

Interviewer: David Marash
Interviewee: Henry Butler
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[piano music]

[00:07]

David: Okay. Henry, what's your date of birth?

Henry: Well first of all, I'm as old as God and as young as eternity. That's what I'm going to give you. [laughs]

David: I'm going to give you a little bit because I want to get at the fact that when you were a child, the educational opportunities and just the technology was magnitudes of difference from young African American children coming up on the rural side I'm going to say 20 years earlier in the 30's.

Henry: Yes. That's right. I was born in the 30's so, but I would imagine that by the time I was born that it was very different.

David: I'm just trying to imagine the environment. The Blind Boys of Alabama are sort of the most major focus. Not the sole focus, but most of them were born around 1930.

Henry: Yes. Yes. So I was about 18 years later.

David: And it was very interesting interviewing Valerie Capers.

Henry: Ah! You got her! That's good.

David: Yes. She says she is still the only blind student to have matriculated to a degree at Juilliard.

Henry: I believe that. I believe that.

[02:00]

David: And she talks very gently and sympathetically about how clueless they were.

Henry: I believe that. I do. [laughs] I believe that and not only clueless in terms of how they could have brought more out of her, but clueless in the terms of the narrowness of their focus.

David: Well, as she describes it, their discomfort level was so high that for most of them it was just absolutely compromising.

Henry: Yes. That unfortunately winds up limiting many things. The whole - just the fact that you're not comfortable with your student. You know, the fact that you wind up not being able to even get out of your seat by yourself or the fact that they may think you might fall with each step.

David: Well she describes going to Juilliard with her dad and simply walking the halls, getting the layout, getting into the classroom, figuring out, I mean basically, pre-stepping through the whole school so that she could operate there and then she describes this nightmare scenario where she's walking carefully down the hall trying to stay close to the wall out of traffic as she's moving forward and some student has laid her violin up against the wall and along comes Valerie and says fortunately the student saw me coming and reacted just in time, but just the whole uncertainty.

[04:10]

Henry: Well there are a lot of things like that at many universities. For instance I went to Michigan State and they advised me – I wanted to be in some of the operas since I was a voice major and they advised me not to do that because I was blind and I wouldn't know the layout of stage. Well, then just show me. You know I mean it could have been done, but I had teachers who just didn't mind my singing the operatic areas, but in terms of acting and being a part of the cast, they were afraid of that.

David: Now I know that Andrea Botticelli is now recording opera and does concertized opera. I don't whether he does full stage performance. Henry, when you were born and your family realized that you were not going to be sighted, how did that affect their expectations for you?

[00:25]

Henry: Judging from my conversation with my mom, she decided that she needed to get going. Remember that this was a time in the South when it was hard for black males especially to get an education and it was harder for black blind males to realize an education or at least realize getting into school on time. Well, my mom used to tell me how she would look for the right people to talk to and that kind of thing and all the rehab counselors were white people in the South, white men in the South which made it even more difficult to try to reach them, to try to talk to them, but she kept working on it and kept trying to call people and she finally got with somebody and they told here about the school in Baton Rouge and actually there was two schools in Baton Rouge, there was school for Caucasian or white blind people and as Louisianan people used to say, a school for colored blind people and I went to the latter. It turns out that that school wound up being a better school educationally. We wound up having more certified teachers, teachers who got their degrees from big ten schools, their advanced degrees from big ten schools and their certification from schools out of State because most of those teachers couldn't get into the LSU system because of the color barriers. So I think, judging from all of the conversations that I've had with my mom, she realized that she didn't have time to wait on anybody to do anything and she just got out and started looking for people and started doing things.

[03:04]

David: So in a way, when your mother was confronted with these white male rehabilitation specialists was kind of the beginning of the class of expectations. She had one level set, my guess is they had a simpler future plotted out.

Henry: Well, that's very true actually. One guy when I was a junior in high school brought me in and we did a battery of tests and he told me, he said: you know, you did very well on your tests and especially the reasoning part, whatever that meant and then he said but I would like to see you do something with your hands rather than going to college. I'd rather see you be a piano tuner. Now this is a guy, he's probably close to retirement and this was in 1965, beginning of '66 something like that I

was graduating from high school in '66 thinking about going to college, but he was trying to sway me from that and it was typical of what white males would do in Louisiana, try to get you to go to a trade school or try to get you to take some menial job versus trying to get an advanced education. So that kind of thing black people and especially blind or visually impaired people have faced for many many decades in the South.

[05:04]

David: When you got to the Baton Rouge, Louisiana school for, at the time, colored blind children, you finally found some people who are ready to address expectations up. What was that like?

Henry: Well these people and that's why I love those teachers because they made us work harder. They understood that we had to work twice as hard in the kind of environment that we were in. They realized that you had to supersede most white blind people to get anywhere in the South and in many cases in the North. So they stayed on us. It was like tough love almost all the time. It was hard to take sometimes, but all these blind people had gone out of State and gotten their degrees and came back into State and taught these kids with care, with the understanding that it's not easy out there especially in those days, it wasn't so easy. So most of my class and most of the classes in the years that I was there wound up sending kids to college and then of course after getting to college and graduating and even if you did well, then the state wouldn't hire you and that was before, long before the ADA and long before any laws were on the books that meant that they had to deal with equal opportunity kinds of things.

