

**Music at MIT Oral History Project**

**Samuel Jay Keyser**

*Interviewed*

*by*

**Forrest Larson**

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## Contributors

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### 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. Linguistics and history of science

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 jazz trombonist. I'm Forrest Larson. We are in the studio of MIT Video Productions. The date is December 17th, 2010. Thank you so much for coming back for this third interview.

In the previous interview, you spoke about the relationship between scientific and artistic creativity. I have a follow-up question. Linguistics is a discipline that borders both literature and cognitive science. Does this give you any particular insights on the similarities and differences between artistic and scientific creativity?

SAMUEL JAY KEYSER: Actually, no. And I think the reason why is that we are at a very primitive stage in understanding just how the rudiments of language—I'm talking about syntax, phonology and semantics—how those things are represented in the mind. It's really the next great frontier for, I think, the study of mind. Let me put it to you like this. As a result of the generative [linguistic] revolution begun by [Noam] Chomsky in the middle of the 20th century, we know a great deal about how language works. But we really have no idea how it's instantiated in the brain. We're just starting out in trying to understand that.

And let me give you an example. In English, if you want to ask a question—an information question—what you do is you move something to the front of a sentence. So take a sentence like, "John ate an apple." You want to know what John ate. So the way you ask that question is, you say, "What did John eat?" Now what that signals is—that is to say, the—the "what" at the beginning of the sentence signals that there's a gap somewhere farther on in the sentence and you're really asking the listener to fill in that gap. So when you say, "What did John eat?" you understand that you're interested in the object of "eat." Notice you can't say, "What did John eat an apple?" That is to say, that shows that those two things are in complementary distribution. Either you say, "John ate an apple" or you take the position where "apple" is and you put a question word there like "what," but English demands that that "what" move to the front of the sentence—"What did John eat?"

And now when you explain that to a class or you put it on a blackboard or something, what you do is normally, you know, you'll write the sentence, "John ate what?" And then you'll take an arrow and move it to the front and you'll do whatever else you want to do to—to make that sentence—the parts of that sentence perspicuous to your—to your listener, but what does movement mean in the brain? Are you saying that something moves in the brain? Are you saying that a synapse moves, a dendrite moves, an axon moves? No—makes no sense at all.

So, what does it mean? Well, that's really a very deep question—I think it's a very deep question—and I think that we haven't a clue yet to how that works. So you're asking me, how does creativity work? Well, that is so far beyond the simple mechanics of how language works. I mean notice, what I'm doing now when I'm talking to you is I'm using these rules of language. But there's something behind my use of the rules of language. It's almost as if the rules of language are a, uh—an

orchestra. And I'm conducting it in my head. I've got a mental supervisor who's saying, "I want to say this, so therefore you do that and you do that and you move there." That—whatever that instructor is, whatever it is that's telling my syntax and my semantics and my phonology, whatever it is that's telling it, "Choose these words, put them in this order so that Forrest can understand what I'm trying to say," we haven't a clue.

So to say, what is create—what is creativity? Well, this is an act of creativity right now while I'm talking to you. I don't know what I'm even—I don't even know what I'm going to say next, but what's remarkable is that I can do it and I can do it instantaneously. But now how am I going to do that to create a poem or a work of art like a novel or a memoir or anything, even a letter to your mother? I mean, you know, it's way beyond—and it's possible we'll never understand that. You know, there are certain mysteries that we may never understand.

LARSON: Right. In this interview that you did with Noam Chomsky in 2009 for MIT Press Journals, you were talking about the state of linguistics, where we are and you were comparing—or you were quoting [MIT Professor of Philosophy] Sylvain Bromberger and he was saying—comparing it to physics and astronomy at the time of Galileo and [Johannes] Kepler.

KEYSER: Yeah, I think that's really exactly right. You see, at the time of Galileo—Galileo had a model for how the planets moved, and this was a model which—which actually—a mathematical model which calculated exactly how the planets moved, but why did they do that? Why did they move that way and not some other way? That's always the crucial question in science or art or in fact any human endeavor: "Why?"

Well, it took [Sir Isaac] Newton to come along and say, "Well, objects act on one another at a distance." This principle of acting at a distance, which was not at all obvious—it means, for example, that you and I—there's a—some kind of a physical force that is trying to bring us together and that we're operating against. Not only is it true of all of the objects in this room, but it's true of planets, galaxies, you know, everything we know in the universe. They all operate with forces that are trying to pull them together. Let's me—let me give you a, kind of, a metaphor for what that's like. Imagine that all of the objects in the universe were on the surface of an expanding rubber ball, and as the rubber ball gets bigger and bigger, it wants to contract. So that's why they operate. That's sort of—it's the elasticity of the rubber ball that wants them to snap back. There's some force that presses them apart, but they want to go back. Okay. So once we understood that—objects at a distance—that attraction of objects at a distance—all of Galileo's work became understandable.

Now, the same thing is true in linguistics. We now have a very good idea—at least I think we do—of how language works, what its pieces are. And we can describe it with great accuracy. I can describe—I can tell you what sentences you will find grammatical and what sentences you won't. I can predict what your reaction is going to be based on my knowledge of what the grammar must be like.

I know, for example, that you will say, "What did John mention that Bill ate?" is a good sentence. But suppose I take the sentence, "John mentioned the fact that Bill ate an apple." I know that the following sentence, which is a sentence I'm—I'm sure

you've never heard before and I'm sure, you know, you have no insight into this sentence, just your intuition about a speaker. The fact is you're going to tell me this sentence is bad in English: "What did John mention the fact that Bill ate?"

Okay, so we can make predictions just like Galileo, but what does the movement mean in the brain? We don't understand that. So, it's—what we need is—we need a Newton of the wetware. We need somebody to come along and say, "This is how knowledge is represented mentally. This is how it's represented in the dendrites, the axons, the stuff of the brain," and then maybe we can begin to answer your questions.

## 2. Linguistics career

LARSON: Mm-hm. Mm-hm. So you've had a long and distinguished career in linguistics. Can you talk about just some of your subject specialties, just so we get an idea about that? I know we could go on for hours and hours about that. That's an unfair question but—

KEYSER: Well, in the beginning, my work was in the history and structure of English. I knew a lot about that from my training at Oxford and so I did work in how language changed, in particular the phonology of language. I did work on—on Great Vowel Shift, for example, and on the plural rule in English— how it came to be.

And then I became interested in metrics. I mean, the way in which a poet determines whether a line is metrical or not and what the—and what the rules are for that. So take, for example, a line like, "Silent, upon a peak in Darien." This is a line from a poem. You'll know—the poem is *Ode to the West Wind*, by Percy Bysshe Shelley. Now, "Silent, upon a peak in Darien" is a passible line in the poem, but notice, "Ode to the West Wind by Percy Bysshe Shelley" is not, even though they both contain 10 syllables. So, why? Why is one possible? Why would Shelley choose, "Silent, upon a peak in Darien," but not a line like "Ode to the West Wind by Percy Bysshe Shelley?" Why would he choose one and not the other? And that—that was a good deal of my work.

