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Born in 1931 in Greensboro, North Carolina, trumpeter Al Neese has been an active contributor to jazz culture for over 60 years. A resident of New York City from 1952–74, Neese learned the language of bebop and hard bop alongside its leading practitioners. Moving back to Greensboro in 1974, Neese then carried on the traditions of this music through an extensive performing and recording career, mentoring a generation of younger jazz musicians. He has preserved the music of the hard bop era through the formation of the Al Neese Jazz Project, and is still actively performing today, into his 80s. This biography examines Neese's life story in the context of the prevailing jazz narrative, arguing for the inclusion of stories such as Al's and other tradition-bearers as a way of broadening the common understanding of jazz history and culture.

TO NEW YORK AND BACK:
THE LIFE AND MUSIC
OF AL NEESE

by

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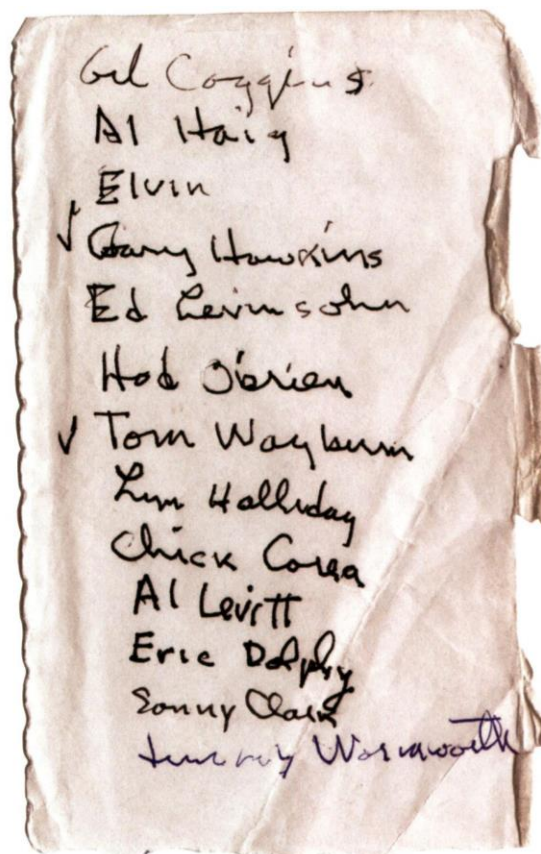
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: FLATTENING THE HIERARCHY

In his book *The Jazz Loft Project: Photographs and Tapes of W. Eugene Smith from 821 Sixth Avenue, 1957-1965* (2009), author Sam Stephenson distilled the thousands of photographs and reel-to-reel tapes from Eugene Smith's enigmatic collection in an effort to shed light on the lives of the jazz musicians who frequented his run-down Greenwich Village loft. One such musician was saxophonist Lou Orensteen whom Stephenson met for an interview in 2009. Entering Orensteen's apartment for the interview, Stephenson was handed a scrap of paper (see Figure 1).

"I've racked my brain," he said, "and these are the people I remember being at the loft." He had listed Gil Coggins, Al Haig, Elvin Jones, Gary Hawkins, Ed Levinsohn, Hod O'Brien, Tom Wayburn, Lin Halliday, Chick Corea, Al Levitt, Eric Dolphy, Sonny Clark, and Jimmy Wormworth.

Orensteen's small scrap of paper stands outside jazz history. It flattens the hierarchy of the normal jazz story. Three icons are listed—drummer Elvin Jones, pianist Chick Corea, and saxophonist Eric Dolphy—and two other musicians of historical significance, pianists Al Haig and Sonny Clark. But they are no more important in Orensteen's memory than Tom Wayburn, Gary Hawkins, Ed Levinsohn, Al Levitt, and Jimmy Wormworth—five obscure drummers. James Baldwin once said, "History is not a procession of illustrious people. It's about what happens to a people. Millions of anonymous people is what history is about." Orensteen's list represents Baldwin's kind of history. Everyone is worthwhile, like characters in a Eugene O'Neill or Tennessee Williams play. (Stephenson, prologue)



(Stephenson, prologue)

Figure 1. Lou Orenstein's list.