[07:13]

David: Now, you'll forgive my saying this Henry, but I think that your career and personality has a lot to do with coloring outside the lines as we say. You're a guy who likes to explore his own limits. I'm wondering in the environment of the school for colored blind children, did this frighten a lot of people or did this upset a lot of people? Henry doesn't want to just learn music. He wants to perform music. Henry doesn't want to just perform music, he wants to go out and work and perform music. A lot of it is benign. We don't want Henry to get hurt. We don't want Henry to get beyond himself, but a lot of it is benign condescension as well.

Henry: A lot of the older people who were say in administration at the school I think felt like that. My mother didn't have a problem with me performing when I was 14 and they told her: well now, you know there's so many possibilities, so many disrupting possibilities that could happen or your kid could have an accident out there and this and that could happen. And so they said okay, if you want to permit him to perform, you need to send us a letter saying that and eliminating us from liability. So she did that and of course the rest is history. I performed in professional bands and always had older people looking out for me and I happened to be the one doing all the arranging in most of those bands, doing all the orchestration and that kind of thing. So of course my mom was very happy once I graduated from high school with quite good grades and all that. I wasn't the valedictorian but I was the salutatorian and got into college sort of, well got into college after studying and taking college theory when I was in ninth grade and so by the time I got to college I was prepared to actually opt out of theory if they had given me a test, but because I was blind, they didn't want to do that. So I wound up having to sit through all these theory classes after studying that stuff three or four years ago, three or four years before I got to college.

[10:31]

David: Henry, when you were describing your track program, your Summer ed program for blind and visually impaired children in New Orleans, you said blind and visually impaired children acquire a different information set from their sighted peers. Spell that out for me. What did you mean by that?

Henry: Well they're forced to acquire learning a different set of learning skills. They have internalize what they're learning probably more than most sighted kids. Sighted kids probably take their site skill set for granted obviously more than blind people take their hearing set of skills and we did an informal test or an informal survey so to speak on the way and the level of concentration in blind kids versus the level of concentration in sighted kids and we discovered almost immediately with almost every blind student in that program that they were able to concentrate more deeply than most sighted kids and they were able to focus more quickly than most of the sighted kids. Now I'm not saying that that's scientific, but we discovered that after having this camp for quite a few years and in almost every instance, maybe with a few exceptions among the sighted kids we found that the concentration was better and was in force quicker.

[12:42]

David: Now in terms of the input in, the pedagogical end, the teaching end, what's the answer to the "so what" question on that? Because blind children have these enhanced capabilities, what does that mean in terms of preparing to teach them?

Henry: Well you use the strength of each kid as you can perceive them so that if a blind kid or if any kid has good concentration skills, there is a chance that you can get them to do certain things by themselves more easily. There is a possibility that you can even give them say more advanced modules. That's not always the case and obviously there are exceptions to everything, but there is a chance that you can get them into a place where they can practice by themselves a little quicker than maybe some other kids who can't focus as well. There are all kinds of things that you can do, but when the teacher is capable of perceiving the strength of the kid fairly quickly, then the teaching can be accelerated.

[14:22]

David: Describe for me the track program. When did it run and just describe the whole package to me.

Henry: We started the track program, well we started camps for blind and visually impaired musicians first in 1994 at the Missouri school for the blind and that school was in Saint Louis. Our curriculum in that first year was theory and some people will say sight singing and they'll laugh at that and say: how do you teach blind kids how to sight read? Well, you teach the visually impaired people how to sight read and you teach blind students how to finger read. So basically blind kids may not ever be able to sight read because they can't see, but they certainly can read music and be able to follow it using their fingers, using the braille system and we also taught Jazz history, Jazz appreciation and we had combos and we also had as a part of that program a component where we brought in motivational speakers from the community to talk about just doing and being the best you can be, that kind of thing and it was quite successful. We felt that we had some very good kids in that first year. I think we did it again at the Missouri school in 1995 and then we brought it to the Indiana school for the blind. Our aim was to keep it at a school for the blind because the message we wanted to send was that we were

definitely targeting blind and visually impaired kids and we wanted not only the kids to be involved but we wanted teachers from those schools to be involved on a certain level and we wanted the administration from those schools to realize the kinds of things that could be taught to people of that age. We had ages 12 to 19 in our camps from the years 1994 to 2005. After the '96 camp in Indianapolis, I didn't do the camp for a while because my mom passed away and I was moving to New Orleans resigning my job at Eastern Illinois University and I was truly burned out on a lot of things so I thought I needed a break.

[00:13]

David: In a way, the difference between what the white administrators were plotting and what the teachers were plotting out was the white administrators wanted to keep blind people in a protected universe for their own good of course.

Henry: Yes.

David: Whereas your teachers knew there's real world out there and we've got to get our students ready for the real world, particularly in your case when you were teaching young musicians, some of whom may in fact have aspired to follow in your footsteps as performer. What were some of the real world obstacles or realities or necessities that you felt had to be part of the curriculum in addition to all the musicological. How did you prepare students to deal with what they would face if they too wanted to become not just musicians but performing musicians.