Then I did a long collaboration with a colleague of mine, Ken Hale, on how verbs ought to be represented in the mental lexicon. This was called—this was work on argument structure. I also did work on analysis of poetry. I was particularly interested in Wallace Stevens, and I've done—I've written several articles about Wallace Stevens's poetry. In fact, I have one coming out at this end of my scholarly career. I have a, an article coming out in July in a journal called *Wallace Stevens [Journal]*, in which I compare the work of Wallace Stevens to that of [Edgar Allan] Poe's "The Raven," and I analyze a couple of poems and I show it's the same thing.

And as a fun thing, my daughter teaches—my middle daughter, Beth, teaches English in Superior, Montana, and next week I'm going to discuss "The Raven" with her class—10th grade class—and we're going to do it by—over Skype, you know, so I'll actually be in the class with them and talk to them about "The Raven," and if that works well, then we'll go on to Wallace Stevens.

LARSON: Oh, my. Wow. So your colleague Noam Chomsky, his ideas have had a huge impact on intellectual, you know, thought in the 20th century, particularly some of his stuff about generative grammar and universal grammar and they've affected lots of disciplines outside of linguistics and philosophy, including music theorists. Can you just—again, it's an unfair question, but for the listeners, talk about just briefly the two concepts of generative grammar and universal grammar because I have some questions to follow up on that in regards to music.

KEYSER: Well, I mean—they really are part and parcel of the same thing. They're really—you're really talking about the same thing. But basically, what universal grammar means is that everybody has hardwired at the moment of birth the ability to create a grammar of a language, that it's built into them in the same way as seeing the world in three dimensions or in color or our ability to walk bipedally—upright on two legs.

What universal grammar really is about is about the blueprint that is, somehow or other, built into the wetware of the brain, such that as a child lives in the world and hears sentences, the child has the ability to make a theory of the sounds, the linguistic sounds the child is hearing and then become a speaker. It's based on the notion that you can't speak without first of all having internalized a grammar. And the grammar that you will create is a function of what you hear, but your ability to create it is the same everywhere, no matter whether you're a child born in China or India or Arizona. It's the, you know, the same mechanism you bring to this miracle, actually, of speaking a language.

LARSON: In the fall of 1973, the conductor Leonard Bernstein gave some lectures at Harvard—the [Charles Eliot] Norton Lectures—and one of the big ideas behind them were some of the ideas of Noam Chomsky about universal grammar. And there were some MIT faculty that had gone to those lectures and in those lectures, Bernstein had challenged the scholarly community to follow up on some of his initial musings about things and there was a committee that was formed at MIT—a faculty committee or a faculty seminar and they included Professor Irving Singer, a philosopher, David Epstein, the conductor, composer, and music theorist, Jeanne Bamberger, music theorist and pianist, and John Harbison, a composer, but also included Ray Jackendoff, who had been a PhD student here at MIT [1969] and studied with Chomsky and Morris Halle.

KEYSER: Halle.

LARSON: Or Halle.

KEYSER: Morris Halle.

LARSON: Yeah. And then there was David Lewin, a music theorist—I guess at the time was at [State University of New York at] Stony Brook, later at Harvard University, and Arthur Berger, the composer, and there might have been some others. You told me that you had given a presentation to this seminar on meter.

KEYSER: Right.

LARSON: Do you remember what you talked about with them and how you came to give that presentation?

KEYSER: Well, you see, you're going way back to the beginning of my career. Do you remember the dates of that, by the way?

LARSON: That was 1973, was the— or fall of '74 was the seminar.

KEYSER: Okay. Now, in the fall of '74, you see, I was at UMass Amherst, I think. I was head of the department there and—but I'd been doing work on Chaucer, and I'd done this work with my longtime friend and mentor Morris Halle. I met Morris—I guess Morris and I have known one another since 1962, I think. Let's see, yeah, that's over 50 years.

And I do remember how I learned most of my linguistics. It was actually—I'd been invited to become a member of RLE—the Research Laboratory of Electronics at MIT. I think we talked about this in an earlier interview. And as it happened, I lived in Needham and Morris lived on Langley Road and that was between—Langley Road was between my house in Needham and MIT. And so I would often pick Morris up on the way in and drive him home at night, and the commute took maybe 45 minutes and it was in that commute that I learned most of what I know about linguistics, just driving Morris to and from his house.

And I remember one conversation in particular. We were talking about meter and he told me about the work of Roman Jakobson that he'd studied and that metrics must be a rule-based system. There must be a grammar of meter and that the way it works is that all speakers of a language—and I think what I'll do is, since most of your listeners will be in English, I'll confine my remarks to English, but it applies all over, to every language. When you write a metrical line in a poem, in English, what that means is that you have a set of rules in your head as the poet and that set of rules tells you which line is metrical and which line isn't. And the speaker—I mean and the hearer of the poem has the same grammar. So part of what must be the joy of metrical poetry is that the poet causes the hearer to use those rules and using those rules must give pleasure.

So if I say to you, "Gaily bedight, / A gallant knight, / In sunshine and in shadow, / Had journeyed long, / Singing a song, / In search of Eldorado," what I'm doing is I'm reciting the beginning of a poem by Edgar Allan Poe which is metrical and I'm forcing you to use the rules in your head to determine the metricality of that and that must be part of the joy, is what I'm guessing. I talked about the rules in that seminar. I talked about the rules that must have been in Chaucer's head when he wrote *The Canterbury Tales*.

Now, you'll notice that you really have been asking me in a number of different ways about the similarities between, say, language and other art forms. All right. Well, I've just said that the joy of metricality is that both the poet and the listener share a same set of rules. This is just part of it, but this is an important part, and that what the poet does is makes the listener use those rules. Well that, I think, can actually generalize to other art forms, like music. I mean, if a jazz musician plays a solo, that jazz musician is using a lot of rules. In fact, that jazz musician is using the theory of harmony that he or she has learned in either—naturally if you're somebody like Louis Armstrong—you're just—you're just born with it—or [Wolfgang Amadeus] Mozart—or if you're some—or whether you've gone to school to

internalize it, but you must—the listener must have that same set of rules in his or her head and it's the same thing because a listener can tell when a solo is bad. A listener can tell when a musician has made a mistake, has played a note that's not in the scale or in the chord progression. And so that means that they both must be sharing the same rules. So, one function of art is for the artist to cause the viewer or the listener to use a mental capacity that they otherwise wouldn't be using.

LARSON: Now some people have wondered if there's a relationship between that and this concept of universal grammar. There's some parallels, but some significant differences.