Understanding what Stephenson refers to as the “normal jazz story” can be a complex task. Where once the jazz narrative was told with an emphasis on historical personalities or developments in style, in recent decades there has been a flowering of work on issues previously considered to lie within the province of ethnomusicologists: gender, race, class, sexual orientation, and cultural identity (Monson, 3-4). The disciplines of anthropology, sociology, phenomenology and linguistics have also contributed to a broader consideration of the jazz narrative.

Despite the expansion of jazz scholarship, the dominant narrative still focuses on virtuoso performers and landmark recordings. In a broad sense, this reflects the tendency of the institutions in which the narrative is commonly repeated, i.e. the academic classroom or the media, to reduce the grand story into easily digestible and measurable units. But this ends up de-contextualizing the leading artists from the very environment in which this music was created. Scott DeVaux summarizes the narrative and its presentation in this way:

To judge from textbooks aimed at the college market, something like an official history of jazz has taken hold in recent years. On these pages, for all its chaotic diversity of style and expression and for all the complexity of its social origins, jazz is presented as a coherent whole, and its history as a skillfully contrived and easily comprehended narrative. (DeVaux, 525)

As an illustration of this pedagogical model, it is instructive to examine some of the materials most commonly used to teach jazz history and jazz appreciation. Two textbooks, both in their eleventh editions, are used widely on college campuses—*Jazz Styles* by Mark C. Gridley and *Jazz* by Paul O. W. Tanner, David W. Megill, and Maurice Gerow. Both texts come with CD anthologies, and are intended to cover the entire history of jazz in a one-semester course.

As an introduction to jazz, these texts seek to equip the novice with an appreciation for the origins and development of early jazz, an awareness of the changes in style from one period to another, familiarity with the music of the leading soloists and composers, and knowledge of the seminal recordings from each period. In a comparison of the chapter headings from these two texts seen in Table 1, the similarity in approach is

evident. In the Gridley, each roughly 10-year style period gets its own chapter from New Orleans Jazz to 1960. Within this timeframe, separate chapters are dedicated to Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Miles Davis and John Coltrane. Towards the end of the text, four modern-era (post 1950) pianists share a chapter. The period from 1980 to the present—a period of over 30 years—receives one chapter, and the book closes with a chapter devoted to vocalists. The outline of Tanner’s text follows a similar structure, with slightly more attention given to the post hard-bop styles. This cursory glance at the content of these commonly-used textbooks supports DeVeaux’s view that the emphasis of the “official history of jazz” is, in the academic realm, on its conformity to the historical narrative over its “chaotic diversity of style.”

Table 1. Comparison of Chapter Headings in Two Jazz Textbooks

Gridley	Tanner, Megill, and Gerow
Introduction/What is Jazz?/Appreciating Jazz Improvisation	Listening to Jazz
Origins of Jazz	Jazz Heritages
Early Jazz: Combo Jazz Prior to the 1930s	The Blues
Swing: The Early 1930s to the Late 1940s	Piano Styles: Ragtime and Boogie-Woogie
Duke Ellington	Early New Orleans and Chicago Style Jazz
The Count Basie Bands	Swing
	Duke Ellington
Bop: The Early 1940s to the Early 1950s	Bop
Cool Jazz	Cool/Third Stream
Hard Bop	Miles Davis
Miles Davis, his Groups & Sidemen	Hard Bop, Funky, Gospel Jazz
John Coltrane	
1960s and 1970s Avant-Garde & “Free” Jazz	Free Form, Avant-Garde
Bill Evans, Herbie Hancock, Chick Corea & Keith Jarrett	
Jazz-Rock Fusion	Jazz/Rock Fusion
1980 to the Present	Contemporary Trends: A Maturing Art Form
Other Voices	

Filmmaker Ken Burns took a similar approach in his 10-volume special produced for PBS (*Jazz*). The textbooks and documentary share a similar audience—one that is largely white, well-educated, middle-class, and not musically trained—and approach the subject largely from the style period/virtuoso model. In telling the narrative, Burns relies on primary source material and interviews of musicians, historians and critics (see Table 2 below).