Henry: Well the main reason we started the program in the first place is that we – I, speaking personally, had written band pieces and other pieces where I needed to have sighted assistants to actually bring the music to a place where sighted people could read it and the last piece that I had written right before I started the camps, right before I had the idea to do that, was a suite for big band and it was a 30 minute piece and I had to bring in a friend to actually do the editing and it took him a long to do it so he charged me about one fourth of what the commission was. So I was happy to pay him because he did a great job on it, but the thing that struck me was the fact that blind people were not acting and could not act independently of a sighted person if they wanted to compose, especially if they wanted to compose on a serious level. So I started looking for people who knew about computers and this was in the early 90's. I got this commission from Fayetteville Arts Council. Fayetteville is a town in North Carolina and you know the thing is, they were wonderful in giving me the commission and they didn't care how I got it done, as long as I got it done. It's not their problem that I couldn't act independently of sighted assistants. So I did find a guy that I met at one of the American Council for the Blind conventions. His name was Bill McCan and Bill McCan is a dear friend of now and he had a business that bundled some software that was dedicated to helping blind and visually impaired people become composers and readers and performers. So we talked about it and it wasn't until the 2003 camp that we were able to bring him in to teach the kids how to use the computers to read and write music using his software bundle and it really did my heart a lot of good to see these kids learn that program and learn to read and write and learn to compose. We had kids the first year in the first week or so of using that program, composing music and I knew that we had made a big step in the right direction for blind and visually impaired kids.

[05:01]

Henry: I just want to say one more thing: nobody, unless they couldn't afford the program would have to go through the stuff that I had to go through even as late as the early 90's in terms of having to

have sighted assistance to compose, to learn music, to do anything they wanted to do with music. Now that music is a big seller in the blind and visually impaired musical community.

David: But again, if you're going to be a performing musician, there is so much business end of that; contracts, just the logistics of travel.

[06:01]

Henry: Well they have to learn how to do that like sighted people. They have to learn how to read contracts. They have to learn how to travel using whatever mobility skills they have. They have to learn how to negotiate just like any sighted person. Yes, you can get help with it, but you have to get the same kind of help that sighted people get either from attorneys or from people who have gone that route. So that's really no different from anybody else.

[06:39]

David: Right now I'm thinking about opening this show with the scene from Gospel and Colonists where the Five Blind Boys enter and the choreography of their entrance, the single file line with the sighted performer in the lead and the other performers hand on shoulder behind them is something they'd been doing for 40 years, but what really makes that scene so powerful is that their role in the Euripides as a group of – as a chorus of blind seers who make up for their lack of sight with a kind of second sight with a special insight and when Euripides wrote this, he knew if you introduced a group of blind people, the audience would or at least part of the audience would make that jump. Yes, these are people who have handicaps but also have special insights. First of all, is there a real life basis for this? You were saying that young blind children acquire different information sets and acquire differently. So how different is it?

[08:11]

Henry: It's very true that, at least in my mind, that blind people acquire information differently even if they're reading the same text as sighted people. First of all, if they're reading it, if they're reading it using their fingers, they're perceiving it differently because that's the way their lives have been. I remember even when I read now, I can almost hear a voice in my mind saying the words that I'm reading. I may not have to say the words out loud or even softly, but there is a voice in my mind that's saying the words or at least appealing to the hearing part of my being. Perhaps when a sighted person reads, they're looking at it and perhaps they're acquiring the information in a slightly different way. Every time you acquire information, you're acquiring it based on your experience, your experience in life. You are the sum total of your experience, no one else's and so your perception is based on your experience, no one else's. So that's all you have to go on. That's it.

[09:49]

David: And as you were saying in talking about pedagogics, a blind person's experience may in fact be more tightly focused, maybe more internally coherent, may have a longer stronger if you will attention framework, not just attention span, but attention frame work. So do you think this plays out in a different kind of knowledge and a different kind of insight as well?

[10:22]

Henry: Possibly a different type of insight, but that remains to be seen. Insight comes after a certain amount of experiences. Insight and philosophy and all that is based on experience. Whether a person develops insight is up to him or her. There's not a whole lot I can do about that. But what I try to do is give them the information and give them even to an extent a little bit of philosophy that will help them to maybe develop some insight, but believe me, teachers have no they have no real control over whether the kid develops insight or not.

[11:23]

David: But this sort of immediate identification or even equalization if you are sightless you must have a special kind of insight regardless of what experience is. That's a kind of sentimental myth.

Henry: I would say that we could say that. Even though a blind person may acquire more in the short term, there is not guarantee that he or she will develop insight. Insight is a totally different thing. As I sometimes have to lecture to college students, kids, in high schools, and other people, I talk about how we sometimes realize knowledge. First we're dealing with information. We're dealing with information and then we're trying to figure out what to do with that information. So eventually we start to label it and we put it let's just say in folders. We label this, if we're talking about music, these are major scales, these are minor scales, this is an augmented scale or a whole tone scale, this is a diminished scale or doubly diminished scale and so you keep putting labels on things and it's still just information. It's not knowledge yet and then you get to a place where you start to try to learn these things that you are labeling. You start to try to use say the major scales and maybe even later on you start to try to manipulate the major scales so you realize that a major scale is not just a major scale. It's there for you to use. It's there for you to become intimate with so to speak. You may not think of it in those terms, but eventually, you realize that you can compel - you can actually manipulate the major scale so that you can make it sound the way you want it to sound and then you can do the same thing with minor scales and whole tone scales and diminished scales and any other scale, any other series of pitches so that eventually it becomes elementary knowledge to you and you keep working on any information that you have so that after you've realized it as a bit of knowledge, you might want to hypothesize or you might want to sort of theorize and you may not be right all the time, but you're sort of taking maybe some intelligent guesses at what else can happen with these scales and by this time maybe you've turned the scales into harmonies. And so it just keeps going until you decide that you've learned many of the rules and maybe you've gotten to the point where you've learned all the rules, whatever that means, but then you get to that point where you say now it's time for me to break the rules. It's time for me to make my own rules and then you're working with true knowledge. You're working with knowledge and at that point you might even be able to philosophize. At that point you might be able to say that you have some insight.

