



(INTERVIEW WITH BEANS BOWLES AND EARL VAN DYKE)  
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1943.

(Bowles) I was drafted in 1943. I was in Great Lakes for boot training and I don't guess, I was the best sailor. Every time they got ready to send me to another Duty Station, I'd go off AWOL. They gave me a chance to come home, and I never did come back in time. The guy finally told me "If you don't come back in time this time you're going straight to the Pacific."

Sometimes by the time you get to what you want to do, you've been filtered down so much, usually you're too old. You don't have that kind of energy anymore. So you have a new thing and you do the best that you can with what you've got and you keep working and you're leaning toward everything that you want to do. I guess it's called the wisdom because it filters down and you come out with something that's probably more compatible.

But after you get to a certain level, after you see that you've reached a level and find out that you haven't done anything and then you keep striving or you quit. You're at the twilight of your mediocre career and you still don't know anything.

I had dreams of retiring at 35, retiring from making money and just being a recluse and playing music. I had to go AWOL because they were sending people away. This was in the 40's and the war had started. I was being taught to be a sonar operator. The reason I got into sonar was, being a musician, I had pitch. I could listen and tell which way the

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pitch was. Sonar is the underwater detection of submarines and they used the same thing as the antenna for radar. The same thing underwater is sonar. They send out the sound and when it comes back, if it's higher the object is coming toward you. If it's lower, it's going away. You have these controls where you sound and you can measure the size of an object and you can tell which way it's going, if it's in a turn, how fast it's going. That was the first CRT, that's the first time I had seen that. They had television they said then but I didn't know anything about that. That's where I went to school. In fact, I was one of the first enlisted Blacks in anything other than the mess boys or steward mates other than officers. Every pilot or every officer had a steward's mate to make up his bed, he was a slave. In the navy, he had a stewards mate to take care of his things. He made his bed, took care of his clothes, polished his shoes, brought him his food. This was for every commissioned officer. Some of them had several. So when I went to the navy, I didn't want that. You either became a cook, a baker, or a stewards mate.

When I got there they had a little window with a hole in it that big and I stuck my papers under there and bang bang, it had navy all over it. I said "No No man, I can't go to the navy." I pushed them back and the guy just kicked me in the buns and said move on. So I was in the navy. We had a hard time in the navy because we were the first group that had a chance to do anything else besides those three offices. We

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weren't integrated. Joe Louis donated the money. It was over a million dollars. Then somebody else had something to do with it, put in some kind of legislation to allow us to do other things. After that the only Black officers you had, you had Black chief petty officer. You had a warrant officer and you had doctors. Those were the only Black officers you had in the navy. Then after this, everything started to happen. Before I got out of the war which was less than 2 years, just about that, they had a captain, they had a command, he had a couple of ships. I was a seaman. You couldn't even be a seaman. You had the rank of seaman first class but you were still a stewards mate. They also had musicians and it was a very select group to get into the music thing.

In the sonar class there were 10 of us and I was pretty good so I graduated at the top of the class. We had a chance to practice in the night. . .At that time the Wolfpack was out there from Germany. The U boat Wolfpack, they were patrolling that area along the New Jersey coast, Cape May, Atlantic City but they were outside the 200 mile limit. We would go out maybe 10 miles. There were also whales out there that we had runs on. I hit something. It was coming toward us. I was in a little sub-chaser. The whole place is about the size of that one cupboard. I broke out in a cold sweat. The guy was over and he told me what to do. I was measuring the thing and it was the size of a submarine. I had control of the ship and he said "You've got to make a run." I made the run and made

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two depth charges on the side. I killed the biggest whale you ever wanted to see!

When they got ready to ship me out, we were getting ready to leave and I asked for my books, my notes. I didn't get my notes. They said "Don't worry about it, we're going to ship them to you the next day. This is classified information. The next place you'll have them. They'll be there when you get there." I have yet to see them so they had no intention of me serving as a sonar operator. I couldn't operate without them.

(Van Dyke) I was in the band and when I went in the service it was late 1946. I was fortunate because I got put right into the division band. We were only supposed to have X amount of men in the band, like 38. We had 108 men in that band. The band was so large but it was all Black because it was still discrimination. They used to send us out, break us up in like four bands. We were like the division band and we would go out and play at parades.