Table 2. Burns’s 10-Volume Special for PBS (*Jazz*) by Episode

Episode Title	Time Period	People	Subjects
<i>Gumbo</i>	to 1917	Sidney Bechet, Buddy Bolden, Freddie Keppard, Jelly Roll Morton	Minstrel shows, Ragtime, New Orleans Jazz
<i>The Gift</i>	1917–1924	Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, James Reese Europe	Chicago Jazz, World War I
<i>Our Language</i>	1924–1928	Bix Beiderbecke, Benny Goodman, Bessie Smith	Harlem Renaissance
<i>The True Welcome</i>	1929–1935	Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Fletcher Henderson	Great Depression, Swing Era
<i>Swing: Pure Pleasure</i>	1935–1937	Billie Holiday, Glenn Miller	Racial Discrimination
<i>Swing: The Velocity of Celebration</i>	1937–1939	Count Basie, Ella Fitzgerald, Coleman Hawkins, Lester Young	Kansas City Jazz, Great Depression
<i>Dedicated to Chaos</i>	1940–1945	Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie Parker	Bebop, Racism
<i>Risk</i>	1945–1956	Dave Brubeck, Miles Davis, Thelonious Monk, Sarah Vaughan	West Coast Jazz, Drug Abuse
<i>The Adventure</i>	1956–1961	John Coltrane, Clifford Brown, Art Blakey, Ornette Coleman	Avant-garde, Free Jazz
<i>A Masterpiece by Midnight</i>	1961–2001	Stan Getz, Dexter Gordon, Charles Mingus, Archie Shepp	Bossa Nova, Civil Rights Movement, Fusion

Burns does take time to include vignettes on the lives and contributions of musicians not commonly covered in the history and appreciation texts—Freddie Keppard and James Reese Europe in episodes one and two, for example. Compelling social issues

such as the Great Depression and Civil Rights Movement, while included in the history texts are dealt with in greater depth by Burns. But Burns's time frame is even more condensed than in the texts—episodes five and six, for example, each cover a two-year time period. The middle eight episodes cover 42 years combined, or an average of 5.25 years per episode, while the final episode covers 40 years, making it impossible to adequately cover the many diverse streams of jazz since 1970.

Despite the valuable contribution the two texts have made to jazz pedagogy and the heightened awareness of jazz the Burns documentary has brought, there are some imbalances in these sources that are emblematic of other sources commonly used to tell the jazz narrative. The first is the lack of balance in coverage between early and late style periods—what has been called the “historicity” of jazz; the second is the de-emphasis of the relational and cultural aspects in favor of the biographical and stylistic; the third is the relative prominence of the stories of the tradition-creators over those of the tradition-bearers.

In DeVaux's words, “the story that moves so confidently from the outset from style to style falters as it approaches the present. From the origins of jazz to bebop there is a straight line; but after bebop, the evolutionary lineage begins to dissolve into the inconclusive coexistence of many different, and in some cases mutually hostile, styles” (DeVaux, 526). While I would argue that DeVaux's “straight line” prior to bebop is not completely straight—for example the wide range of solo piano and vocal styles, instances of small-group playing in the midst of big band styles, and wide stylistic and regional

variations within the swing era¹—his premise of an even more widely divergent approach to jazz from bebop to the present day is certainly true. The relatively linear development of jazz prior to 1950 certainly aids in the conveyance of the story when compared to the varied and complex styles competing for the jazz audience post-1950. This fracturing of styles and democratization of the inventive process necessarily complicates the telling of the more recent part of the story. Gridley, Tanner and Burns address this challenge by compressing the timeline and leaving the working out of the details to others.

Those who research and teach in other historical disciplines have wrestled with these challenges, as divergent viewpoints have been considered in the re-telling of narratives. In the discipline of Western history, for example, the “generals and presidents” approach to historical subjects is being reconsidered as other, parallel voices and experiences are included in the narrative. In one example, historian/activist Howard Zinn, in his *A People’s History of the United States: 1492-Present* (2005), writes the common chronological narrative of American history from the point of view of the conquered and the enslaved. In his opening chapter on the arrival in the New World by Columbus and his crew, he tells the story from the perspective of the native Arawak Indians, including accounts of their generosity and their atrocious treatment by the Spaniards. Zinn’s work is but one example of the move towards the more inclusive presentation of historical narratives.

¹ Even comparisons of Duke Ellington’s vs. Count Basie’s music and sounds show a wide range of diversity that would question a linear concept of jazz evolution. Which one, for example, is more closely related to King Oliver’s approach to ensemble jazz? For that matter, what are the similarities between Fletcher Henderson’s and Jelly Roll Morton’s bands in the style period before Basie’s?

