went to all the Commencements—there was this band playing in McDermott Court.

And I hadn't played the trombone for 25, 30 years. And when I saw them doing it, here in the heart of academia, it just —something that had been turned off, turned back on in me. And I said, oh I've got to—jeez I would love to be able to do that, again.

So I took out my horn and I started playing. And I was just playing in an aimless fashion. And then a friend of mine, who—a linguist actually, I haven't seen him in over 30 years now, but he was here at that time. He moved to Paris and hasn't come back. He was a very good saxophone player. He said, "Jay, you know you can't just doodle like this." He said, "You need a teacher."

So I was living in Gloucester at the time and Herb was there. And I asked Herb to recommend a teacher. And he recommended Phil Wilson. So I played with—I took lessons with Phil Wilson for about three years. And then I went on and took some—took about two years of lessons from Tom Everett. Well, somewhere in that period, let's say about '79 or '80, I went to Roy and I told him I play trombone and could I join his band. And he said that he'd give me a try.

And so we went to Building 20, and there were piano practice rooms on the second floor of Building 20. Do you remember that?

LARSON: Yeah.

KEYSER: And Warren Rohsenow, who was in Mechanical Engineering, there's a Rohsenow Laboratory here now.

LARSON: Was he still playing piano then or was he playing vibes?

KEYSER: He was playing piano. And Roy and Warren were there and they gave me a couple of tunes to work on. And I went in and they said, "Okay, you can join us." I was terrible. It was an act of kindness on their part. I mean, I wasn't anywhere near a good musician. But their notion was, this is MIT and this is an MIT thing and after all, Jay is on the faculty and he wants to play and so they said, "Sure." So that's how I got into that.

LARSON: Tell me about Roy as a musician.

KEYSER: He was a very, very good improviser. Very fluid. He was a—he was the kind of improviser who stayed close to the melody and also right on the chords, and so he was a joy to listen to. Yeah, he was very good. He—his field, I think, was Middle English.

LARSON: That's right.

KEYSER: I think he taught [Geoffrey] Chaucer. We'd never talked—I'd studied Chaucer at Oxford and studied Middle English, but we never discussed that. But Roy, when he was younger, I guess about 20 years younger, he was a—on the list of Ruby Newman players. Ruby Newman was a well-known booking agent in the Boston area. And Roy was somebody he would call to do a gig. He knew all the tunes. He knew them by heart. You know, I mean he was—he didn't need music. He could go and do a gig. Whatever tune was called, Roy was there. So—he was a natural. He was a natural and he was very, very good.

LARSON: Wow. At his memorial service, somebody played a recording of him playing and I've been wondering who might have a recording of him. Because the Music Library would be very interested. I think I'd asked you at one point. But if you know of anybody who has those. We can talk about that after the interview, but—

KEYSER: Well I can look and see if I have any tapes that were made when he was playing. But I don't think so.

LARSON: Okay. So besides playing at the Commencement stuff, did you do some other playing with him?

KEYSER: No. It was strictly Commencement. By the way, he had a trumpet player whose name was Tom Lindsey, who was a—do you know that name?

LARSON: Yeah. He was on a list of names to ask you about, yeah.

KEYSER: Tom Lindsey was a black player from—oh I guess he must've been about 70 when I was playing with him. He played with Benny Carter. And I have a CD somewhere where he's playing with Benny Carter. I think the tune is called "A Fine Dinner." He was good.

LARSON: Now, was he affiliated with MIT at all?

KEYSER: No, not at all. Just Roy knew about him. He was affiliated with the Christian Science Church, and he lived in their apartments on Mass Avenue. His wife, Carol I think it was her name, was a—I think she was a painter.

Well, Tom, at some point in the period that I knew him, he ended up living in the apartment alone. And I'm not sure whether he and his wife split or whether she died. I just—that's—I just don't remember. But I do remember that I would hire him whenever MIT asked me for a gig.

Well I'm skipping ahead. Roy became ill and running the Intermission Trio fell to me. In fact, I think his wife asked me if I would take it over because he wasn't well. And I agreed to. And I took it in a different direction. And I have to—what I did was, I started hiring musicians who were really good. Not just within the MIT community. So—although I was able to kill two birds with one stone with Herb, because he was within the MIT community.

But while Tom was around, I would always hire him for—if there was an MIT occasion that somebody would want me to put together a band for. Some department in engineering might be having an anniversary, so they'd ask me to put together a band. So I was—Tom was a wonderful player. And he was living alone in this Christian Science-owned apartment, but he just was un—unable to make enough money. So he moved out to the Midwest and I had his phone number and I called him occasionally to see how he was doing.

Well, the first thing that happened was that he lost his teeth and he couldn't play. But he had a wonderful voice and he was very devoted to the church and he sang in the church choir. And then he went blind and he still sang. In other words, if he couldn't do it through one instrument he was going to do it through another. And then he died. That was the—a loss of a great musician.

Then I started to play with Herb [Pomeroy]. And Herb began to teach me to be more sophisticated about bass players, about rhythm sections. And so I hired more and more people that he played with. And—but there was one, sort of, tie with MIT that was never severed.

And that was of course Warren [Rohsenow]. Warren played piano. He's a wonderful piano player, very inventive. Just, again, a natural. But then he developed an infirmity, which made it—it was—I think it must have been something like arthritis of the spine—anyway he could no longer move his fingers with dexterity.