I know where Beans is talking about jumping ship, I used to jump the ship every time. Our plan was, when the ship got into a port, we were trying to wait till we got to Manila or China, before we would let them see us. They got John Bird and Dwight Mitchell in Guam. I heard them call my number. I never will forget that because my number was 262. I was on the ship hiding, I wouldn't come out. When they call your number you have to get off the ship. Guys were going to be stationed when their name was called. And the next stop was

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the Johnstons so I hid. Somewhere I messed up. The next stop was Okinawa. How they found me, when it came time for Okinawa, they found me so I guess somebody told them. In a transport, there are a lot of places to hide, you'd be surprised how many floors they had up under them. They knew that people were hiding but as long as they had the strength, X amount of men, if they called your number and you didn't answer, they'd call somebody else. They'd get you sooner or later. But they called me at Okinawa! Geez! I got dumped there.

When the war broke out, I never will forget because across the street from me, there were two little girls who lived there and they were of German descent. Maybe it was 1942. We looked out one day and all these government vehicles were out in the street. My father was out there talking to the man that lived over there. They were kind of crying. When my father came back I asked what was happening. He said "The government is moving them out of the neighborhood because they are Germans and we are at war with Germany." That's what was happening. Same thing with the Italians, they moved them out.

When I was about 4 years old my mother used to sing and play the piano. My father worked afternoons and my mother wanted me to stay up with her. She would stay up late and practice and I would come along and pick up tunes behind her. I would pick up the same notes. So one night she got me to

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stay up. She said "I want you to play for your father what you just played for me." So I said OK and I stayed up. Right away, he came over and closed the piano down. He told my mother "Mary, we don't want him to learn how to play by ear. We want him to learn how to play correctly, to learn how to read his music." So he took me and found me a tutor and that's when I started in 1935.

(Bowles) When I got here, I was a real country boy, I didn't know anything. They used to pick on me. I had real funny country style clothes and like the haircuts the guys got today, that's what I was wearing. The guys pay \$25-\$30 to get it today and mamma used to give it to me with a bowl. That's why I laugh at them. I used to say to mamma "Please let me go to the barber shop. Please don't cut my hair." They didn't have electric clippers. They used those hand clippers and you got to cut them before you pull them up and they never did. OUCH !!!

As a child I played the clarinet. I was a horrible musician. Living in Indiana and being the best guy in the city in the Black community I should say, you thought you could play well until I got here. My teacher was a violin teacher who read the book the day before I got there and then would teach me what he read. He knew music but he didn't know anything about the instrument. He could teach me enough so that I could play with a group and look good with the community. Fifty cents for a lesson. He was a violin teacher and I was

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learning the clarinet.

Earl and I bumped into each other all those years. We really met in 1961. I worked at the Flame 6 years as a saxophone player. I raised my family at the Flame. I had two boys while I was there. Maurice King and the Wolverines. I can't get it together but I know I went from Sunnie Wilson's to the flame. Sunnie still is mad at me about that because we had a thing going over there with Yusef and a Barry Horten from New York who played the piano, Mack McCrary. It was the McCrary Allstars, that was the name of the band. It was his band and he hired me. Either Candy or Yusef and me. Dagwood was the drummer. I don't think we had a trumpet.

(Van Dyke) One of the first jobs when I came home, we were working at a club out on Mack called the J&B Bar. We had \$12.50 a night to split between us. We ended up with \$2.50 a piece.

(Bowles) We didn't teach in those days. \$7.00 a night was a lot of money compared to what other people were getting. You could buy a loaf of bread for a nickel. I got two cigarettes for a penny.

(Van Dyke) We used to go up to Silvercup and get two loaves of day old bread for a nickel.

In Black Bottom there was quite a bit going on because when I came back home, over there on Adams where they had Paradise Valley, Paradise Bowl, Three 666's, 606, Stans, Turf, the ElSino and that hotel the Avalon was across the street



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from the bowling alley. Stutz had his office in there. Then down here they had Henry's Swing Club. They had a lot of acts in there. Then that one place called the Long Bar. There was a club on Hancock and Hastings.