The second and third issues mentioned above—de-contextualizing the jazz narrative from its local culture and the under-representation of the stories of tradition-bearers—are related. As the linear narrative gained acceptance in jazz circles, expedience and efficiency prevailed. Many factors have contributed to this, not the least of which is the 14-week semester, along with its requisite chapter quizzes, mid-term and final exam. When condensing something as complex as the history of jazz and the stories of the people who created it in a historical/cultural context, it is necessary to eliminate certain details—people, styles, cultural contexts—to get to the repeatable and measurable “facts.” As Howard Zinn and others addressed this issue in the field of history, scholarship by contemporary ethnomusicologists like Ingrid Monson and Paul Berliner shift the emphasis of the jazz narrative, focusing on the act of creating the music, its improvisatory and interactive nature, and the values of the musicians who create it. A recent jazz history text by Gary Giddens and Scott DeVeaux (*Jazz*, 2009) is gaining recognition and strong reviews for its incorporation of just such an approach.

The work of scholars Monson, Berliner, and DeVeaux focuses less on the historical landmarks and more on the cultural context in which jazz musicians operate. In his introduction to *Thinking in Jazz* (1994) Berliner writes: “As I was reviewing the relevant literature, I initiated field research by seeking access to artists. It is still largely the case, as it was when I began this work, that if one wants to learn the intricacies of jazz improvisation, one must learn them directly from the musicians” (Berliner, 5). Monson concurs: “Like Berliner, I began with the presumption that the best point of departure for

an ethnographic study of improvisational interaction would be the musicians themselves”

(Monson, 5). Sociologist William Cameron puts it this way:

Most jazzmen agree that no one can understand jazz or jazzmen except jazzmen themselves. This becomes understandable when we recognize that jazzmen exhibit a cult-like consensus on certain esthetic matters, employ an esoteric jargon, and are usually neither trained nor disposed to seek similarities between their ways of living and those of other persons. Indeed, many of their peculiar characteristics trace to the fact that their contacts with outsiders, when not restricted or actually prohibited, are distorted into limited patterns. (Cameron, 177)

The “limited patterns” mentioned by Cameron refers to ways of behaving and interacting known only to those from within the jazz culture and largely unknown or foreign to those from without. Those who write about jazz culture are often at least partly on the inside—Cameron, DeVaux, Monson and Berliner are practicing musicians themselves, and as a result are granted by their peers a level of trust and entrée not given to outsiders.

As jazz practitioners, it would not be a stretch to suggest that these scholars share similar values to those about whom they research and write, as a cursory glance at their scholarship indicates. In comparison to the historical/stylistic texts listed above, Monson’s *Saying Something* (1996) includes the following chapter titles: *Grooving and Feeling*, *Improvisation as Conversation*, and *Interaction, Feeling and Musical Analysis* (Monson vii). Likewise, Berliner’s headings include *Hangin’ Out and Jammin’*, *The Jazz Community as an Educational System*, *The Never-ending State of Getting There: Soloing Ability, Ideals and Evaluations* and *Give and Take: The Collective Conversation and Musical Journey* (Berliner, vii-viii). In contrast to the approach of Tanner, Gridley and

Burns, these two works bring the reader directly into the world and mindset of the practicing jazz musician, and the narrative becomes more personal than historical. It is as if each of these authors asked the question, “What is important to the practicing jazz musician?” In fact, asking questions of musicians forms the very basis of Monson’s and Berliner’s research.

A significant component of this newer narrative is the inclusion of voices other than those of the giants of jazz. Monson bases much of her research on conversations and listening sessions with Phil Bowler, Joanne Brackeen, Don Byron, Michael Carvin, Richard Davis, Jerome Harris, Billy Higgins, Cecil McBee, Ralph Peterson, Jr., Kenny Washington and Michael Weiss (Monson, xi). Berliner’s list of interviewees, is more extensive, but includes a similar proportion of little-known to well-known artists: Benny Bailey, Gary Bartz, Art Davis, George Duvivier, Art Farmer, Lonnie Hillyer, Melba Liston, Greg Langdon, and Emily Remler (Berliner 760-62). Both authors include well-known musicians, but the majority of those interviewed are musicians with whom even the most devoted follower of jazz may not be familiar.