KEYSER: Well, only in this sense. I mean, take—I mean, there's—with respect to universal grammar, what I've said to you is that what that really means is that all human beings come hardwired with the ability to learn a language and what language they learn is a function of what language they hear, and in fact, not just what language they—but it could be more than one language. The ability to learn a language is something which is completely natural until the age of puberty. At puberty it seems to shut down, although my friend Ken Hale was something of a linguistic genius because his ability to learn a language never shut down. I mean, even though he had—I mean, he was a genetic, you know, anomaly in that sense. He should have—you know, it should have shut off at 12, but it didn't. And he knew something like 50 languages. If you were to ask him how many languages he knew, he would tell you "I only speak three: Warlpiri and Navajo, I guess, and English." But—Warlpiri is an Australian aboriginal language and Navajo an American Indian language and—and of course English, but, I mean, I've—I've—

I once went into the Gaelic [Irish] consul with Ken in New York City and Ken started speaking Gaelic to the person behind the desk and after 10 minutes, she said to him, "Excuse me, do you speak English?" And he said, "Yes, I do." And she said, "My Gaelic just isn't that good." And he didn't speak to her because—in Gaelic to show off. What Ken did was he spoke to her in Gaelic because he thought it was a court—courtesy, a courtesy which I wish all of us could, you know, extend. But he was very special in that regard, but most people have the ability to learn—so for example, in Africa, it's absolutely commonplace for speakers to know five or six languages because they are—Africa is such a rich reservoir of languages. The average African speaks Swahili, Chichewa, I mean, whatever languages—but then at the age of 12 it shuts off. Now, we don't know why. I mean, there are a lot of interesting speculations, but we don't know why. But, in any case, it sh—now, it's very likely that music is universal as well. There probably is a universal grammar of music.

Now, what does that mean? Well, what it means is, study the theory of harmony and then you'll know what it means. I mean—and—it'll talk about, you know, a tonic chord, you know, tonic chords, dominant, subdominant, first, thirds, fifths. It'll talk about what—everything that you need—talk about the cycle of fifths—this—but it's really been very well worked out, and in some sense that theory must be in everybody's head. Of course, as far as I can tell, music is universal.

### 3. Music theory and linguistics

LARSON: Speaking of that, there's that book called *A Generative Theory of Tonal Music*, by Ray Jackendoff [MIT PhD 1969] and—

KEYSER: [Alfred W.] Fred Lerdahl.

LARSON: Right. And that was published by MIT Press, a part of this series called "Series on Cognitive Theory and Mental Representations," which you were one of the series editors.

KEYSER: Yeah.

LARSON: Were you involved in any aspect of this book?

KEYSER: No, no. I mean, I didn't—if you mean, did I do any work with Ray? No, no. I just—I knew the book. I read it and I thought it was really interesting. It was an attempt to show how there—there was a st—a structure behind music in the same way that there was a structure behind, let's say, a poem, and it was an attempt to sort of explicate what that structure was.

LARSON: Right. And this book came—was inspired in part by Leonard Bernstein's lectures at Harvard—

KEYSER: Yeah.

LARSON: And then there was that MIT faculty seminar that—

KEYSER: Yeah. When I talked at the MIT faculty seminar, I strictly talked about meter, and the notion was, well, is there a relationship between meter in poetry and meter in music when you talk about, you know, this tune is in four bars—I mean, four beats—four-four time—you know, four—four beats to a measure, quarter note gets a beat, that sort of thing.

LARSON: Yeah. What was—when you spoke with the seminar about that, how were you talking about the similarities and differences because there's some significant differences, but were you finding any similarities besides some of the more superficial ones?

KEYSER: No, no, I didn't. There—I think rather—the most—one of the most interesting areas of convergence is, how do you set a poem to music? So I remember that there was this Ben Jonson poem, ["Song. To Celia."] "Drink to Me Only With Thine Eyes," which was in iambic tetrameter, I think. "Drink to me only with thine eyes,"—yeah, it was iambic tetrameter—"and I will pledge with mine." Okay, so the idea was, how do you set that to music? And you'll notice that although it's, "Drink to me only with thine eyes, / and I will pledge with mine; / then take a sip from out the cup / I will not ask for wine."—something. I'm butchering it, but it's something like that. Notice when it was set to music, it was set to three-quarter time. [counting] "Drink to me only with thine eyes, / and I will drink with mine"—two, three, one, two, three. What's going on there? Something which is a tetrameter meter, iambic meter, shows up in a poem—I mean, in a song as three-quarter time.

Well, clearly there have to be rules that allow you to, uh—map between the two and that's a very interesting question. And I think that can be done. I mean, I think in fact, I once gave a talk in which I suggested that what you—that was only the stress maxima in a line that could be elongated in—in the music. So it was only a stress syllable of a particular kind in the metrical line that you could associate with a note and allow the note to be extended longer than a single beat. So notice. "Drink to me only," you see, "only" gets two be—"o-o-n-n." Well, that's sort of interesting to look at that and I think that's—I did a little bit of work in that, but I never really became a—I never really delved deeply into that.

LARSON: That's a fascinating subject. There's so many poems that are set where the composer seems to disregard any of the metrical part of the poetry and they're just attaching notes to syllables as a way of making the music go, but there's no sense of the poem left.

KEYSER: I'll tell you something else about—about setting poems to music, which I think—I don't think I've ever heard anybody say this, but you'll notice that there's a lot of attempts—take Ned Rorem, I think put some Wallace Stevens poems together—to music. If you think of the Schubert songs, or take, for example, the *Winterreise*, you know, the—the—if you—the *Winterreise* is really a lovely—I mean, it's a beautiful song cycle. The one that always strikes me as the best is the last one, "The Hurdy-Gurdy Man," who is, of course, a symbol of death and it is absolutely gorgeous. But if you look at the poetry, it's banal.

Most of the great songs that have been put to music have been—most of the songs have been banal. They haven't been very interesting poetry. And when the poetry is too good, I think the music—the marriage fails. I think that it doesn't work that you can put great poetry to great music. I don't understand why. The poetry has got to be banal. Now can you do it the other way? Can you put great poetry to banal music and make it work? No, I don't think you can do that either. So I think that what has to happen is that when you make songs out of poems, the poems can't be too good. Why should that be? I mean, maybe I'm wrong, but that's been my intuition.

LARSON: That's very interesting. As a composer, sometimes I've looked at poetry and said—I just—there's nothing I can add to that because the poetry is complete in and of itself and it would be a disrespect to try to add something to the poetry.

KEYSER: Yeah. I can—I'm completely sympathetic to that view.

#### 4. Is music a language?

LARSON: So following up more on this topic of language and music—as you know probably better than I do, you know for centuries musicians have talked about music as a language and not really understanding—from a linguist standpoint or really stop to think more intellectually kind of what that means. But here are some examples.

Even MIT's first Professor of Music, Klaus Liepmann, wrote a book called *The Language of Music*. And jazz musicians talk about that a lot. There's—the pianist Toshiko Akiyoshi has a biography called *Jazz Is My Native Language*—or this

trumpet player Valery Ponomarev. He says here, quoting him, "Rhythmic, harmonic, melodic, formalized. It's all language and to teach her to learn to speak jazz is identical to speak any language." And he has a group called Universal Language, and linguists obviously would disagree that it's actually a language. Ray Jackendoff has some articles where he's talking about some of these significant differences. He talks about parallels, but not similarities, and he goes to great lengths to—saying that we have to understand the differences between the two before we can even talk about—meaningfully talk about the similarities. And there's also a paper which you've read by Peter Culicover called "Linguistics, cognitive science and all that jazz" and he talks about some of the parallels between jazz and language, some of which you've already talked about. Some of it being that jazz is rule governed, it's processed in real time, acquired through experience, it's improvised and used for communication. Do you want to talk any more about some of those similarities? And then he also has something about some of the differences, but you read that paper. You want to talk about some of that?