We used to always meet up on the corner at Canfield and John R. There was a guy down there, Mr. Kennedy, who used to sell hot sausages, tamales, outside on the corner. We used to stand out there and talk. All the musicians used to stand out there and meet and talk all night about our gigs. Right now it's a parking lot for the medical center. That's where we'd always meet up to swap gigs or whatever.

(Bowles) We'd talk lies and when it got to be early in the morning we'd go over to Maxie's and eat some Catheads biscuits, Catheads we'd call them. Maxie's was a barbecue place. Shorty Long was working in there. A one man act playing drums.

The ambience of the 50's is the greatest thing in my life as far as music is concerned, because we had brotherhood, we had respect, didn't make much money. You never make a lot of money in this business unless you get to be that one person out of a million that goes to the top. You get a chance to build your confidence. You live a good life. You enjoy your life, and there's places for you to work. Now there's no place to work. There's no place for a young musician to even hone his wares so that he's competent. We used to go to the West End. They used to come to my house on a Friday night.

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At the Flame, we had a battle of the bands. Maurice King the house band, Billy Gohlson was playing with the alto player, Earl Bostic, and Bill Doggett. Three bands. Friday, Saturday and Sunday I'd have a jam session at my house. That started after we got off work. We'd play from Friday until Sunday night or Monday. We used to bring a Texas Fifth in, everybody would drink, and then my wife would fix pies and cakes and food. Those were good times. We developed our music.

(Van Dyke) Sarah Vaughn and somebody else got caught down in the joint so they took them to jail. They raided the blind pig. From what I understand, when they took Sarah into jail they told her they wouldn't lock her up if she would sing. She said, "I refuse to sing." So they put her in the back with the rest of the woman. They heard all these beautiful sounds coming out and she's singing back there but she wouldn't sing for the police. She sang for nothing but the inmates.

I'll tell you what really happened. At the time Detroit was like a mecca for good musicians and I never will forget, when I first came home from the service. Jackie Gleason came here and he raped the city of good White musicians. He picked up his musicians very easily. Then you had people like Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Andy Kirk, everybody was coming through here taking musicians out of here. By 1955, everybody was gone.

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In order to protect jobs for a select few, they created a union and made it difficult for you to get in it. Most of the musicians didn't have enough money to pay the initiation fee. The guys would come in and take you off the band staff. You were Black balled. If you played good enough, then they'd let you come in but you had to play at certain places then. You didn't really make that much money.

The other thing, the way the big bands came here and took the musicians, we were working with Lloyd Price and Ray Charles had a 7 or 8 piece band. It happened one time that we were on the same show. Ray was a hot item. He was really the star. That was in Atlanta, GA and James Brown was there too. We played the show. Ray was the hot item but we had the smoking band. We burned them up. I never will forget that. The manager came around to the hotel and was trying to hire guys out of Lloyd's band. He wasn't successful in Atlanta. When we come back to New York, soon as the bus pulled up to the hotel, who's standing out there but Ray's manager and he was offering guys money so that started breaking that band up. That's how Ray formed his large band. Lionel Hampton, same thing.

(Bowles) When we first started going out with Lloyd's band, they would have a White dance and the Black dance. The White ones would come in first and the Blacks would come in later and we would play the longest part for them. Then they got to having Black and White and they'd have a string down

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the middle of the floor and the White guy would stand there with the flashlight, don't let nobody cross that string. We got to swinging one night and the string broke and it was over.

(Van Dyke) I was working with Chris Columbo and Jackie Wilson, and we'd come into town and we were lost. Chris always said if you were lost the best thing to do was go to the police station. We went to the police station and the sheriff told us, Chris talked to him, he said, "Oh yeah, you going to do that dance down there with Jackie Wilson." We said yes and he told us where to go and everything. He told us he was coming to the dance. Chris said "Great, we'll play a selection for you." He said ok. Number one was, when we got to where we having the dance, it was a great big tobacco barn. Nobody was in there. We went in and they had this little stage set up. Chris went around there and said where's the manager and where's the so and so. The guy came out and said "I'm the manager and you set up right there boy." He said, "Who are we going to play for." He said, "You just set up. They'll be here." After we set up, maybe about half an hour, 45 minutes these great big doors to the tobacco barn opened up. These six by sixes came in loaded with Black people on the back. Six by's--trucks, six by sixes (18 wheelers). They had them loaded up in the back. Everybody was standing up. I don't know how many there was, I'll just say 6. They made them get off and lined up next to the