But he could hold on to mallets and use his arms. And he started playing vibes. And he was marvelous on the vibes.

Then we hired—I hired a guy named Bill Youngren.

LARSON: Yeah, yeah. Wasn't he an English professor at Boston College?

KEYSER: Well, before that he was here at MIT.

LARSON: Oh really?

KEYSER: Yes, he was in the English department here, then he went to BU. He was a—the music critic for *The Atlantic Monthly*.

LARSON: That's right.

KEYSER: He was very good. And very, very knowledgeable. He wrote a book about Johann Sebastian Bach's son, which I think was published just before he died. He'd been working on that for a very long time.

LARSON: I'll have to look that up.

KEYSER: And he also did—Carl [Philipp] Emanuel Bach—that was his name, wasn't it?

LARSON: Mm-hm.

KEYSER: I think so. And then he also did some interviews with the arranger for Paul Whiteman, who was alive in New Jersey. And I don't know what ever happened to those interviews.

And then he developed a very strange malady. People didn't understand—it took a long time to diagnose it. And it finally killed him. But I don't even think they knew, in the end, what it was. But it basically—the etiology was, that the nucleus of his cells, the mitochondria, I think, was falling apart. And it made him get dizzy. He would get up in the morning and he'd have maybe an hour of lucidity and then he'd get extremely dizzy and have to lie down. And he went through a very long period of dying.

LARSON: So what kind of musician was he?

KEYSER: Basically he was a swing tria—piano player. Very good. Knew, I mean, again, all the chords, he was—he knew music. Really knew it front and back. I mean ninths, flatted 13ths, the whole business, progressions, you know, substitute chords, sus. chords, the whole bit. He just knew everything. And he was—there wasn't a tune he couldn't play. He was really very good.

LARSON: Did he play professionally as well?

KEYSER: I think the only time he ever played was with me. And then there was—Moore House is an assisted living home over there by Symphony Hall. And every Christmas they would have a party for the people who—the residents. And Rod Nordell, who played drums—he was the editor of the Christian Science Monitor editorial page for years and years. Rod is still around, by the way. Rod would put together a band. And it was always Bill Youngren and me and Tom Lindsey and Steve Pratt played bass while he was playing.

And so he would play those gigs. And those were sort of freebies, you know, sort of for the benefit of the residents. As far as I knew that was just the only playing he did. The rest of his time was as a music scholar and a record reviewer.

## 5. Musicians in Boston and at MIT

LARSON: In the MIT Lewis Music Library, the conference room upstairs is called the Roy Lamson conference room. And there's some framed pictures of jazz musicians up there that you probably have seen. And I think those came from Warren Rohsenow.

KEYSER: Yeah.

LARSON: And there's some names here that I'd like to kind of run by you. We don't know much about—some of them you've already mentioned. There is somebody named Jeff Stout, a trumpet player?

KEYSER: Yeah.

LARSON: Tell me about him.

KEYSER: Well, Jeff is still working around town. He's a—how shall I put it—he's a first-rate, very much in-demand, and he makes a living as a trumpet player. He's a big band jazz or improv small group. He's really very, very good. He's a superb improviser, knows all the tunes, knows all of the music that I was saying you really need to know. And you can actually—I mean, he's still around. He must have been called on by Roy to play one of the gigs. He's a major figure in the contemporary Boston scene, now, Jeff Stout. He also has a brother, who I think is also a trumpet player. And who's also in the same league.

LARSON: Wow. Then there's someone named Perry Lipson, a guitarist?

KEYSER: Yep. Perry Lipson, yeah, yeah. He was—I—I've often hired him. Perry was, again, a local musician, great guitar player. He taught and gigged for a very long time. And he had a son who was a—I believe the son was a saxophone player who was blind. And I played with him a couple of times. Perry brought him on the job. He was a guy who just knew everything.

LARSON: Is he still with us?

KEYSER: No, no. Perry's gone.

LARSON: And then there was Art Lichtfield, who was here at MIT in the Purchasing Department, a drummer. And, did he play outside jobs and stuff? Did he play professionally at all?

KEYSER: Well, I don't think so, but I'm not really sure there. Because you are now coming at the point where when I came in, he was, for some reason or other, stopping. He wasn't playing. I don't—I may have played one gig with him, or two. But I don't think so. I knew that Art was somebody that Roy had used quite a bit—Roy and Warren had used quite a bit before I came on the scene. But by the time I did, he wasn't playing.

LARSON: And what about this gentleman, Steve Pratt, you mentioned just a little bit ago?

KEYSER: He was a guy who—I think he lived out in the north—the west of Cambridge somewhere out in Framingham or someplace like that. But he was just a bass player who—his daytime gig was something else. He worked in—I can't even remember what it was, but I have a feeling he worked in the corporate world. And I believe he was a writer, but I'm not sure about that. But he was a bass player, who, like so many musicians, you know, they—they did it on the side for fun. He was not like Jeff Stout, you know. And Steve Pratt just stopped. He decided one day that that was it. He didn't want to play anymore.

LARSON: What about George Poor, another trumpet player?

KEYSER: Yeah, George lived out in Marblehead. And he'd lived in Marblehead for a very long time. I think George came from a pretty long—had a very long lineage—that goes back in Marblehead history; sort of like a Marblehead blue blood. But he was a very good trumpet player. Again, not in the every-day—not in the professional gigging world. But he was a guy who—who knew all the tunes. And you could always count on him.