KEYSER: Well, I think that really, when musicians talk about music as a language, it's got to be a metaphor, and I'll tell you why. When I talk to you, what I'm doing is using sound and this encoding of words in a particular format in order to convey to you a meaning. This whole enterprise that we're engaged in, the six hours of interviews, is really not about the rules. It's not about the sounds. It's really about the meaning, right? All right. Now, when I say something to you, if you understand it, fine. If you don't, you ask me questions and ultimately, if we've been able to communicate effectively, you understand.

Now I ask you, uh—what is Erik Satie's *Gymnopedies*? What's the meaning of it? There isn't any. And for every piece of music, there's no—there's no—the question about—what is its meaning in the sense in which language is conveying meaning—it just doesn't exist. Music is not about meaning, but language is.

LARSON: Meaning in a semantic sense.

KEYSER: Yes. Music is not about that. It's about something else. What I've inti—intimated is that what it's about is using this hardwired theory of music and causing the composer to create using it and causing the listener to use that same system in order to—uh—in order to—to enjoy it. The reason why I'm—I'm hesitating is because another idea just occurred to me.

I think the way it really works is like this. When I talk to you, you talk to yourself. And basically, the shibboleth is, to perceive is to generate. If I generate a sentence and you perceive it, it's because you've generated it. So in a way, talking is really a way of making you talk to yourself. That's what music is. A composer who composes music is a way of making the listener create the music him or herself. That's how we work as human beings. We are really far more solitary than you think.

LARSON: Do you think there's also an aspect of a composer creating something that's constantly surprising the listener in a way that—particularly if it's something that's—uh—

KEYSER: Well, that's a difference. I think that a difference between music and—and language is that music seems to me to have the ability to change its rules m—for—

more flexibly than language. I mean notice, language you have to have a subject, a verb, and an object—in English, I'm saying—and notice that the order is fixed and there's no way that the next generation is going to push the envelope by making English into a verb, subject, object language. It's not going to happen, but you could do something like that with music, and witness the changes that music—I mean, I—I'll—I'll let you in on something which I should be ashamed to admit. But when I listen to the masters now—Beethoven, Mozart—I enjoy them, but nowhere near as much as I enjoy [Olivier] Messaien and Satie and the newer composers who are just doing something completely different, and that, really, I find exciting. I can't tell you that I find anything exciting in the masters, just something familiar and pleasant and I'm glad they're making me do that again, but I want to—I want to go someplace different and so, you know, Messaien is just—blows my mind.

LARSON: You're not alone in that regard.

KEYSER: [laughs]

LARSON: You mentioned earlier, and I was going to ask this question anyway, can language— it sounds like you're saying that it can be a useful metaphor for music.

KEYSER: Yes, but you know, I think—look. There's an interesting kind of crutch that people who want to understand something use, and it—this crutch can get in the way of understanding and I'll tell you what I mean by that. I can tell you in terms of a joke. There's a drunk and he's on his—all fours underneath a street light, obviously looking for something. Somebody comes along and says, "What—what happened?" He says, "Well, I lost my keys and I'm trying to find them." And the guy says, "Well, let me help you. You know where you lost them?" He said, "Oh yeah. I lost them across the street." He says, "Well, why are you looking here?" And the drunk says, "Well, because the light's better."

Now how does that apply to science? Fifty years ago at MIT, [Claude] Shannon and [Warren] Weaver developed a theory called information theory and at that time, Chomsky's *Syntactic Structures* hadn't been written, or maybe it was just about that time. People hadn't anyway understood it. And a number of linguists started to use information theory to try to understand language. It was a completely wrong move, but why did they do it? Because the light was better. Somebody had come up with a theory and it was clear what the theory was. Well, that's a clear tool. Let's try to apply it to language. That's always a mistake. You have to look at language on its own and it's the same thing is true with music. When you say that music is a language, you're looking where the light is clearer, where the light is better. Don't do that, because all it'll do is lead you down the wrong path. Music is *sui generis*. It's its own thing and figure out what it is, but don't muddy the waters by saying, oh well, it must be like language. Why? Well, because we understand language. So I don't think calling music a language is helpful at all, but one of the reasons why we call it that is because there are certain similarities, but that doesn't make it, you know, that doesn't make it the same thing. Well, what are the similarities? Well, the ability to speak a language is an ability to generate an infinite number of sentences. Well, the ability to play mu—to improvise, let's say, is the ability to generate an infinite number of solos. All right. Big deal.

So that's what—that's a property, not of the similarity between music and language, but happens to be a property of the human brain. It has this ability to produce infinite output based on finite means. And what we need to understand is how does language work and how is that represented in the brain? How does music work? How is that represented in the brain? And then maybe we can say something else.

## 5. Poetry and music

LARSON: Right. And the similarities between poetry and music is a different issue because as Ray Jackendoff says, it's kind of a hybrid kind of art where there's some more aspects of music there, but he's making a distinction between that and language.

KEYSER: I think all of that is dust in the eyes. I mean, you want a—poetry, look at poetry on its own, you know, and I think that to look at poetry as music—there was an interesting comment that was made by a 19th century German philosopher. I think his name was—I think it was [Friedrich] Schlegel who made this comment, but I'm not sure. But he did notice something about the arts that you might take umbrage at as a composer. When you say of a painting—let's—let me choose visual art—when you say of a painting that it is, uh—poetic, you're sort of saying something nice about the painting. But if you say—you are enlarging the painting—if you say of a piece of music that it is poetic, you're enlarging—you're saying something nice about the music, but notice if you say of poetry that it's painterly, you're diminishing it. And if you say of a poem that it's musical, you're diminishing it. So Schlegel—hope it was Schlegel—I apologize if I'm misleading your listeners, but if you say—given that Schlegel felt that poetry therefore was the highest form of art and that music and painting were lesser forms. Now, why did he say that? Well, I think the reason why he said that was because poetry is an art form based on something which is distinctly human—the human language, ability to speak a language, but vision and—and music are not. I mean, other creatures, I mean, they can see and they can, you know, make musical sounds, although whether it's music or not, that's a different question. You know, maybe that's not so. But in any case, people have—the point that I'm trying to make is that people have often said of poetry that it is the highest art form and—and what they mean by that is, it's the highest art form because it's an art form of a cognitive function which is unique to human beings, the ability to speak a language. It's enough to say that without having to worry about whether you want to order it above or below something.

LARSON: Right. Right. In 1971, you co-wrote a book with Morris Halle called *English Stress: Its Form, Its Growth, Its Role in Verse*.

KEYSER: Yes.

LARSON: And in this theory of meter that you've already talked about is in that book. I want to ask you if your work on meter has affected your own work as a poet.