[16:07]

David: But the simpler minded concept that Henry's blindness allows him to see things that if he were sighted he wouldn't understand. Does this work for a performer? Does this give a performer – first of all, is this an assumption you've encountered in audiences?

Henry: I think I've met people who think that I might not have understood a certain musicality, a certain level of musicality had I been sighted. We really don't know this. That's basically a sentimental guesstimate. We don't know that to be certain. I know sighted people who have great musical visions and they don't take their sighted gifts lightly. So it depends on the individual. It depends on how much

time and how much effort and how much of a desire that person has as to what they can develop.

[17:18]

David: Do you think that it's an advantage for you as a performer that some audiences are simply going to say: well Henry's achievement is greater because he is sightless and not just that it's greater, but that it's greater because he has a special insight, even a second sight.

Henry: Like I said, it may be true, it may not be. We don't really know. I say that line of thought is based on sentimentality and yes, so if we think that people think that we find a way to use that in a constructive way so that everybody benefits. We can't know how people are thinking, but if we assume that and we happen to be right, it accelerates what we can do with those people mentally and inspirationally and we can have a good jolly old time with those people.

David: Now when you were first coming up, when you were even a preteen, gospel quartets was at its apex.

Henry: Yes.

David: Is this a music that you heard a lot? Was this music that was around in the air when you were growing up?

Henry: Yep. I heard it at a lot of churches. I heard it a lot on the radio. There was on every black station in New Orleans, I should say on every station that played a predominance of black music, there were gospel shows. Usually one in the early morning and one say just short of midnight in the evening and there were also R&B shows and Jazz shows and that kind of thing on those stations, but yes, it was definitely in the air. I myself when I was in the school for the blind I was part of a couple of quartets.

[19:52]

David: Has the music stuck with you? Do you still feel it coming out through your fingers?

Henry: Well I would say that I was definitely influenced by it although I don't necessarily stick with those harmonies at this point in my life.

David: Now of course that music itself was changing over that period and a lot of this has to do with broadening the audience for the music and it really started out as fairly traditional in church music. But it wanted to reach, again at that time, a substantially black audience that maybe didn't go to church and was much more oriented towards blues and jazz and you can sort of hear blues and jazz bleeding into the quartet sound really right about the time in the late 30's that the Blind Boys of Alabama are starting to go on the road.

Henry: Well if you really listen to the music of the Five Blind Boys of Alabama and there was also a Five Blind group from Mississippi, you can hear that the harmonies are quite simple, very simple as a matter of fact based on today's standards. Even pop music has more sophisticated harmonies today let alone jazz. You know, you might hear [piano music] those kinds of harmonies and they were great because there was so much passion coming from the singers and the only rhythm you heard was the tapping of the feet. [piano music] Some songs were maybe a little more sophisticated than that, but not

much more because many of these people were not educated in theory and all that kind of thing and it was great for the times and when you hear the five blind boys today, it's still great now.

[22:55]

David: They were at the white house last week sounding great.

Henry: There you go. That's right.

David: But you know it's interesting because when you compare the Five Blind Boys to some of the other contemporary groups like the Soulstirs or even more so the Dixie Hummingbirds or the Golden Gates, these were groups that employed much more sophisticated harmonies, much more "trickeration" as they called it and rhythm, much more sort of counterpoints called and response and the Blind Boys are roaring. They're stock and trade is put it out there.

Henry: Yeah, but don't misunderstand what happened. The Blind Boys did quite well when they started in the 30's and they played to a lot of audiences, but those audiences were much smaller in those days than they are now and I have to tell you, for the last four or five years since they changed management, they're enjoying their best years and that's because of the management understanding of what had to be done. It's totally a different thing. You've got to have PR, you gotta have good producers and you've got to have concepts, musical concepts that are unique and you've got to bring in other musical personalities that you might not realize as being gospel performers which gets people in that, what I call, dabbler market interested. So though we're realizing that they're enjoying lots of success now, it hasn't always been that way for them.

[25:17]

David: Well they face the classic choice that just about every gospel group faced in the 50's and 60's which is will you sing rock and roll? Will you sing secular music? Like several of the groups, including the Hummingbirds, the Blind Boys decided that their faith wouldn't permit that, but what they did do is they opened up a lot of white hymnals as well as the traditional Thomas Dorcy and black hymn book and their line was: well as long as it's church music and we sing it in a gospel style. But this allowed them to cross over. They found a different way to cross over than say Sam Cook did.

Henry: That's true, but even the cross over in the 50's and 60's and 70's was a little different than it is now and their audiences were still smaller and I'm telling you they are enjoying more success than they've ever enjoyed first of all because, at least up until recently, there were more people buying records up until a few years ago than at almost any time in history. So I've always appreciated what they've done and I appreciated the fact that they never flinched and they never stopped doing what they really wanted to do. Not that Sam Cook didn't do what he wanted to do because I think he wanted to be a mega star. He wanted to be a pop star, he wanted to be a guy who crossed over and that's what he did. He's a great singer and to the extent that the Blind Boys have stayed with their original track so to speak, they still have actually used certain thing in the secular part of music to reach the customers and reach the patrons that support them. You know, singing perhaps a sacred lyrics to House of the Rising Sun for instance is a great example of what somebody on their team came up with which I thought was brilliant. It still allowed them to be sacred, but at the same time, use a melody that was known maybe in the liturgical world.

[28:22]

David: Yeah, they started recording Down by the Riverside, the Saints Go Marching in, etc., which by the time they were recording them had become multi-ethnic music certainly. Not from the same very narrow very black gospel tradition that they started out in.

Henry: That's exactly right.