He knew Bobby Hackett. And in fact, the trumpet that he played on was given to him by Bobby Hackett. I think George went to Harvard. And I think he'd been playing ever since his student days. And George was kind of an aristocrat of music. You know, sort of the way Artie Shaw was. And a very nice man, lived in a very nice house. I remember visiting it once. And that's the story with George.

LARSON: And you briefly mentioned Rob Nordell, the drummer?

KEYSER: Yeah. Rod Nordell. R-O-D. And Rod still—he's still around. He lives over by—on the corner of Fresh Pond and Brattle. There's a—sort of a group of houses that are scrunched in behind these very high fences. Rod lives in that area. He played drums but what his daytime gig was was the editorial page editor of the Christian Science Monitor. He's still around; you might want to talk to him.

LARSON: Yeah, interesting. Were there other jazz musicians at MIT that haven't come up in our conversations that you played with or knew about?

KEYSER: Well, there are ones that I know about but I haven't played with. And I can't remember his name now. He still works here; he's a saxophone player. And I think he's a pretty—very, very accomplished player. He has a quartet or a qu—or a trio. He plays in places like the—isn't there a restaurant on top of one of the downtown Boston buildings? Steak and Sirloin or something like that? He plays those kinds of gigs.

LARSON: Do you recall his name?

KEYSER: I can't—every so often I get notices of where he's playing. And the next time I get one I'll send it to you. Because I've never played with him. I don't know. There's another player that I have played with. He doesn't play much now. Dave Broderick. He's in Audio Visual.

LARSON: Yeah that's right. I didn't know he was a musician. I know him from the Audio Visual Department here.

KEYSER: He builds basses. He built his own bass. And I once did a—the Physical Plant used to have a party over in E19, in the basement of E19, a Christmas party every year. And they'd have musicians. Bill Moran, who was a painter, used to play drums, and, uh, Dave Broderick came one year and played—sat in with us. And I remember he was using an electric bass that he'd built. It was a terrific instrument and he was really good. I remember the tune we played, which was "Mustang Sally." Which is not the kind of tune that I would normally play, but thank God it wasn't that complicated. He is very good.

And he played with a group of four musicians, one of which worked—also worked with him in [MIT] Audio Visual [Service]—called Bicycling Sideways [Correction: band is called B J Magoon & Driving Sideways]. And they were a kind of a rhythm and blues group. And they were really good, really good. And I remember hearing them on the steps of the Student Center one year.

So, Broderick is a guy who—I saw him very rec—I oft—I hear from him often, you know, and I often see—we—whenever I see him we talk. But he's a guy who isn't playing now but he's very good.

LARSON: There's a trombonist that played with, in the original MIT Festival Jazz Ensemble when Herb started it: [Richard] Rich Orr [MIT 1962].

KEYSER: Yeah.

LARSON: Have you played with him at all?

KEYSER: No, no. He's another one of those monster players, you know. He's all over the horn, plays rings around me. Up and down, and fast. And really good. Has a CD [*Like an Eager Child*] out, and he—

LARSON: That's right we have it at the library.

KEYSER: He lives in Baltimore. And I think he's still making CD's. Very, very good player.

LARSON: Mm-hm. I just wondered if you had ever had a chance to play with him.

In April 2007, there was an event at MIT called All-Star Jazz Blowout. I wasn't able to go to this, but from—according to the press release it included students and faculty from area colleges. And the press release said it included an MIT graduate student pianist, Nathan Ball, and it mentioned that you played with him. Is that right? Maybe the press release was wrong. Nathan Ball?

KEYSER: Nathan Ball? How do you spell it?

LARSON: B-A-L-L.

KEYSER: No, doesn't ring a bell.

LARSON: Okay. Sometimes these press releases get all kinds of crazy things wrong.

KEYSER: Yeah, but maybe I did and you know, of course I'm 75 and the first thing that goes is names.

LARSON: Do you remember this festival at all? It was called All-Star Jazz Blowout in 2007.

KEYSER: Mm-mm.

LARSON: And Mark Harvey was involved with that.

KEYSER: Well if Mark was involved I may have been involved then.

LARSON: And it said that you were—Mark's wife Kate Matson is this filmmaker and that you had played for some—did some live improvisations to some of her—

KEYSER: Yes, at Harvard I've done that.

But I tell you one thing that happened, uh—that I was very proud of, un—I think it might have been—maybe it was this All-Star Jazz Blowout, maybe it was not here but it was held at Berklee [College of Music]—

LARSON: There were some events, part of that festival were at Berklee.

KEYSER: Okay, I played in that. And Phil Wilson has a band that he puts together from students called The Rainbow Band. And he had a big band for this evening. And the idea was to have jazz musicians come from the universities in the area. There was somebody from Harvard, I came from MIT. And I was in the trombone section. So this might be interesting. The tune was one that Phil Wilson had written. And all I knew was that the chords were basically the chords of "When the Saints Go Marching In." [coughs] Excuse me. And I remember sitting in a trombone section with four other trombone players; they were all students at Berklee.