KEYSER: No. Or if it has, I'm not aware of it. I mean, when I have—when—look, I've engaged in two art forms, poetry and music. Well, maybe three art forms. I've also

written—you know, I've written some children's book poems, and I wrote a long elegiac poem called *Raising the Dead*, and I've also—I wrote a couple of memoirs, so—which are not scientific, you know. The one on travel and then the one that MIT Press is going to be publishing in the spring of 2011. Whenever I do anything like that, I don't think like an artist—I mean, like a scientist. I deliberately don't. I don't want to. I follow an intuition. I don't want to follow a line of thought. I don't want to analyze it. So I—I try—in fact, one of the reasons why I'm writing and playing now is because I want to—I want my mind to work in a way differently than it has for the last 40 years.

LARSON: Mm-hm. When you were coming of age, this poetic form that we call free verse poetry became much more prevalent.

KEYSER: Yeah.

LARSON: Do you have any thoughts about kind of seeing how that became more accepted? Even when I was in high school, there were some people saying, oh, that's not poetry, and stuff like that, and some—poetry I've seen of yours seems to be more in the free verse kind of form.

KEYSER: Well, what happened was that at the beginning of the 20th century, Ezra Pound wrote a long poem—set of poems called *The Cantos*. And one of the ones—I think it was Canto LXXXIII—[laughs] he said that the function of the—the task of the 20th century was to break the back of the iambic. Now why did he say that? Well, poetry up until the 20th century was metrical. Every—you had to write metrical poetry of some sort or you weren't a poet. That's just—that was just it.

And when Ezra Pound said, "We are breaking the back of the iambic," what he was essentially saying was that poetry needs a new unit. The breaking the back of the iambic was railing against feet as the unit. So what was the new unit? It was line length. It was just a line now and poets now could make lines as long, as short as they wanted, you know, and that was what they began to manipulate. Well, line length is much easier to manipulate than metrical poetry, and so—but that's what happened. It certainly freed up the kinds of things you—but it was still poetry. It's just that the unit was now the line. That's interesting about that.

What happened at that time? Well, what happened in painting? Representational art went out the window and all of a sudden you had cubism, you had pointillism, you had abstraction in painting. Well, what happened in music? Well, all of a sudden, tonal music gave way to Alban Berg, for example, or, or [Anton] Webern. All right? All of the arts decided to give up the constraints that they had been under, to throw them away—all at the same time.

Well, what happened in science? The theory of evolution. [Charles] Darwin. And it's always been my view that the Darwinian notion of evolution was behind the breakup of traditional art forms in—It was a cultural thing and it happened in all of the art forms across the board.

LARSON: Can you speak just a little bit more about that?

KEYSER: Yes, I will. One of the great functions of constraints is that it prevents you from making mistakes. It works very well in the hard sciences, in physics and chemistry,

biology. There is so much that is agreed upon in terms of the theories that it's very hard for people to write nonsense because the constraints within which they must write are so commonly accepted. You understand what I'm saying?

Now that operated in music and in poetry as well. So what is interesting about tonal music is not that you had a few masters—Beethoven and whoever you want to put in that, but what's interesting is how good the secondary artists were. To me, you know, the remarkable thing is not that Bach was so great, but that [Georg Philipp] Telemann is, because the constraints showed them how to write the music. When you got rid of the constraints, everything depended on how great the artist was and it is no accident that at the time when Ezra Pound said break the back of the iambic, the poets who came in to do the breaking were people like T. S. Eliot and in music, Schoenberg.

LARSON: [Arnold] Schoenberg.

KEYSER: Schoenberg. [laughs] Schoenhof—yeah, he's the bookseller [in Harvard Square]. Yeah, Schoenberg. And in painting, [Pablo] Picasso—but if you're not great, if you're just good, then the quality of the art suffers because you're not helped by the constraints and in my view, that's what's be—actually what's happened in all of the art forms. I think that it hasn't recovered from breaking the back.

LARSON: So you were talking about Charles Darwin's theory of evolution and how it affected the changes of the arts. Can you talk a little bit more about how you see that, kind of, more directly?

KEYSER: Well, I think that Darwin really shook everybody up. I mean, there was a kind of a social order and what Darwin did was he turned it upside down. I mean, what—all of a sudden it became clear that—uh—that *homo sapiens* was just part of a much grander, much larger scheme of—great chain of being, if you will. And, and what I think was that that was one of those times when what people thought about themselves suddenly disappeared. Human beings were no longer the center, the perfection of the world, just simply an extension. And I think what I'm suggesting may be the case. I mean, if I were a social historian, I would explore this. What I—what I would suggest is happening is that this caused underpinnings of everything to be reconsidered, and it happened in the arts and that's—was—in other words, it was a cultural paradigm shift of immense proportions and this cultural wave just rolled over everything in the arts, in the sciences—I don't think it's an accident that at the same time that you find tonal music disappearing in western music, replaced by Schoenberg and Berg, and the same thing is happening in poetry, the same thing is happening in painting, and then when you look in the sciences, what you see is that there's this cataclysmic shift wrought by Darwin. That's not an accident. That requires explanation.

## 6. Jay Keyser's poetry and short stories

LARSON: That's really fascinating. Getting back to the subject of poetry, have you written any metered poetry or is all your poetry kind of more free verse?

KEYSER: I—I've written a lot of—I've written metered poetry and I wrote some children's poetry, which was metered. And I thought that children's poetry needed to be metered because children would like that, but most of the time I opted for the line because I was trying to do something else in poetry and I thought that meter didn't add to it.

LARSON: There's this book of poetry that you mentioned earlier called *Raising the Dead* from 1993. Can you talk about the inspiration for, for the poems?

KEYSER: Oh yeah. That's very simple. I mean, that's not—that's very straightforward. Let's see. I think although the last 15 years of my marriage had been— was really not very happy, I was not the sort of person who was going to do anything about that. I came from an era when you played the deck of cards that you were dealt. Divorce never seemed to me to be an option, but what happened was that there was a cataclysmic event in my life in which my ex-wife and I no longer could live together, and this had quite an impact on me and I needed to see a psychiatrist. And I found a psychiatrist whose name was Winston Hughes. And you can see that he's one of the people to whom I dedicated the book *Raising the Dead*. Now Winston was a child psychiatrist and it seemed to me that I needed to go to a child psychiatrist because I considered that whatever was wrong with me must have started out in childhood. And I noticed that Winston had in his office these little boxes filled with materials that would allow you to build stick figures. They were pieces of wood that fit together like Lego or log cabin or even pipe cleaners.

And I asked him why he had those there. And he said, "Well, you know, most of my clients are children and it's hard to get children to talk sometimes. And so what I do is I have them build models of their lives, of their world, and sometimes they'll make a model, let's say, of their parents and the father will be very, very big and the mother will be very tiny and then that'll enable me to say to the kid, so why is the father big and the child small, you know—I mean, the mother small—and that can start a conversation."