David: But again, as I say, they found a way to split the difference. They stayed. They did not go secular as Sam Cook or the Golden Gates did, but they did change their repertoire to solicit a wider audience and it worked.

Henry: Yeah. Yeah and we can definitely say that. There's lots of evidence to prove that.

David: I'm going to play a bit of a record for you and this is Arizona Dreams, blind pianist, schooled from the 20's, early 20's who actually became a pretty popular performer in the race record market in the 20's and my guess is you're going to hear a lot of other pianists.

[music/singing]

[32:18]

Henry: Yes, well I have heard sort of bits and pieces of a lot of people playing like that especially in what we used to call sanctified churches. On the verse when she was doing this [piano music] I was reminded of what tuba players might play if they were marching in a parade in New Orleans or something like that. It's a beautiful thing when you can recognize different parts of the heritage and how they just move from place to place and people from different States and different cities they just grab pieces of the heritage and grab pieces of whatever the music is offering not knowing that that's the way a lot of people are playing in other parts of the country.

[33:50]

David: Well to me, I just hear first off the incredible head long swing, the forward thrust and yet there is so much space in the syncopation unlike a lot of so called classic ragtime where the left hand is almost like a player piano, is almost mechanized. There is like a stutter breath and again I think what you're saying about the tuba baseline because again, with that tuba line it's note uh, note uh, note uh and she gets that hesitation, the syncopation in there. At the same time, the real take home message is: damn how hard she's swingin'! The thing really is propulsive but at the same time so open with space.

Henry: Yeah, and the thing is you don't always know what's coming next and I dare say that she didn't probably also know what was going to happen next. The ways she played some rhythms made me feel like she wasn't sure how she was going to get out of that to get into the next verse or the next chorus, but it always worked.

David: It did. I guess her most famous disciple was Mildred Falls who was Mehelia Jackson's accompanist for most of her career and again, a lady who could just swing a whole building.

[35:35]

Henry: Well now Mildred was, I have to tell you I was listening at some of the classic Mehelia

Jackson things recently and you know if I could accompany people like any of her accompanists I would be happy. I would be happy right now. I'm not saying that I can't but I always enjoyed how her accompanists swung but did not get in here way. Never.

David: It was very easy to miss how good Mildred Falls was on piano because one Mehelias voice was so huge and so rich that it captured you but it took up a lot of the oral space. It didn't leave a great deal of oral space for the piano, but if you could sort of pluck yourself under that voice and hear the piano, you'd say that she is mad swingin'!

Henry: Well the thing is, and Mehelias knew it and that's why she had her for so long, the thing is the job of the accompanist is to make the singer sound great, not good, but make the singer sound great. Put enough fire under that singer so that the singer becomes the highlight, so that the singer becomes the star that Mehelias always was and when you listen to a great accompanist like Mildred or there was another guy, I'm trying to remember that accompanied her for a while, anyway I'll think of it, but the point is Mehelias wouldn't have been Mehelias if Mildred wasn't there, if it was somebody who didn't know what they were doing. But Mehelias was smart enough or whoever, somebody was smart enough to make sure that she had a great support team, a great supporting musician and that's what we strive to do when we're working with singers.

David: I'm going to play another different gospel tune. Probably the most famous guitar instrumental in American folk, gospel, blues, what have you. Dark was the Night Cold was the Ground Blind Willy Johnson.

[music/singing]

[41:56]

David: Well now if that's not the blind performer as seer.

Henry: Yes yes and that comes out of the tradition when I was a kid, I used to go to these black Baptist churches and you hear some of those types of songs are call and response songs where you go and you hear them – [singing] I love the Lord. He heard my cry. And the congregation says: [singing] ahhh the Lord. Ahhh. It's really improvisational. It really really wonderful to hear a whole group of people improvising and being and staying on the same wavelength.

David: Yes, some of the congregation performances that you hear, some of the Library of Congress recordings where they went out and recorded the whole congregations. Fantastically powerful.

Henry: Yeah. Yeah. And there is some of that stuff in a different way in the Appalachian communities as well.

David: Yeah, the Sacred Heart Choirs are phenomenal. Of course what I'm struck with is Albert Ailer, Donald Ailer, ghosts spirits. It seems to me that that was an attempt to resurrect that group spirit. One the mysteriousness of the original concept. It's not just wordless but it's affable and then the absolute freedom within that mood.

Henry: Yes. Yes. I would buy that. I think there were many attempts by people in different areas trying to make contact with that spirit, make contact with that freedom that also had structure and

it sounds like a contradiction, but the truth is when you hear 100 or 200 people singing the same thing, you've got to figure that there's structure there even though it seems like it's improvised and even though you or I may not know what they're going to do next. Everybody else that's doing it seems to know.

David: It's a kind of cosmic consonance.

[45:07]

Henry: That's right and every culture, every race, every culture has it within their own confines or within their own racial bank, within their own racial infrastructure, they have that and they can do that just like you hear some of the Appalachian people doing it.

David: Is there anything, do you think, about the slightly isolating aspects of being sightless as well as the positive aspects of an increased ability to focus and to concentrate that gets expressed in this as I say, sort of cosmic consonance?

Henry: I might need a little clarification on that question.

David: I'm saying do you think that there is something about blindness, sightlessness both some would say the negativity of being slightly isolated from your sighted peers, but you would point out as well that there is a compensating plus factor in terms of concentration and sustaining concentration that may allow blind people a slightly greater access to that kind of grand scale consonance? That's what gospel is all about isn't it.