I remember this one kid who I—was sitting to my right. And we're playing these tunes. I'm thinking to myself, "This kid really is good." I mean, he was reading beautifully and he was playing well. I remember making a mental note that Berklee really teaches its people well. Well, anyway, I was supposed to do a solo on this tune. And all of these other guys were getting up and they were doing their fast licks on the saxophones and all of that stuff.

So when I got up, I had a wah wah mute, a Harmon mute, the plunger. So I decided to do the solo in a plunger and play very quietly. So instead of, you know, really loud I was going to make everybody listen. And so I stood up and then I started doing this stuff on "The Saints." Well, I don't know how it happened but the solo came out well.

Peter Bloom [flute and alto sax], who plays in Aardvark, told me a couple of days later, he said, "That was really a good solo." He said, "You know, it had a beginning, a middle, and an end." Well, when I'm playing, and I'm really into it, I don't know what I'm doing. I mean it really is like you are disappearing into the Twilight Zone. And then you come out of it. But I knew it was going well. [coughs]

Well after that tune, my job was to get off the stage, put my horn away and then go out and sit in the audience. And in order to do that you had to walk through a corridor that went beside the main auditorium. And it was this corridor that artists would go up and down in order to get up on stage. So while I'm going down, there's a drummer coming up, who is a drummer—his first name is Max—I can't remember his last name now. But he has a band, and he plays with something like Jay Leno or somebody like that. That was his standard gig. I mean he was a pro. I mean he had a band and he was a big star and everybody knew who he was. Max [Weinberg] something or other. Forgive me for not knowing.

And he was the—he was the next gig up. And he was going to do a drum solo with this band. So as I am going down the corridor, he's passing me, and he says, "Nice solo." And I've never forgot that. I thought, wow, that's pretty good, I mean when this guy's telling me nice solo. That was a great moment for me.

LARSON: Wow. So also on this press release for this event, it said there was you with Fred Harris, who is the current director of the [MIT] Festival Jazz Ensemble—

KEYSER: Yeah, yeah—

LARSON:—did a lecture called "Tight Makes Right." Does that ring a bell? There was a lecture that you supposedly did with him, and it just said it was called "Tight Makes Right," and I was wondering what this lecture was.

KEYSER: Yeah. They asked me if I'd give a lecture on big band jazz. And so I put together a lecture with video examples of the great swing bands of the '30s and early '40s. And it was basically a lecture in which I showed what these guys could do and talked about it. What I meant by "Tight Makes Right" was that a band that plays tightly together really swings. And that these musicians of the '30s and '40s were just consummate musicians. I mean, they played like a unit, you know, and they were really solid.

And I looked at all of the bands. The Gene Krupa Band, uh—Tommy Dorsey, of course, Bob Crosby and the Bob-Cats, and uh—Cab Calloway. And I had a whole host of these bands.

And I remember spending a lot of time putting this lecture together. And when I went into the lecture room there was one student there. One student. So I'm—thought, "What am I going to do? This is something, you know, gone wrong." But anyway, I thought, "Well, what the hell. He came, I've done it." So I lectured to one student for about an hour. It was more like a conversation, but that's what that was about.

LARSON: MIT Senior Lecturer Martin Marks is a silent film music scholar and pianist, who has scored music for a lot of forgotten and rare silent films. And he enlisted you to play for one of the films called *A Bronx Morning*—

KEYSER: Yes.

LARSON: —by Jay Leyda.

KEYSER: Yeah.

LARSON: And you played some tunes from the '20s. "Ya-da" and "China Boy."

KEYSER: "Ja-da."

LARSON: "Ja-da." Okay.

KEYSER: And "China Boy" and then—

LARSON: And then you did a blues—

KEYSER: And then I did "Ain't Misbehavin'." And these were background that I was playing while the movie was up there. I felt very professional. I mean it was really great. I had earphones on and I'm sitting here, I'm the only musician there, you know.

There's my horn and then they showed me the film and I think, "Jeez, I've really arrived," you know. I thought, "This is really great."

And then, he called me up one day and said, "We can't use any of those tunes because they're still covered by copyright." And I said, "Well, no problem. I'll come in next time and I'll just improvise." So that was the blues. And so what you hear on the—on the film, is me just playing the blues. And I think I'm using a plunger.

And I remember after the film appeared, I had occasion to talk to the woman in Hollywood who was one of the producers of the project, if not the producer. And I mentioned that my wife was dragging me to Africa. Because, as I said, my wife loves to travel and you know I hate to travel, and—but I follow her around the world. And that happened to be the time when we were going to Africa.

And I said to her—and she said to me, "Well, are you taking any blood?" [coughs] I said, "You mean other than my own?" [laughs] And she said, "Well, everyone in Hollywood does." And I really felt like, God, I'm really not—I'm just not with it. Apparently when they went to Africa, they took vials of blood in case they needed a transfusion or something. That's right, I mean that's really funny. I never forgot that. I mentioned at the beginning of the interview, that I wrote this book, *I Married a Travel Junkie*. Well, I put that in it. You can—if you get the book, you can—

LARSON: [laughs] I'm definitely going to have to read that book.

KEYSER: Well if you do, you can find—you'll find that.

## 6. Current performance activities

LARSON: So, Mark Harvey, who is a Senior Lecturer in Music at MIT and a trumpet player, composer, and director of the Aardvark Jazz Orchestra, which he started in 1973, and you now play with. How did it come about that you joined the band?