The research of Monson, Berliner and others who walk a similar path², has flattened the hierarchy by validating and valuing the story of a category of jazz musicians whose voice would otherwise not be heard. In support of such an approach Berliner argues: “Art worlds consist not only of their most seasoned and single-minded members, but of a large support system made up of individuals with different interests and varying

² Such as David Ake, Paul Austerlitz, William Cameron, Scott DeVeaux, William Kenney, Neil Leonard, Lawrence Levine, Alan Merriam, Raymond Mack, and Sam Stephenson.

degrees of talent and knowledge” (Berliner 7). DeVeaux summarizes the need for a new narrative in this way:

The narratives we have inherited to describe the history of jazz retain the patterns of outmoded forms of thought, especially the assumption that the progress of jazz as art necessitates increased distance from the popular. If we, as historians, critics, and educators, are to adapt to these new realities, we must be willing to construct new narratives to explain them. These alternative explanations need not displace the jazz tradition (it hardly seems fair, in any case, to deconstruct a narrative that has only recently been constructed, especially one that serves such important purposes). But the time has come for an approach that is less invested in the ideology of jazz as aesthetic object and more responsive to issues of historical particularity. Only in this way can the study of jazz break free from its self-imposed isolation, and participate with other disciplines in the exploration of meaning in American culture. (DeVeaux, 553)

Ethnographic studies of jazz such as those by Monson and Berliner that include the voices of more individuals in more locations than in the traditional narrative, help to shape the grand story in new and different ways. This biography applies these principles on a personal scale, in effect flattening the hierarchy by examining the life of one individual in light of the common narrative.

CHAPTER II

METHODOLOGY

I became interested in looking at jazz history through a different lens during an ethnomusicology class entitled *Music and Identity*.³ Having been an artist and educator for three decades, trained in the Western classical tradition,⁴ I was intrigued by the new perspectives I was gaining through this class. Reading certain articles and books,⁵ while challenging at first, started to rekindle memories of experiences I had as a young jazz musician and reminded me of specific musicians I knew whose story would be of interest to many in the Greensboro community—Ray Gariglio, Burt Massengale, Tal Farlow, Sammy Anfllick, Charles Dungy, and others, all deceased. How interesting it would be to tell their stories, I thought, especially to those in the community in which they lived and practiced their art. Besides these musicians, some of whom I had played with, there was another Greensboro jazz musician I knew of by reputation. Having heard of his experiences, his legendary story-telling ability and his artistry, I knew that if there was

³ MUS 606 – Fall of 2012, taught by Dr. Gavin Douglas at UNC Greensboro.

⁴ Yes, this is a loaded term, but it is not without meaning and context. Having been a product of a public school band program, and trained within conservatory contexts at two schools of music, all of my professional experience has been in the context of Western classical music, except for my experience playing jazz. Even that experience was deeply influenced by the classical model. For a thoughtful article on the influence of the Western classical canon and its influence on the formation of the jazz canon, see “Toward Jazz’s “Official” History: The Debates and Discourses of Jazz History Textbooks” by Kenneth E. Prouty in *Journal of Music History Pedagogy*, vol. 1, no 1, (2010):19–43.

⁵ Monson’s *Saying Something*, Paul Austerlitz’s *Jazz Consciousness*, Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities*, Kyra Gaunt’s *The Game Black Girls Play*, and Lawrence Levine’s article “Jazz and American Culture,” among others.

anyone with whom I would like to speak and share my nascent ethnomusicological viewpoint it was trumpeter Alan Neese.

I called Al in October of 2012, and asked if he would be willing to talk about some of his experiences in jazz, and perhaps be the subject of my class project. He willingly agreed, and we set up an interview. I allowed about 90 minutes for this initial meeting, not knowing how it would go, but three hours later, with many stories left untold, it was obvious that Al's story was bigger than that initial project. Beginning in January, 2013 we scheduled a series of three more interviews, parts of which included Al's wife Shirley. I decided to attend weekly rehearsals and monthly live performances of his band the *Al Neese Jazz Project* in order to observe Al's interactions with the music and the band members. After several invitations to bring my horn to rehearsals and gigs, I began sitting in. In my studies I have also listened repeatedly to Al's recording *The Omen Seeker*, and the recordings of others with whom he has played; I have listened with Al to recordings that are meaningful to him, talked with him and Shirley informally on the phone, in the parking lot after rehearsals and on set breaks. Finally, I have spoken with other musicians in the Greensboro community who know Al and have performed and recorded with him.