Henry: Yes, that's right. I would say that blind people first of all don't have as much of a barrier. First of all, to have sight, you automatically have more distractions. You look around you see stuff in that direction, you see maybe beautiful ladies, beautiful guys. It can if you allow it, it can take you away from yourself sometimes when you need to be with yourself. Blind people don't have as much of that although they can be distracted. They can be distracted by all kinds of things they hear. It's still less of a distraction and if they wanted to internalize and go inside, I would say with some exceptions, they could probably do that a little easier if they worked on it.

[47:59]

David: I mean in a way there is music that captivates us and entertains us through its detail and its interactivity and its motion and its this and its that. And then there is music that simple engulfs us through its basic innate character through that tone. Maybe not literally a tone, but the tone of the tones.

Henry: But we make the choice as to whether it engulfs us or not. We spontaneously decide that we're going to tap into this, that we're going to make it our own, that we're going to really like this. That we're not only going to like it, but we're going to really attune to it so to speak. There are many things that I hear that I don't attune to. That's by choice. There are many things that I hear that I do. We make all kinds of choices that we're not aware of. We make the choice of dating people that we probably know we shouldn't. We make the choice of dating people that sometimes we should be with. We make the choice of sometimes making mistakes or missing the mark as some people might say, but we don't always know what the consequences are, but we do make the choice of sometimes missing the mark and we make the choice of hitting the mark, being on target. So it's really up to us and when I say

to you that the blind people that we sort of tested and surveyed and monitored were able to more quickly tap into their concentration efforts. It doesn't mean that blind people are immune to being distracted and sometimes for most of their lives. It doesn't mean that. Just like it doesn't mean that rich people will always have happy lives just because they have money, just because they have all the resources they'll ever need. Some people of means will be miserable. Some people of means will be happy. Some people of means will share. They know that it's a wise thing to keep an ebb and flow going, but everybody isn't aware of that. All poor people aren't miserable. Some poor people are happy because they realize that they can find ways of more fully utilizing what they have and that's a great thing. So when we talk about blind people being more capable, maybe with less distractions of concentrating, we don't mean that all of them will do that.

[51:41]

David: I'm going to play the Blind Boys of Alabama first great hit, great record. I Can See Everybody's Mother and to me this is a great record to play because it not only tells you a lot about the Blind Boys, but it actually tells you a lot about their audience in the early 50's when this record was recorded.

At this time I would like to introduce one of the world's greatest gospel groups none other than the Blind Boys of Alabama with Clarence Fountain. Let's give them a hand. [applause] [music]

David: All the gospel groups have mothers songs.

Henry: That's right. That's exactly right. Of course mothers are very important to males in the black community. They're the closest people.

David: But you know in the 50's the church audience was predominantly women.

Henry: That's right.

David: And they loved to hear about these songs because most of them were.

Henry: That's right. That's right. Well they performed many of the important duties for the children. Unfortunately many of the fathers couldn't be found.

[music/singing]

[55:46]

Henry: Well you know there were so many people, so many families in the black community just as unfortunately there are now where the fathers were distant from the families, we'll say that and my mother did most of the stuff and most of the important stuff in our family and of course when my mother divorced my father, it was really all her including fighting for me to get into school on time and taking care of all my school needs and my home needs and trying to keep me at least satisfied to the extent that she could and believe me, a lot of the people in the black communities worshiped their mothers. They loved them, appreciated them, knew the circumstances, knew the hard times that they went through to get what they needed for the kids and especially in the 50's and 40's and 30's and before that.

David: And again, just the audience in the church. This was the time when all of the Blind Boys appearances would have been in church. That audience was probably 75% to 80% female.

57:43

Henry: Yes, that's right and it's maybe a little better now and it's also better with the fathers being around but it's still not where we would like to see it.

David: Again in reaching out to a wider and more generalized audience. In a way, except as a kind of reference to classic days, the mother sounds get put away because today's audience or the audience that you're reaching for, you're not looking for 80% African American women anymore and so you change the repertoire.

Henry: Yes and also most of their performances aren't in church anymore. They're in theaters and auditoriums and a few big clubs here and there so the whole performing arena has changed and I remember playing with them at a club called Yoshi's in San Francisco I think it was and you know, it was a fairly big club, medium sized club, 300 to 400 people and I've seen them at festivals and different auditoriums so the whole game has changed and at this point they have management and they have producers that are producing all of their records, same producers and the PR people get involved. It's a totally different ball game for them and I'm very happy for them. I'm very happy that they're reaching more people and hopefully selling more records and DVD's and that kind of thing.

David: But again their glory is you can take the Blind Boys out of church but you can't take church out of the blind boys. Wherever they're singing that's church.

Henry: That's right. That's exactly right. Well that's what they know.

David: You know what? I'm done. I'm happy. This was fun Henry.

[1:00:04]

Henry: Yeah, I enjoyed it.

David: This was an education and a half as well as a pleasure. Boy that was great.

Henry: I enjoyed it. Great questions. This is the best interview I've had in a long time.

David: Well thank you. I confess, quartet is right up there among my absolute favorite forms of music. I think I may have mentioned that I had the pleasure of doing a 20/20 show on the Hummingbirds when they were at their 50th anniversary as a group and then 20 years later for Night Line, Stevie Wonder threw a fest for them in Phila on their 70th anniversary as a group. By then James Davis who had founded them had stopped singing. He's still alive. He's still with them and still came to the show, but Ira was still Ira. I mean what an amazing voice.