KEYSER: I haven't a clue. I knew you were going to ask me that and I asked Mark, "Do you remember when I joined this band? Why?" I don't underst—I have not a clue how I got into the band. I remember going to Aardvark concerts. I remember watching Bob Pilkington do solos and thinking, "Oh my God, that's sort of like Ornette Coleman." I mean, I—thinking, "This is really wild." But my ears were open to it. Whereas in the past they hadn't been. I mean my ears were open to it.

But then for some reason, I can't remember what it was. And you know I asked Mark the same question. He can't remember either. But about—somehow or other I got in this band. I don't know why or how. But I also remember that as I got into the band, in the beginning I was very, very timid. And he would—you know, he'd ask me to do a solo or something—I was really very uptight about it. And I think I just squeaked out little things.

But over the years I've learned that's not the way to be in this band. And now I feel really great. I mean, and some of my best musical experiences are playing in Aardvark, where I feel as if I can just let go.

LARSON: So did it feel like it was a real different kind of musical universe for you when you joined?

KEYSER: Absolutely, absolutely. Completely different. I mean it's a—I mean, look, the charts are not big band charts. I mean the charts are—sometimes they're just squiggles and dots on a page, I mean, you know. And some—and you never play in a key, and if you play a melody Mark says, "I don't want to hear that again."

You know, it's really a different kind of a band. The musicians in the band—present company excepted—are superb. Really good. I mean, the sax section is tremendous. You know, and great versatility. The trumpet players have got great sound and the rhythm section—I mean the band is really good. The trombones, I mean we've got four trombones.

Bob Pilkington is first-rate. Bill Lowe and Jeff Marsanskis, they're—I mean they're all really good players and they're pro—they've studied music at Berklee. So I don't know how I lucked into that crowd. But I really am glad I have, because it's the—

Now one of the things that it does for me, if you think about the kind of music I play—Like this Saturday I'm going on a fire truck in Fall River and playing in a Dixieland band. And then—

LARSON: This is the New Liberty Jazz Band?

KEYSER: The New Liberty Jazz Band. Dixieland, you know, "Bill Bailey," "Sunday," "From Monday On," "When the Saints Come—Go Marching In," "Struttin' with Some Barbeque," those kinds of tunes.

I also play in a rehearsal band that is composed of the best musicians in town, who wanted to play in this rehearsal band because there's not much work anymore. And these guys wanted to play together in a group, and so they asked Everett Longstreth if he would put together a band. And Everett said he would, under the condition that if anybody couldn't make it they had to arrange for their own sub. So he—all he does is show up with the music.

Everett's a great arranger. He's the guy who can take dictation, you know, listen to a band and write it down. He is a great arranger. He's an extremely good lead trumpet player and a terrific band leader. He really knows how something is supposed to sound. And he worked here at MIT for 30 years; the [MIT] Concert Jazz Band. Wor—he was brought here by Herb Pomeroy.

LARSON: That's right.

KEYSER: The two of them worked together in tandem for—for that 30 years.

Anyway, so, Everett—I'll play his arrangements or whatever tunes he doing and here I have the opportunity to play with real pros. I mean, the guys who play in the pits, you know, in downtown theatre district, and they're really good players. And the reason

why I'm there, I play third trombone and Everett's a friend of mine so he knows that I'll be there every time. And it's a great experience for me.

And then there's Aardvark. So I'm able to play avant-garde jazz, big band jazz, and Dixieland. And what could be better?

LARSON: Yeah. With Aardvark, does it seem that some of their more avant-garde stuff is less and there's more—stuff has gotten a little more tonal?

KEYSER: Yes. Yes. I think that's really happened. Aardvark has sort of tamed a bit. And I know exactly why. Because we've got a manager. And the manager is trying to get us gigs outside, you know, just, outside of MIT. And she's been wonderful at it. That's Peter Bloom's wife, Becky DeLamotte. And she says, "You're going to have to provide some focus so that you can have a wider audience." And it's really—I think it's been very good.

I mean, you know we're—well, let's see, where are we playing? Are we doing Scullers [Jazz Club]? I think we're doing Scullers again. And we've been into Scullers. Now you don't get into Scullers, you know, if you're going to play all the wild stuff that he does. But Mark will always throw in wild stuff. You know, and—so, uh—he is never going to get completely away from it.

I guess we're doing Scullers in February, and I don—our Christmas concert! We're doing the Christmas concert on the 18th of December and—in Emmanuel Church and that's always pretty square. You know, very—you know, sort of medieval Christmas carols and stuff like that.

LARSON: Right. So you've played in some of Mark's long, kind of, symphonic-scope-type pieces. I think there's a thing called *Paintings for Jazz Orchestra* which is inspired by paintings of Stuart Davis.

KEYSER: Yeah, we did that twice. And at the MFA [Museum of Fine Arts, Boston]. That was great. I loved that. In their big auditorium, you know, and Stuart Davis's paintings were projected and we—we played.

LARSON: So tell me about—do you have any comments about playing big piece like—they're like 45 minutes long. I mean they're almost symphonic in scale. And it's just so different from so much other big band kind of stuff.

KEYSER: The Aardvark experience, I think, is unique. I've never had anything like it in all—in my musical life. The thing is that the band, at its best, [pause] is like a single instrument. Everybody is listening to everybody else. And everybody is playing off of everybody else.