Throughout all of these interactions it has been my intention to listen and observe as much as possible. When I did begin to put what I heard and saw on paper, I tried to do so in a way that allowed Al's voice to be heard clearly, so that his story and its connections to others in the larger narrative would be heard. Al's life has touched many, as he has lived a kind of dual citizenship between New York and Greensboro, playing

alongside jazz's greatest big-city stars and its unknown small-town sidemen. By some measures, his career was not very successful; by others, his successes will long outlive him. Deciding which standards to use to judge his career has been part of this journey.

Though born in Greensboro, his story really starts with a vignette straight out of the New York jazz scene at its height, in the 1950s and early 60s. Sam Stephenson paints the portrait of photographer Eugene Smith's Greenwich Village loft as an archetype of the jazz meetinghouse, itself a central character in the drama of the hard bop jazz world:

For every renowned musician who visited 821 Sixth Avenue, however, there were dozens who were obscure. Strangers—unproven newcomers—wandered into the place: if you could play an instrument, you were okay. Fifteen-year-old pianist Jane Getz came in from Texas, pianist Dave Frishberg from Minnesota, and bassist Jimmy Stevenson from Michigan . . . It was an intersection of people that could have occurred nowhere other than New York. Jazz musicians were flocking there from all over the country, along with many others aspiring to new lives. Suddenly this building, which had been abandoned for decades, became a spot where you could stop by and see an icon, or see unknown junkies strung out on the fourth-floor landing . . . (Smith) once called the story of the loft scene a “unique piece of Americana.” From his photos and tapes, we can document 589 people who passed through the dank stairwell of this building in the 1950s and 1960s. The true number could be twice as high. From all walks of life all over the map, only a dozen or so of these people went to college. What building in twenty-first-century America—that is not an enterprise or institution—has this kind of diverse traffic? Is there one? Anywhere? (Stephenson, 4–5)

In an appendix in the back of his book, Stephenson lists those 589 people who are known to have been in Smith's 6th Avenue loft between 1957 and 1965 (Stephenson, 247–48). On page 248, between the names of Gerry Mulligan and Garry Newman is the name of Al Neese.

CHAPTER III

BEGINNINGS

Alan Drexel Neese was born on December 24, 1931, the only child of Dallas Cicero Neese (Sept. 8, 1901–March, 1984) and Allie Belle Tickle Neese (Dec. 4, 1900–Nov. 1, 1999; see Figure 2). A likeable and successful salesman for Odell Mills Supply, a company that sold everything necessary for the operation of textile mills, Al’s father provided well enough for the family to build a Blandings Dream House⁶ opposite the seventh fairway of Starmount Country Club in Greensboro, North Carolina. Al’s mother, a homemaker, was also a competitive golfer. Al recalls his parents being star struck with celebrities, perhaps explaining their interest in Hollywood’s Blandings Dream House promotion. As a young boy himself, Al describes himself as being involved in what he called “show business,” doing plays and skits at school. He related his introduction to the trumpet:

I started (trumpet) in 5th grade in elementary, and my mother took a small magazine, sort of like Reader’s Digest, but it was named “Coronet.” And so I was already in the glee club, and had a pretty good voice, for a soprano. And they were passing out these cards and I was in I guess the 5th grade, and I wanted to play saxophone, and what I tell (everyone) is I didn’t know how to spell it! (laughs) So I remembered “Coronet” that magazine, so I wrote down “coronet” and I ended up playing the cornet! (Neese, 10/20/12)

⁶ Blandings Dream Houses were built as a promotion for the 1948 Carey Grant movie *Mr. Blandings Builds his Dream House* based on the 1946 Eric Hodgins novel of the same name. The film’s distributors, RKO Radio Pictures in conjunction with General Electric, built 73 of the homes around the United States. See Figure 3 for photos of the Blandings Dream House advertisements and the Neese’s home.



Figure 2. Dallas and Allie Belle Neese, c. 1948.

As a child during World War II, Al recalls listening to the music of Duke Ellington and Art Tatum on the radio every Sunday. Remembering the sounds of the Ellington band backing up a female singer, he sang distant memories of powerful sounds: “Then when the trumpets would hit a chord, man it was like ‘God!’ It wasn’t no Stan Kenton kind of thing. It was all dissonance, really far ahead” (Neese, 10/20/12). To Al, the dissonance of Ellington’s harmony was equated in his mind with modernism and complexity, values that would be important to him during his professional career.