So I thought, well, Winston needs stick figures for me. So I would leave these sessions with him—this happened—I saw him for about three and a half years, and this happened about a year and a half into the therapy. I—I thought what he needed was stick figures from me and so I would leave the sessions really emotionally charged. I would go to the Wursthau [Restaurant, 1917–1996] in Harvard Square because his office was around the corner and I would order two eggs over easy, fries, and toast and I would write a poem based on how I felt as a result of the session. And I did this for about a year, year and a half, and then finally, when the sessions were over, I remember spending one afternoon looking at these poems and suddenly realizing they made a book. I went and I added a few transitional poems to go from one to another, but basically it was a single narrative, and I put it together.

I found poetry there extremely useful. In fact, poetry was for me a way of figuring out what my problem was. And it seemed to me that I could write poems about what was troubling me without ever really understanding what was troubling me, but the poem was a way of getting to my subconscious or whatever and verbalizing it and then later I could realize it.

So, one of the poems in that group was a poem in which I said—I don't have the book with me. I could read it to you, but—I remember saying, uh—my sister was a blue baby. She died 18 months before I was born. Therefore I was surprised to see her when she rang the bell. She said she was a Jehovah's Witness and had I found God? And I wrote another poem in which I saw through the window of my house—lawn, in which this—a troll was digging a grave, and I talked about holding my breath until the walls of my room turned to dirt. And then—I read these to Winston and then we would—I would just go in and I would read it to him and then we would do—talk about what it meant.

One day I was walking in Holyoke Center [at Harvard University] and I was thinking about this poem. I suddenly realized what it meant. Basically what it meant was that my mother had a baby who was born before I was born. It was a blue baby. Blue baby meant there was a hole in the heart, and it was a congenital heart problem. Now they know how to fix it. They take a—uh—an artery from the arm and they reattach it or something, but then they didn't know what to do. It was a huge tragedy in the life of my family. They—my father was—had a pretty good job and he spent all of his money trying to save my sister. I assume she's my sister, but she died before I was born so it isn't clear to me that I have a sister. However, it is absolutely clear in—if you are a Buddhist or a Confucian—a Confucianist that you do have a sister, but for me, you know—anyway, this child—they—they couldn't save her and then my father lost his job because of the stock market crash and I was born, you know, but it was—I was born into a stressed family, not a family that was unstressed.

Well anyway, I suddenly realized what the poems were about. And what the poems were about were that my mother could never get over the loss of her daughter, and she had me, but it was extremely hard for her to accept me because if she did, then she would have to admit that her daughter was gone, that I'd replaced her daughter. And that had a huge effect on my relationship with her as a child.

When I understood this, all of a sudden it felt as if a weight had dropped from my shoulders and I'm walking to the shrink's office. And so I go in and I say, "Winston, you remember that poem I read you two weeks ago?" "Yeah." I said, "I know what it's about." And he said, "What?" And I described it to him. And that was the beginning of the end of the therapy. I remember he didn't say a word. We went on talking, but I felt different. I felt lighter. And at the end of the session just before I left, I turned to him and I said, "Winston, you never said anything about the poem. What do you think of my interpretation?" He said, "Oh that." He said, "That was brilliant." And out I went and that was the beginning.

Now what's interesting is that it took poetry to get me there, you understand? But it took Winston to get me to write the poetry. So that's where that came from.

LARSON: Wow. How much poetry had you written prior to that?

KEYSER: None, or maybe a few children's poems. Nothing much.

LARSON: Had you—you obviously had studied poetry in college and all that. Had you written any poetry for any classes or taken any courses? You study with any poets as far as on the technique of writing poetry?

KEYSER: No, not in high—not in college. I mean, in college I took the—you know, my major was English literature and I just read poems and poetry. I loved it. But it was only when I started writing poetry that I went into seminars. I used to belong to a poetry group and you would read the poems to people and they would criticize it and then I—there was the—one of the things that successful poets do is they set up seminars and you pay them \$400 and you go to their seminar for eight or ten sessions, you write a poem—I stopped doing that because I didn't think I was getting anything out of that. I figured it's really up to me. And so I made my own decisions.

I'm—I mean, you know, I'm hardly—you're focusing on my poetry. I was not—I wouldn't call myself a successful poet. I mean, I wrote this book of poems which was published by a local press. My children's poems, which arose in—in one of these seminars, one of these work—the poetry workshops—

LARSON: That's the poetry—that's called *The Pond God*.

KEYSER: *The Pond God and Other Stories*. And I just—I mean, that's a—look, I just started—I got tired writing poems. So I decided I wanted to write stories, you know, and I wanted to write really concise little stories. So I wrote these stories. Each one was maybe—there was a constraint. I figured everything needs constraints. So every one of my stories had to be 200 words long or shorter. Nobody who's ever read it has ever noticed that, by the way. Nobody has ever said, "Here's an interesting fact about Keyser's *Pond God and Other Stories*: they're 200 words long or shorter." Every one has to mention "on the horizon." Every one has to mention on the horizon. Nobody's ever mentioned that either, but those are the constraints that I would write and I treated it—a line would pop into my head and then I said, now how can I write a story that makes sense of that line? So it was like a game. It was like a puzzle that I set for myself. I—that's what I had fun doing.

LARSON: Wow. So I was wondering if there's a poem or two that you might want to share with us?

KEYSER: Well, when—I have some poems here that I—when you said that you wanted me to read some poems, I went last night and I looked at the poems that I had and I thought, well, I'll read you—let's see. Here is one that was published in that great poetry journal *The Cambridge Chronicle*. [laughs] It was call[ed "A Fresco at the Abbey of Monte Oliveto Maggiore"]—and it was inspired by a fresco that I saw in a Benedictine monastery in—in Italy, the Abbey of Monte Oliveto Maggiore. And the panels as you go into this abbey represent miracles of Saint Benedictine. And in one of them, it's really interesting, his miracle was he mended a broken plate. [laughs] You know.

"For his first miracle Saint Benedict mends a plate. / In the left panel, it is split in two; in the right, / whole again, as if it had never been severed. / 'He knew the power of two hands,' whispers the monk. / A goiter the color of a bermuda onion bulges in his neck. / He leans toward me, rasps into my ear, / 'Sono questo piatto. I am that plate.' / 'Once I was broken. Now I am together.' / He presses his mottled hands palm to palm. / Summoned by vespers, a solemn procession passes. / I nod goodbye, but he has already slipped / into the company of mended men."

So that was—well, I thought you'd like—because I thought—I'd publish—I'd read you some poems because—to show you at least somebody else thought that they were worth publishing.

This one is called "Meditation on the Plague." It was published in 1996 in a journal called *Amaranth*.

"The ocean is shuddering. Offshore / bloated holsteins bob. Barn swallows, / flying low ahead of the coming storm, / kamikaze into the sand, bony feet sticking out. / The pastor says, 'Blessed are the meek,' / keels over, arms flopping before the pulpit like windshield wipers. / The congregation follow suit, limbs askew among the pews. / I'm not religious. Perhaps that is why I'm still alive. / To pass the time I reckon the dead. The tally's in the thousands: / birds, cows, black snakes. I leave a record in the sand, / long columns with headings: BIRD, BEAST, NEITHER. / Black clouds stain the sky. I'll try to finish before it rains."