Now you have to—you're supposed to do that in big band jazz as well. You're not only playing your part, but you have to know what everybody else is doing so you know how your part fits in. But it's that notion of "your part." I mean, there's a chart, there's chords, there's a line, you got to play it.

In Aardvark, it's much freer. And so when you're playing you've got to sort of mold what you do to fit in with what everybody else is doing.

Wynton Marsalis once said somewhere, I don't know where, that when you're playing in a jazz band, when you are soloing, the job of the band is to make you sound as good as you possibly can. And that's your job when somebody else is soloing. Well Aardvark, I think, takes that very seriously.

And so, a lot of its symphonic work rests on the ability of its musicians to improvise. And when they're doing that, Mark is using the rest of the band as accompaniment. And he will have no music written. Often, not always, but often. And he will just point to us and sh—you, know, with his—with hand gestures tell us how to play. And when we do that we are sort of doing it on the spot. Well, that's very unusual. It's very ver—I don't know of any other band that's doing that kind of thing now.

LARSON: He's improvising as a conductor.

KEYSER: Right.

LARSON: As though it's an instrument.

KEYSER: Well if you sit down, and I'm sure you—you've heard the rehearsals, I mean Mark will always say, "Well I don't know what we're going to do here. We'll see." You know, or something will develop. And I'll tell you, when the band is on, and when something is happening, it's exhilarating. And the audience feels it too.

LARSON: Can you tell me about some of the—the hand signals and stuff with the cards that he uses and how that works when he's improvising as a conductor?

KEYSER: Yes. Well, the—he'll—the cards—he holds up cards, which have letters on them: A, B, C, and D. And those letters refer to sections in the music. And the chart will have, not a chord progression, but there might be a series of notes. And—and what he'll be saying is, here, go to section C. And what the instruction there is, pick any of these notes and playing them in any order you want. And he will just tell us when he wants us to do that.

Then sometimes, section C might be—or section B, whatever it is—might be a written line, where we're to play it all together in tempo as if it were a tight big band chart. And then we'll all play the line. And then he'll go like this, that is to say, he'll pretend as if he's pulling taffy apart. And what that means is, now spread the line apart, and change the time relations between the notes and make it longer and attenuate the lines. And everybody will do that in a different way. So that what comes out, you—well you never know what's going to come out.

LARSON: Sometimes he'll give numbers with his fingers, he'll do like this or this.

KEYSER: Yeah, well what that does is, in music like this you often need as much guidance as you can from the conductor as when the next part is coming up. So he'll go [gestures with fingers] and then what he's doing is he's counting the measures. He's saying, "You're four measures out of section D. Four, three, two, one." And then everybody knows downbeat. So that's very helpful.

LARSON: Because the band is very tight when you need to be tight, I mean that's what's so remarkable.

KEYSER: That's why it's tight. Because he sho—he shows us. I mean we can be tight when he shows us. But we're—generally we're—if he's not—if he's not controlling us, then we're going to be loose. And its—and you never—I mean, he really is leading it. I mean he's really treating the band as if it were one complicated instrument.

LARSON: Right. Right. So when you take a solo with Aardvark, it's obviously very different kind of soloing than you do with other stuff. Tell me about what that's like. Are there special, kind of, approaches you bring to solos there?

KEYSER: Well, I—Mark has—looks on me, I think, as sort of the blues specialist. So that if it's down-and-dirty-type piece, I'll usually do the solo for that. Well, I know what the blues is, and I know—but you don't play it like you would in a Dixieland band. So what you do is—what I do is, I mean, I play the blues, but I play it really—I try to play as far out on the envelope of the blues as I can get and still be in the blues. So I try to be really experimental, do strange things, things I've never—I would never dream of doing in a Dixieland band. And that's what I do.

LARSON: So tell me about some of these things, the extreme kind of things.

KEYSER: Well, for example, I might think about, uh—uh— putting in a lot of notes in a very quick run.

[mimes playing the trombone] *tooka tooka thucka digga duga thuh.*

And then sort of go back to this, *bwah bwah buh baaaaaah*, and stuff like that. So, mixing styles, mixing [coughs] licks, trying to match the spirit of whatever the tune is, though—that's what—

But you know, the thing about it is, for me, the great joy about doing this is that I don't think. It's not like giving a lecture in—in linguistics. It's really like jumping off a cliff and hoping that you've jumped far enough out so that when you land there'll be water underneath you. You never know what you're going to do. And for me, at any rate, it doesn't—it doesn't help to think too much.

There such a thing as a blues scale. And if we're doing a tune where it's going to call for the blues, I know what the notes are in that blues scale, so I know what notes I can hit safely in that tune. And so I'll have those notes sort of circling around in my head. But very soon, once I'm into the thing, I'm forgetting about all that. I'm just going by how it sounds to my ear, listening to myself. I'm often really surprised when it's over.

## 7. Humanities and Science at MIT

LARSON: Wow. So, to change the subject a bit, in 1979 you were chair of a committee appointed by Provost Walter Rosenblith to look at the state of humanities at MIT and propose some changes. And you were—as I said, you were chair of the committee. And I have a couple quotes concerning the Music Section here at MIT. Says, "It is recommended that the ... Music Section of the Department of Humanities be assigned

to the Dean of the School of Humanities and Social Science as a separate program under that office."