Henry: Yes. Now the Hummingbirds they were involved in doing some commercial things. They did some background things for -

David: For Paul Simon, Loves Me Like a Rock and you know it took him years to get over the fact that their cover got the Grammy not his record.

Henry: [laughs]

David: He sulked for a couple of years.

Henry: Well he's got an expansive ego anyways God bless him.

David: Yes. Both his record and their record are wonderful music.

Henry: Yes. I think that – and I guess the Blind Boys never did, well, didn't they do some background stuff for commercial -

David: The Fairfield Four were the ones who started doing a lot of background stuff. I don't know whether the Blind Boys did or not.

Henry: It seems to me I remember, maybe it wasn't a commercial, but it seems like I remember them on somebody's record.

David: Well you know Ira Tucker was poached by the Golden Gates when I think Bill Johnson got drafted in 1941 and so they asked Ira if he would come and become their lead singer and he lasted for half a set and midway through the set he just turned to the other guys and said: guys, this is not my music. I can't do this. I admire you. You're wonderful musicians. It's a thrill for me to be here, but I can't do it. He got on the train and went back to Philli.

Henry: That's amazing. I wasn't aware of that.

[1:03:12]

David: But you know, he would have been looking at a major upgrade in income.

Henry: Yes. Yes.

David: Because the Gates were huge -

Henry: Yes. Yes.

David: and had crossed over to the cafe society for an audience.

Henry: I'm just trying to remember who else is out there right now other than the Five Blind Boys. I know that they're the only quartet, they're the only group to get a Grammy for anything that they've done in the last four or five years.

David: One of the labels was: Keeping Up a Soulstirs group and I think Iva [xx] from the Originals was still with them but it was a totally reconstituted group.

Henry: There's a lot of reconstituted groups out there not just in gospel and they don't have to me the swagger. They just don't have the musicality and the voices sound different. They're trying to sing the same songs and it doesn't work for me.

David: Well it's a generational thing too. To them it's learned music and to the originals it was organic.

Henry: It was music that they all helped to create even though they may or may not have gotten credit for it. I looked at the Coasters and I know that Leiber and Stoller just took credit for all those pieces, for a lot of those pieces, but I also know what was happening in the community and to me they sing those things too naturally for somebody else to be writing them.

David: Did you ever know Sadiq Hakeen? The piano player.

Henry: No, I didn't know him.

[1:05:40]

David: Well he's has the classic stories of that. He was a very good friend of mine for years. He passed in the mid 80's. He was on the Blue Bird Dates with Charlie Parker, but local one demanded that there had to be three local ones out of the quintet and they only had two and so he was listed as: "piano unknown."

Henry: I see.

David: And was unknown for years and then part of the problem was that he was born Aragon Thorton but he converted to Islam in the 40's and changed his name to Sadiq Hakeen. I think he was still Aragon Thorton when he made the Parker Day, but also he was the pianist on Jumpin' Symphony Sid of Lester Young. He wrote the tune, Lester got the credit because that became like the most covered tune of the late 40's and early 50's and "Monks Tune Aeronel" now even Monk finally acknowledge that it was written by Adrean Souleman and Sadiq and if you listen to it, it's the one Monk tune that doesn't sound like a Monk tune. It sounds like a bee bop tune.

Henry: Well the same thing happened with Clarence Williams. Clarence in New Orleans days would take peoples stuff. He had more of a position than most of the composers so he used it and that's that.

David: The original Dixie Land Band's book was lifted from local bands and credited to [xx] and Shields who could play and some of it might have been theirs but a lot of it was somebody else's domain as well.

Henry: A lot of it went on like that and as a matter of fact, a lot of the people who signed on, maybe they gave half of the tune to the actual composer and the person who was publishing took the other half.

David: Sadiq said the rule when – I think he recorded it for Aladdin so that would have been the Erticans. The rule was leaders date, leaders get the composers credit. It was Lester's date, oh well.

Henry: Yes. Yes indeed.

David: Sadiq got many years of work out of Lester so I'm sure he didn't feel in any way abused. Well Henry this was fabulous. I had such a great time.

Henry: Well thank you for inviting me to do this man.

David: This is going to really make this show much much better, much more special.

Henry: Well I hope you send me a copy of it.

David: Well we'll definitely do that and if you would like a dub of the interview I think we could do that.

Henry: That would be great.

[1:08:57]

Henry: If you could do both, the edited and the interview.

David: The edited is months and months away.

Henry: I understand but the interview, that would be great.

I got your e-mail so I'll get your mailing address and I can send you the -

Henry: Thank you.

David: So what's your next gig?

Henry: I am at B.B. King's tomorrow with Leo Mosentelli and George Porter and a drummer from here, Adam Dice and it's Leo's gig. Then I'm going to go to Denver for a few days and check on the house there.

David: So you kept your place in Colorado?

Henry: Yeah, I kept it.

David: Were you in Denver or Boulder?

Henry: Denver. Well I was in Boulder for a year and then I moved.

David: That's what I remember that after New Orleans that's where you had gone.

Henry: Yeah.

David: I like Denver.

Henry: It's an interesting town. It's kind of tame for me musically so I mean that's why I came out here.

David: Yeah, the one guy from there who I think is phenomenal is the trumpet player Ron Miles.

Henry: Ron Miles, yes. I got to meet him briefly.

David: Yeah, he's got an absolutely individual concept and sound.

Henry: Yeah. I don't know how much work he's getting out there, but people in other places love him. The thing about the Denver area is most of the guys who are working are very white. I mean very white and their comfortable basically working with their white peers and you know it just makes the music sound just like that. You know most cities that I've lived in including New Orleans and L.A. And different parts of Michigan when I was in grad school and of course New York. You know you have a lot more diversity out here and a lot more people trying to do different things. A lot more blended styles and a lot more – it's just different. It's very different.