All right. Now here's another one that I think you'd like. I chose this one because it's about MIT. Do you know if you go down the corridor in Building 6, just before you go across the aerie way that leads to the library, there's a mural of animals?

LARSON: Yeah.

KEYSER: Okay, so this was inspired by that mural. The scene is a giraffe walking down the corridors of MIT ["Safari So Good"].

"She ambles down the corridor, / bends her neck toward a bulletin board, / nuzzles posters announcing / a Latino dance party, / gay and lesbian solidarity, / a forum against sexual harassment, / racism, Christianity, the death penalty. / She tears off a corner and swallows. / The ripple of a hundred thousand muscles / rolls along her mottled mane / as if her neck were a pond. / She lopes off. Her head grazes the ceiling. / Ancient dust settles onto her back like dry rain. / On the floor above, Professor Einarrson / discusses the second derivative / while mountain gorillas / swing from the sprinkler system, / nest behind his lectern, / grooming one another, / mouthing chalk and erasers. / Anacondas wrapped around oscilloscopes / in sophomore physics make sinusoidal waves / the thickness of fire hoses, flick long tongues / at the arms of students reaching to adjust / their amplitudes while, in fluid mechanics, / a shark is waiting for someone to test the waters. / In the basement alligators belly up to the mail room. / Soon, trees will sprout beneath the marbled floors, / vines will drop from the skylights, / tropical birds with beaks like spades / will perch in the ventilators, / herds of wildebeest / will careen through the hallways / like a river rushing on a thousand legs. / The noise will be deafening."

That's about MIT.

All right. So then I will read you one more, okay? This is much more abstract. I mean, this is a different kind of poem altogether. And I just thought I would—I chose this one because you're interested in how my—does linguistics affect my poetry and here's one where I suppose you can see the similarities. All right? It's called "The World is Filled with Empty Places."

"There can be no argument in an empty place. Two people leave the hall. Each thinks the other follows. In the black street, a lamp is burning. Each walks toward the light. Both arrive at the same place. One turns to the other. No one is there. There can be no color in an empty place, only the sound of color that we cock our ears to like gaudy birds. The world is filled with such bird song, each an exclamation point without a sentence. There can be no sound in an empty place, only the sense of sound. You sit, for example, on a stone bench. The bougainvillea places you in a hot clime. The sky is a shade of blue you will never see again. White rollers lick the shore. Perspiration gathers at the back of your neck. It is your turn to speak. You adjust your collar, take a handkerchief to your brow. The wet air fills with the dregs of your sentences. Things without names are the ghosts of empty places, images bobbing in empty air. Imagine a dark street cobbled, a gas light flickering at the corner. To your right, a brick wall. To your left, an open field sprawling to the horizon. You raise your hand to your face. It isn't there. Something brushes your cheek. Things without names are empty places. They fill the mind with dread. You find yourself alone in a piazza. There are cobblestones, an arcade of fluted columns. In the distance, a horse and rider approach. The bell tolls twice. Suddenly you realize the next instant will be your first or your last. You turn. There in the dark piazza the rider without equerry is upon you.

"These are not poems. These are images of poems. Imagine a word—say, 'apple'. Now move the word aside. There behind it is the fruit. You say it is round. That is not the apple. It is merely an image of the apple. Close your eyes. The apple disappears. That is the poem."

LARSON: [sighs] Wow. That's so beautiful. Thank you very much.

KEYSER: I'm glad you like it. That's the only way I'll ever get them published. [laughs]

## 7. **Playing in Dixieland and swing bands**

LARSON: So I have some other musical questions and then we're going to have you play us a number on the trombone. There's a—

KEYSER: I want to know how you're going to do the segue from the interview to the trombone.

LARSON: Yeah, well we—

KEYSER: Do you have a rhythm section here? [laughs]

LARSON: I wish.

KEYSER: [coughs]

LARSON: So, there's a group that you play with called the New Liberty Jazz Band. They were formed in 1980. I guess the instrumentation according to what I've been able to find is cornet, clarinet, trombone, piano, tenor banjo, guitar, banjo, tuba, and a vocalist. When did you join this group and how did that come about?

KEYSER: Huh! Well, let's see. I joined this group—I think I must—I must be with them now for 15 years. And the way it came about was that they had a trombone player, a man by the name of Ernie Clark, who could play rings around me. He was great. Ernie moved out to western Massachusetts and I don't think he's playing anymore, which is too bad. He's really good. Anyway, I—Ernie would play with them and I was taking lessons with Ernie Clark and he introduced me to the band and said, you know, this band needs a trombone player and I can't do all the gigs so maybe you'd like to try out with them. So I did and then Ernie stopped going. He moved out and so I just stayed with them. And that's how that happened.

LARSON: Prior to this, had you had much experience playing Dixieland and traditional jazz?

KEYSER: No, no. Not at all. You know, I mean, that was—that was really the hard part. I mean, the beginning, I don't think I was very good at all. But I—you know what I had that made them keep me? I was really dedicated to learning, and I made all the rehearsals and they want—they wanted to rehearse one night a week and it's amazing how things that happen to you in music are not really a function of how well you play, but extraneous things like, will you make all the rehearsals and are you reliable? Do you get drunk on the job? You know, I mean, you can be really a great musician, but if you get drunk on the job, you know, it's—people won't hire you because you make a pass at the guy who hired you's—you know, his wife. [laughs] You don't want that kind of trouble.

LARSON: So the repertoire of this group—is it mostly Dixieland and traditional jazz or how would you describe it?

KEYSER: It's all traditional jazz and in fact, it's a kind of—it's got to be really traditional. I mean, most of the tunes that we played on our—on our CDs are tunes that you've never heard of before. You know, I mean—that nobody's ever heard of—"The Breeze," "Panama," "When My Best Girl Turned Me Down," "Sensation Rag," "Eccentric." These are really, you know, 1920s and '30s typical Dixieland—Jelly Roll Morton pieces, things like that. When we do parades, we limit our repertoire to th—to stuff that most people will recognize on the—who are watching the parade. So we'll do "Bill Bailey," or "Darktown Strutters' Ball," "Ain't She Sweet," "Five Foot Two," "Bourbon Street Parade," stuff like that.

The band has not been rehearsing for the last couple of years and that's a sad thing because it turns out that the wives of two of the band members are in need of a—of a lot of care. They're not very well and it's made it impossible to rehearse, but that—but when we were, sort of, at the height of our sense of being a band, we would rehearse every week and we would come up with—the whole fun of it was to come up with a new arrangement for a new tune, a new Dixieland tune.

LARSON: So when the band was learning new tunes, what kind of charts were you working with? How were you learning stuff?

KEYSER: We just actually had the chords. You know, we put the chords in front of us and the trumpet player is a—one of these extremely talented musicians. I mean, he not only plays trumpet, but he plays clarinet and he's great on piano, but he's a natural.

LARSON: What's his name?