And one more quote: "The Music Section has long functioned independently within the Department of Humanities. Status as a Program under the Dean appears to be acceptable to members of the Section and we endorse it." Section—Program as opposed to a Section.

That didn't happen, um—and there was lots of debate as I'm sure you remember about this—these proposals. But what I really wanted to ask you about, at the time I know that music was just one part of this very large report that you were doing. You were looking at all the humanities programs. But can you remember from the time, what your thoughts were—I mean your ideas for, kind of, the vision for the music program here at MIT?

KEYSER: I think that—that was in, as you say, that was in '79. So that was, what, 21, 31 years ago. I remember the committee very well. I mean, I remember Pauline Maier was on it. And I remember the motivation for the committee, and the thing was—I believe that it was in the 1950s that [President] Killian introduced a Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at MIT. It was the last big department that MIT introduced. It was part of the gradual shift of MIT from a technical school to a university.

LARSON: Right. There was the Lewis Report [*Report of the Committee on Educational Survey*, Warren K. Lewis, chair, 1949] that came out that brought that.

KEYSER: Right. And then that was that department. The problem was that that department became an umbrella department for a lot of different humanities—what are traditionally separate departments in humanities. But MIT introduced it as one department, with sections.

So there was English, foreign language and literature. There was history, there was music, and there was philosophy. And I'm probably leaving out something.

The whole thrust of that report was really to try to regularize the sections within the MIT framework. Now, what does regularize mean? What it meant was to see which departments, which programs, which sections, were autonomous and wh—had developed, essentially, as self-sustaining groups and to try to recognize that. So questions came up. Should we combine literature—English literature and foreign language and literature? Or should we keep them apart? And that was the thrust behind that. So the reason for separating music was because music had essentially—was a separate entity that really had very little overlap with the others and so it just made sense.

You'll notice that MIT is still struggling with that. So even now there's a proposal—a possible proposal in 2010 to eliminate foreign languages as a separate entity. And the thing is that MIT has had a hard time finding the right place for humanities. But from 1970 until—let's say roughly from the 1970s—well, from the time that I have been here—you'll notice that the quality of humanities has just been going up and up and up and up.

So we have Nobel—I mean, Pulitzer Prize winners in history. John Dower and Pauline Maier are major, major figures in the field.

LARSON: And then there's John Harbison.

KEYSER: John Harbison is—

LARSON: He won a Pulitzer Prize a while back.

KEYSER: He won Pulitzer Prize but he's also an Institute Professor, recognized as one—as a major, major contributor. And so, what's—what's been happening to humanities, over the—at least the 40 years that I've been here, has been a steady improvement in its quality so that it matches the world-class character of the rest of the Institute. And I think it's done that very, very well.

And that's—so when you think about what was happening in '77, and which is still happening, is what's the best structure for the way in which those entities have developed? You want the structure to reflect the reality. 'Cause that ma—that makes for the smoothest kind of administrative environment for an entity and its en—and its school.

So I think that's basically what was going on. That's what we were trying to do then. And I remember at those—in those early days there was a lot of friction. There were a lot of groups that didn't like one another. And we had to take that into account as well. But I don't remember that music was a part of that. I think music was just its stand-alone entity.

LARSON: Mm-hm. So, the curriculum at MIT is a science-based curriculum, which is different from a more liberal arts school, where the core curriculum is liberal arts with science and mathematics kind of added on. Here, in some ways it's kind of a reverse of that. And what's your understanding of the role of, particularly of the arts—and we can include music—but other creative arts in the education of an MIT student?

KEYSER: Well, if you take a look at a typical arrangement in America, vis-a-vis the sciences, the standard view was—and is—you go to college for four years, you get a liberal arts education. Then you go on to a graduate school.

What we did at MIT was something different. We said we're going to make you an engineer in four years. You're not going to do liberal arts and then go to engineering school. You're going to get a liberal arts education while you are becoming an engineer. And what that led to was the folding in of humanities requirements along with the semester requirements of your major.

And so, that's how we had hoped to do it. And that's basically how it's done here. You get the humanities education while you're getting an education in science. And if you're—want to be an engineer, well then at the end of four years you're an engineer. But you've had this liberal arts exposure.

Uh—Now as it happens, there seems to be some remarkable overlaps between scientifically minded students and the arts. I'm not sure what the numbers are now. I'm sure you'll know better than me, but there are 4,000, maybe 4,200 undergraduates. I think 2,700 of them take music courses.

LARSON: That sounds—I've heard of figures like that, yeah.

KEYSER: I mean, it's extraordinary. And so in a way you can sort of look at it—at least with respect to music—you could say, "Look, what we need at MIT is—if we didn't have music, we'd have to create it." Because there's a need for it. I mean, the students need it and want it and they're very good at it.

Well, I think the same thing is true of the other humanities as well. Certainly history and English. We've got students here who are really very good writers. And so I think that when you say to me, your question is, "What is the role of the humanities here?" Well, I think the role of the humanities is on one hand to cater to the natural needs of the kind of student we get. And the second is to produce a parallel education in a scientific specialty alongside of humanities. That's how it goes.

LARSON: Mm-hm. It doesn't seem like we hear so much anymore, there used to be talk about humanizing scientists and engineers. But that doesn't—I don't hear people talk so much about that anymore. Is that your experience too?