By junior high school Al was already playing in a dance band, playing dances in Greensboro and the surrounding area. He recalls one of his first gigs in Mt. Airy, NC:

(W)hen I was in junior high school, and we had already formed a band – I took a band up to Mt. Airy, and we were playing those stock arrangements, we even had to have a chaperone! You know, nobody could drive. So they drove us up and we spent the night up there and played two gigs, you know. And got paid for it!
(Neese, 10/20/12)

One particular memory from junior high school made Al aware that his musical tastes were already different from his peers and elders. While in Myrtle Beach hanging out with a bunch of people, somebody found a radio broadcast of Dizzy Gillespie playing live at the Royal Roost in New York. Al was listening intently when someone yelled out, “Turn that s**t off.” Even then Al says he was thinking “What planet am I on? I knew it then—I wasn’t on the planet with the rest of these people” (Neese, 2/25/13). Another time he recalled hearing *Jack the Bell Boy*, by Lionel Hampton and Nat Cole on the radio: “I ran home 6-8 blocks to find it on the radio, because this was the most dynamite stuff I had heard in my life—it still knocks me out when I hear it!” (Neese, 2/25/13)

Although his parents were enamored of the entertainment industry, that fact did not necessarily translate into a support for Al’s love of music. About his parents, Al recalls that “they just didn’t understand” him or his desire to play music. In fact, Al related that his dad once said to him as an adult, “We bought you a trumpet when you were young and you kept playing in high school, in college, after college—we were just wondering when you were going to get it out of your system!” (Neese, 5/29/13). The possibility of a career in music did not seem feasible to Al’s salesman-father.

Entering high school, Al continued to pursue his interest in music. He formed a jazz band with some friends, later informing his Greensboro High School band director Herbert Hazelman that he and some of his band mates wanted to switch from the cornet to the trumpet:

Al: When we got to High School, Bobby Rich⁷ was in there, and he bought a trumpet, and I bought a trumpet—Alex Hanas was another good player, but he had a tin ear. So we were all playing the first parts, the good parts, the cornet parts, but when we bought the trumpets, man, he put us back in the trumpet section. . . I didn't find out till years later that he put himself through school playing on ships. You know, he was a *dance band* guy! But yet, he hated trumpets, and anybody that got caught up into that.⁸

Me: What was the difference for you?

Al: You just didn't get the good parts. You was almost like a peck horn⁹ or something. (Neese, 10/20/12)

The photos in Figures 4 and 5 show Al as a young cornet player in the Greensboro High School concert band, while Figure 6 shows him holding a muted trumpet. Al's smiling face in Figure 6 hints at his preference for the trumpet over the cornet!



Figure 4. Greensboro High School Band, 1948.

⁷ Bobby Rich is a boyhood friend of Al's who also pursued a career as a jazz trumpeter. I played gigs with him in a local dance band in the late 90s and early 2000s.

⁸ The divide between the cornet and the trumpet reflected the divide between classical music ("legitimate" music) and jazz. Hazelman was trying to uphold the traditions of the cornet in band, while himself having supported himself playing the trumpet on cruise ships.

⁹ A "peck horn" is the E-flat alto horn, known for "pecking out" up-beats in band music.



Figure 5. Al, with cornet.



Figure 6. Al, age 13, with trumpet.

As his interest in music grew, he showed a passion and desire to understand every aspect of it as deeply as he could. Aware he would need some knowledge of the piano, he asked his parents to sign him up for lessons:

Al: When we got to that point (after he formed his band) I decided to take piano lessons, and I remember having to go to Aycock Auditorium (for piano recitals); hell I was in high school, wearing drape pants, combing my hair in a duck tail, and playing over there with these *kids*. It was just too much.

Me: Do you remember your piano teacher?

Al: Yeah, Miss Wharton. She lived on West Market Street. I used to be sitting out there in the car practicing, cause I never would practice, and I remember hearing them in there, and I was always pretty good. She did teach me how to come down with the weight—cause, you know, like Freddie Redd said, “Remember, the piano is a percussive instrument.”