KEYSER: Bobby MacInnis. And his brother Dan MacInnis, who's also a natural, he plays banjo, 12 string banjo, but he knows all of the tunes, all of the chords and if he doesn't know them, all he has to do is hear the tune and he knows the chords. So the two of them are sort of a powerhouse of musicality and represent, kind of, the focus of the band. And what we would do is—I mean, they'd come in and they'd know the tune and there'd be the chords and we would work out what we call a road map and the road map would be: play the tune once, then clarinet solo, then trombone and cornet split choruses, and then banjo solo—something like that. You know, and then we'd—that would be the road map of the tune. And we'd just work on it until we thought it worked.

LARSON: And if it was a tune that you didn't know, then they would just kind of play it a few times until you've picked it up?

KEYSER: Until you knew it, yeah.

LARSON: How different are different performances of the same tune?

KEYSER: Well—

LARSON: Obviously there are solos and stuff, but—

KEYSER: The same tune is identical where— every time we play it—I mean, we don't do anything different. Now most of our playing, as I said, is on—in a parade and what typically happens in the parade is that Bobby will point to different soloists to come in and he'll vary the order of solos. So you watch him at the end of the 32-bar phrase. And so basically what happens is you play the tune, then he points to you to do a solo, then somebody else to do a solo, and then we just—everybody does a solo, and then we do the tune again. It's not very interesting. So the real varia—the fun in doing it is seeing how well we can play together while somebody is soloing—you know, punctuating the—providing backgrounds for the solo, and how well we can play together in the—when we play the tune, which we call the head. So it's not very complicated.

LARSON: There's this tradition in traditional jazz of sometimes doing kind of simultaneous improvisation. Does this group do much of that? I'm thinking of the recording of the tune "Once in A While" that you sent me and it sounds like there's some places where there's some simultaneous improvisation.

KEYSER: Yeah, but we don't do much of that. Basically, it's pretty straight ahead Dixieland. They're not very—they're not—the members of the band are not very—I would say—revolutionary in how we do it. The piano player, for example, can't stand Duke Ellington. In fact, the only kind of music he likes is Dixieland. It's pecu—he's a very peculiar guy. He was an OB gynecologist most of his life. He's one of the people who has to take care of his wife now 24 hours a day, and he's very knowledgeable about Dixie—has an encyclopedic knowledge of who played what in the '20s and '30s. They—he knows a lot of the players. A lot of the players have stayed at his house.

LARSON: What's his name?

KEYSER: His name is Jack Phelan. And Jack is a good piano player, but he can't practice at home anymore because it's disturbing to his spouse. And the only other jazz musician

that Jack likes who is not a Dixieland player is Thelonious Monk. [laughter] Really weird, isn't it? I mean—and he'd never heard of Thelonious Monk, but he and his wife had gone up the Amazon on a trip and they were in a canoe and the guide and he were talking about music and he'd mentioned to the guide that he played piano and the guide said, "Well, do you know Thelonious Monk?"—said one, on the Amazon, in Brazil. And Jack's never heard of him. And he said, "Well, you ought to listen to him when you get back," and Jack did and he really liked Thelonious Monk. Other—he thinks Ornette Coleman, Dizzy Gillespie, John Coltrane, I mean, Miles Davis—he can't stand 'em. Too many notes. Too busy.

LARSON: So in this band, how do you think of your role as a trombonist in the group?

KEYSER: Well, what you're supposed to do is, you know, try to provide—fill in the gaps behind the melody when the—when the trumpet player's playing and then you're just a soloist like everybody else, but I have got to be very careful to play on the beat because my swing experience and my Aardvark [Jazz Orchestra, directed by Mark Harvery, MIT Lecturer in Music] experience makes me want to play all over the place, but it's very upsetting to this band if I don't play on the beat because the rhythm section feels as if they're fighting against me rather than with me and in general, you have to play on the beat in Dixieland. It's just very straight ahead, you know?

And the thing is, that—there's—that limits the kind of solos I can do because I can't play too many notes. If I play too many notes then I get off the beat. That's my fault. That's not the fault of the genre. So—but I have to be very careful to be right on the beat all the time and either provi—providing fills, playing harmony for fills, or else soloing. Sometimes I take the melody on a tune.

LARSON: So you also play with this group called the Dave Whitney Orchestra and according to what I've been able to find, they were formed in 1989 and it's about a 14-piece band?

KEYSER: Yeah.

LARSON: How did that come about that you joined them?

KEYSER: I don't remember. I think he just asked me to attend a rehearsal and these were rehearsals that he did. It was originally a rehearsal band. It was not really a gigging band.

LARSON: The leader's name—this is Dave Whitney, right?

KEYSER: Dave Whitney, yeah. And we played—for example, we would play at nursing homes like—no, like these assisted living villages, like Brooksby Village [Peabody, MA]. We'd play there and the people who lived there liked to hear the music and we would get to rehearse and we would get to play and then he got a gig at Angelica's [Restaurant & Functions] up in Middleton [MA]. We actually played there every other Thursday night for six and a half years. And then the gig fell apart and we haven't done much playing since. That band is sort of—I mean, he could call it together, but there's not much work for big bands.

LARSON: Mm-hm. So this group—the repertoire is mostly kind of swing?

KEYSER: Swing. Strictly swing, yeah.

LARSON: So in this group, when there's more than—there are two trombones, right?

KEYSER: Yeah.

LARSON: And you were playing second trombone.

KEYSER: Yeah.

LARSON: In that capacity, how did you see your role there as opposed to with the Dixieland—or also thinking about your work with Aardvark? It's a very different role.

KEYSER: Well, in that band, I played—my job is to really blend with the trombone—first trombone player and what I'd do is I'd try to—so it's a big deal for us to play in tune and play in tune all the time and sound like one trombone. So that's what I'm trying to do. I'm really trying to be a section player there. And then there's occasional solos for the trombone. But Dave would always between—between sets—between the first and the second set, he would always introduce the second set by having a group of five or six of the musicians play Dixieland tunes. So we'd do one Dixieland tune, like The Bob-Cats—you know, Bob Crosby and the Bob-Cats, which was part of his bigger band. And so I would play that. I would do the Dixieland tune.

I also play in a rehearsal band now that's run by a guy who worked at MIT for a very long time—Everett Longstreth. He used to work with Herb Pomeroy, and now because business is so bad—the music business—big bands aren't getting the work so they're a bunch of guys who like the big band business. And Everett put together a rehearsal band and we rehearse one Wednesday a month. Now what's fun for me is that this is—the musicians in this band are among the best in the area and so I can play in a band where the first take is very close to reco—being recordable and I love that. I really love playing with really good guys because it really helps you, your own playing. It's hard to do that. It's hard to play in a band where everybody's better than you. And if you can do that, it's a great kick to your own musical education.

LARSON: So I think this is a good spot to ask you to play a selection or two on the trombone and we'll also do a little bit of set up in the studio here, but I think this would be a good way to end the interview.

KEYSER: Sure.

[Plays “In a Sentimental Mood,” by Duke Ellington, and “Ain’t Misbehavin’,” by Fats Waller]

[End of Interview]