KEYSER: Well, I've written a book called *Mens et Mania: The MIT Nobody Knows*, which will actually be out in the spring. MIT Press. And it discusses that question, in particular. And basically what had happened was that there was a period when MIT was moving toward getting a more general kind of student, a student—introducing into MIT a student with a more general set of interests.

Well the question is: "How do cultures change at MIT?" And they change in two ways. One is by a process which I call *Chushingura*, which is the name of a Japanese play. And the other is by catastrophe. And the reason why you're not hearing talk about humanizing MIT students anymore is *Chushingura*.

Edward [Edwin] Land gave a talk at MIT around 1980.

LARSON: This was the Polaroid guy, right?

KEYSER: The Polaroid guy. He was giving a talk on retinex theory. And I remember—he is somebody that you—is highly regarded. And one of the ways that culture changes here is when highly regarded people express opinions. Because of how highly regarded they are, people pay attention. And Land said at the beginning of his lecture—I remember because I was there—he didn't give an introduction to theory of color. He said, "MIT is interested in getting general students. Well, generalized students are students who know a little bit about a lot of things and are masters of nothing." He said, "You don't get ahead unless you specialize." And within a couple of years the students that we were accepting were people who were highly focused in science and engineering.

Now, the fact of the matter is, that was—in my view, he was right. MIT is not Oberlin. It's not Reed College. MIT is a place where people who know—who have an affinity for math and science—are pushed to their limits in developing that. And you can't do everything.

LARSON: But it's also—maybe "but" isn't the right word. There are some students who come here expecting to major in science or engineering, but find that their real calling

is, say, in music. And they're actually able to get a music degree here. And there's always that tension about that. Should that happen or not? What's your view on—

KEYSER: Sure it should happen. I mean, I—you know, MIT's pretty open about that. Take Jamshied Sharifi [MIT 1983, FJE director 1985–1992], he was the guy who took over the [MIT] Festival Jazz Band when Herb stepped down. Well, what—Jamshied was just that sort of person. I mean, he was an engineer here. Then he went to Berklee. He acquired tremendous expertise in electronic music. And the last I heard, he was doing music for Hollywood. I saw this movie, *Hannah the Spy*, I think that's the title of it. And he was—he did the mus—he gets the music credits for it. So here's a guy who came here as a scientist and went out as a musician. Highly regarded, you know, very talented.

LARSON: There's a fair number of them.

KEYSER: Yeah, well more power to them. And, frankly, I think that the scientific education they get here holds them in very good stead for the kind of demands that they—well, look what's happened to animation. I mean, in Hollywood now. I mean, look at *Avatar*.

I mean, what better training could you get than a MIT training if you—if you are an artist? [coughs]

LARSON: So here's a question that I've asked some MIT people: you know, there's the traditional stereotype that engineers and scientists need humanities. But does science and engineering help an artist? Do you think that they might be a better artist? I mean, outside of technical stuff. You were mentioning the animation. But, but—maybe not excluding, but is there something about the scientific way of being creative that can help an artist in kind of a deeper sense?

KEYSER: I think that the question that you're—I think you're touching on an important point. But I don't think the way I would like to look at it is will X—learning X help in Y. I mean, will—the fact is if you're an artist, then you're an artist. You understand it intuitively and what you're trying to do is express yourself. I don't think learning science or math is going to make you a better artist. Or being an artist is—would make you a better scientist.

However, there is a place where the two converge. And that is, both are problem solving. The thing is that in science, what you do is you set yourself a prob—the best scientists know when—as they're working out their scientific careers—they know that there are problems which are so simple that to set about the task of solving them is not very wise because the solutions are trivial and you're not going to learn very much. They know that there are certain problems that are so hard that you'll never solve them in your lifetime.

The trick is to solve the problems in the middle, the ones that are so hard that solving them really pushes back the barriers of knowledge.

Now an artist is also a problem-solver. The artist sets himself or herself a task. If it's Chaucer, the problem is, "How do I write about a bunch of pilgrims going to Canterbury in iambic pentameter in a way that will hold the interest of my audience?" If you're a painter, the question is, "How do I produce a painting such that the

juxtaposition of two colors produces a unique experience that neither of those colors produces alone, but next to one another something strange and beautiful happens."

They're both solving problems. And that's where science and the—and the arts converge. The difference is that in science the direction you go is highly constrained by the rules of the science. Because the more you understand about something, the more constrained are the hypotheses you're going to be able to make about the next step. That's why, in science, it's so hard to talk nonsense. Because the field already so constrains you that it's impossible, if you know the field, to talk nonsense.

In the humanities, however, it's easier to talk nonsense. Because there are no such rules like that. But it also is freer for that reason. And so my view is that—that both artists and scientists are actually about the same activity. But one is more constrained than the other, much more highly constrained than the other. The artist is much less highly constrained than the scientist. But even so, the artist is constrained whether they know it or not.

LARSON: Wow. That's really, really interesting. It looks like we're running up on our two-hour limit, so I may have to have you come back for another session so we can talk about your linguistics career. But also I have some more questions about music and linguistics for you. And I wanted to have you read a poem and share some of your poetry and stuff like that. So we'll do one more session. I want to thank you very much for coming today. This is just tremendous.

KEYSER: Well thanks to you, Forrest. And also I want to thank the guys behind the camera and the microphones for doing—for their patience.

[End of Interview]