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trucks. The White man said "I will be back at 11:00 to pick you all up. I want you all to be lined up here ready to go." We looked at one another because we're not used to no shit like that. Our contract had said from like 9 until 1:00. Chris panicked. He run to the manager and said "Our contract says from 9:00 until 1:00." He said "Boy, you just play until we tell you to stop." Chris said OK and said, "It looks we'll get away early." At 10:30, he told us to stop. We stopped and everybody started getting in this line for the trucks. They opened up the doors and the trucks come. Now the sheriff hadn't come yet. He comes in with the trucks. When they loaded up the trucks and everybody was pulling out he told us "Now I want to hear that damn song." Ain't nobody in there but us and this here sheriff and we had to play this damn song. He had gotten violent. Chris said "The job is over. We have to go to next town." He said "Not before you play this tune." The tune was "Your Cheating Heart."

When he was talking about how they put the ropes down with the White on one side and the Black on the other side... Jackie Wilson had a bad habit of jumping off the stage. What happened was they had told him "Don't jump off the stage." He said OK. We were playing a place like the Joe Louis Arena where they played hockey games where they put the floor on top. The floor started sweating. Jackie jumped off the stage and started sliding. I'll never forget, Chris said "Oh my God." There was a little White girl sitting right up here.

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He slid right up to where the girl was. He looked up and he saw her but he just kept on singing. It was all right until she put her hands on his head. She got to feel his head. She was laughing. The police came from everywhere and said "The concert is over." We stopped playing and they just got so aggravated because the response was not fast enough so they started whopping our ass. That was in New Orleans in 1959. We come out and we went 60 miles the wrong way, just trying to get out of town.

We just got paid. We had a pocket full of money and we were hungry. We couldn't find a place to eat and we stopped on the road. Chuck Berry said I'll go in here and ask them because White people in the south loved Chuck. The guy said yeah, we'll feed them. He brought us in and paraded us through the restaurant in the back with the garbage cans and told us we had to eat back there.

(Bowles) I remember in Mobile because I never wanted to go back there no more in life. We played on the pier. It was like an island across the bridge and you get to this place where we had to play. Me and Sam walked back across the bridge and went to a little restaurant. We walked in and the first thing the guy said "We don't serve no Niggers in here." I was smoking man. This guy was a bum, a White man who came up to me and asked me for some money to get something to eat. I went off. I said "Man you got chance to be president of the United States." I pulled out my money and said "Just look at

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that. You know I just went in there and I couldn't get nothing to eat and you go beg me for something to eat. Man, you better get out of my face." I put the money back in my pocket. He looked at me and looked at the place, we didn't have nothing but peanuts and candy. They didn't even have any hot dogs we could eat out there.

(Van Dyke) Remember when we were playing with Lloyd and we pulled the bus up. We stopped to get some gas and all the White people started coming up and standing in the doorways with shot guns and shit. All we were doing was the bus driver stopped to get some gas. They came out and stood in the doors. When the man stopped the bus, we all jumped off the bus to stretch your legs, go to the john. When the people saw us come off the bus, the rifles and shotguns and things came out. We said "Oh, oh!"

(Bowles) That only happens when you're in your sub-teens. That you believe that maybe you're not that good. I remember, I went to a church in Mishawaka, IN and me and my little brother were over there with a little band. Mr. White had a band in the neighborhood. The violin teacher, Professor Gordon, was teaching. This was a trumpet player that was self-taught and he made us a little Christian band and we were performing at this church. We came out of the this church and I don't know how it happened but me and my brother went across the street and went into the bathroom. This man came in and beat our ass. A big grown man cussed us out and that's one of

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the times that I felt like maybe something was wrong with me. Of course, I was even afraid to tell my dad. I didn't understand what he thought was wrong. I guess it was that I was Black and had no business in that toilet, that's what he said. And the toilet was dirty.

When you fantasize and dream you create pathways for yourself. When you walk down those pathways then you say "This wasn't a dream, this was possible." You expand your mind. You don't have a chance to do that now. If it ain't on television, they don't want it.