David: It is. It is. I mean for example the black community in Denver is so small that it's not a surprise that it's marginalized, but the Latino community in Denver ain't that small and it is surprising how marginalized they are because they're out there in great number but there are no clubs playing. Maybe in the Latin ghetto there are a couple of small clubs playing Latin music but certainly nothing I've heard about.

[1:12:13]

Henry: As I told a friend, it's really not about seeing more black people perform as much as seeing none. Seeing very few Latin people perform. What are these guys afraid of? Every other city has done it for decades and you know it just reminds me of small town in maybe – even some small towns in Iowa are better than that. You just have to wonder what the problem is. And all of the jazz departments, well Ron Miles is at Metro State, but most of the jazz departments are totally white and you just wonder what in the hell are we doing? What are they teaching there?

David: Well again, it's telling because Denver University has got money up the wazoo and they've been expanding like crazy and they have pretensions of becoming internationally significant education center. They've got nothing going on.

Henry: Colorado is the fifth State for capital in income and they spend less on education than Louisiana. That's saying something.

David: That is shocking.

Henry: They are cutting even as we speak. They are cutting the money they want to spend on higher education.

David: Well that's going on all across the country right now.

Henry: You know there are two things: I hear this commercial about the National Endowment for the Arts says that a great country deserves great art. I always say they need to take the word “deserves” out and put “needs” in there because when you look at how all of the countries including Rome fell when they stopped supporting art, they just automatically took a dive. Most countries that have stopped supporting their art have done that and people don't realize how much of an intangible force, you can call it a psychic force, you can call it whatever you want, but people don't realize how necessary it is to support music and art in a great nation.

David: Well when you travel the world, one of the things that has really struck me is with one or two exceptions, there hasn't been an interesting architectural structure in the city of New York since the end of WWII.

Henry: Wow!

David: And you go to any European or the major Asian cities and you're not just going to see big and expensive and impressive buildings but you're going to see funny buildings, you're going to see smart buildings, you're going to see crazy buildings. You're going to see all sorts of architectural concepts, good, bad, and ugly and you come to New York and you just see boxes and it the 30's and 40's and 20's when Manhattan was really being built, it was being built with all sorts of architectural models, gorgeous buildings and I don't know where else in the States they're being built, but sure ain't in New York and it never was Washington.

Henry: I'll tell you what, if you look at New York, I've been visiting New York since 1967 almost every year, not quite, but almost every year and starting from say around the mid to late 70's somewhere in there. I started to see a change in the kind of music that was being produced here and not just being produced, but the way New York City started to limit what was happening with whatever the indigenous music was here. I would say that would have been some types of straight ahead jazz and a lot of experimental music, experimental dance, that kind of thing. New York has become a big importer of music over the last ten or 15 years and I'm not sure what that says except maybe they're not producing as much as they used to here, original music. There's a lot of kids here playing jazz, but they're playing standards and when you go to [xx] or malls you don't hear anything really new.

[1:17:45]

David: Well that is true.

Henry: And you wonder how long that's going to last.

David: That's a two sided coin. The sort of Neoclassicism of jazz that in many ways the Marseilles Family incorporated. It was a wonderful thing because it called attention to and gave exposure to a lot of absolutely fantastic music that was being forgotten, but now all you hear in New York is either standard standards or bee bob from 45 to hard bop sort of from confirmation to sidewinder. It's like 90% of the repertoire of the music in New York is packed in that 25 years or 23 years.

Henry: Even the so called "new stuff" that's being written sounds just like that almost with a few slightly different twists and turns, but here is where I have a problem: what the main Marseilles guy has done is he has become sort of empirical. He has become sort of a guy who likes power and he wants people to teach jazz his way and he's got a lot of stuff going at the Lincoln Center, but as they have concentrated a lot of the stuff that happens here and mostly in Lincoln center, there's not much going on in Detroit. There's not much going on in Los Angeles in terms of jazz. There's not as much going on in New Orleans in terms of jazz because it's all being concentrated here at Lincoln Center. You've got all kinds of classes and workshops. Something will happen to the music if one person tries to control it all.

[1:20:32]

David: Well especially when that person has such a radical view of correctness.

Henry: I wouldn't say a radical view of correctness, I would say a fundamental view of correctness. In other words it's like the fundamentalist religionists. If it's not my way, it's not done right.

David: I will say this: Bradford and Jason are not that way at all.

Henry: No. No. This is Winton.

David: This is Winton's personality and I think a lot of it is straight out of Ellis which is also very very didactic personality.

Henry: And yet, I don't know how well they get along.

David: Well, strong personalities.

Henry: But something has to happen. Something has to break open because he still doesn't tolerate older musicians very well and although he will allow them to play Lincoln Center from time to time, he still doesn't. And his understanding and his appreciation of much passed Duke Ellington is still very limited.

David: Yes that's true. It's gotten about as far as again apparently one of the great thefts, thieves of all times, Gill Fuller. He's sort of gotten up to early period Gillespie bands.

Henry: Yes. Yes.

David: But I was reading about apparently Fuller just put his name all over. He had a whole school of people who were writing arrangements for him and they would all get copyrighted in his name.

Henry: Wow. I believe that.

David: It's like everything bills on Ellington.

Henry: That's right. That's exactly right. I understand Blood on the Fields was written by somebody else, but it went and got the Pulitzer for it.