So anyway, the ones that we had in the dance band, four or five of us, decided to get a piano teacher—one of these women, I’ve forgotten her name—and she taught us harmony. So that’s when I started learning harmony. (Neese, 10/20/12)

His interest in jazz led him to researching its history, once writing a term paper for a high school English class for which he illustrated the cover with his own drawings of African drums. The main resource for his paper was a book entitled *Shining Trumpets* by Rudi Blesh (Alfred A. Knopf, 1948), a significant early text on jazz history.¹⁰ Al was interested in Blesh’s discussion of the African roots of jazz, in particular his emphasis on polyrhythm. Thus began a fascination with jazz’s African elements, an interest he pursued in some fashion for the rest of his life.¹¹

A significant event in Al’s musical life was the night as a high school student that he attended a performance of the King Kolax band at the Play-More Club in East Greensboro.¹² He describes the evening this way:

It was a big building, it was sorta like on stilts. And the floor used to just bend . . . and all these people were out there shagging. And they had a little white spectators section where they let the white guys in. And the night that I graduated from high school, I went down there and King Kolax, and swear to God man, it must have been Coltrane¹³ (playing tenor saxophone) . . . And I remember that

¹⁰ In his review of jazz history texts Kenneth Prouty writes of Blesh’s book: “Though Blesh completely ignores contemporary developments (intentionally so), his book is among the first to use the term “history of jazz” so explicitly. (Prouty, 21)

¹¹ Al tells a funny story about turning in the same paper as an English major at UNC Chapel Hill—“and I got another A!”

¹² Al recalls this night being the night of his high school graduation in 1950, but Kolax’s band broke up in May, 1947 and Al graduated in May, 1950.

¹³ John Coltrane was indeed playing with King Kolax’s band in the late 1940s, touring around the southern US. It is possible Al did hear Coltrane with King Kolax, but if he did, it was most likely not on the night of his high school graduation, but rather sometime during his sophomore year.

night, that something happened to me, man. It was like I was bit. I mean, I knew I'd never be the same; that no matter what I did, that's where I would always be. I knew—it was like a religious experience. That whatever it was, it was going to get in my way, man. That no matter what I did, that everything was going to be related to what was going on there. (Neese, 4/26/13)

As Al recalled this experience more than 60 years later he was still able to describe in detail the sights, sounds and emotional impact of that night. In some way, as a high school student, he had already experienced the connective power of jazz, and he had been ineffably drawn to it.

After graduating from Greensboro High School in 1950, Al enrolled at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill as an English major and music minor. He recalls the signs posted in the practice rooms as an indication of how his main musical interest was viewed there: “No smoking, no spitting on the floor, and no jazz playing.” (Neese, 10/20/12) How strictly this was enforced, he could not recall, however, the sign was a tangible expression of the tense relationship between jazz and the academy at that time. Nonetheless, the exclusion of jazz from his formal studies did not keep him from exploring it outside of the classroom:

I started out in college playing (in a big band). I remember looking at the sheet and it would say “7 bars of solo.” You know, (sarcastically) “7 bars, thanks a lot!” But then I was playing in the beer joints in Chapel Hill, and I really didn't know what I was doing, man. (Neese, 10/20/12)

In the music theory classroom he ended up with a pile of “A/Incompletes” due to a stack of uncorrected part-writing assignments. With some frustration he recalls his experience:

You know, when I was in school, with the Bach thing (part-writing), if you wrote any parallel 5ths or octaves, they wouldn't accept your composition. Man, that's crazy. To me, that's alright for a while, but I mean, I was about to be ready to fail out of music school and go to Korea. Actually, I got a failing grade and was drafted. (Neese, 2/25/13)

Though he was assured of a post in a military jazz band in Charlotte, he failed his physical due to childhood asthma. Rather than returning to Chapel Hill, Al transferred to Guilford College, back home in Greensboro. Soon thereafter he met alto saxophonist Jackie McLean, who would become highly influential in Al's musical development. The story of McLean's brief departure from the Sugar Hill neighborhood in Harlem and his arrival in Greensboro is told by writer Derek Ansell in his biography *Sugar Free Saxophone*. This turn of events in McLean's life allowed the paths of these two young musicians to cross for the first time. The excerpt below provides a snapshot of the culture McLean's mother wanted to shelter Jackie from, and that Al was about to enter:

Many years later, Jackie was to claim that he and his friends were all hip junkies at that time, but that most of the mothers on the hill went out of the way to give their children good manners. Jackie's mother tried to protect him and make him behave well, pushed him towards what she regarded as suitable jobs and, all the time he lived at home with her, required him to get in at a respectable time of night, even when he had a jazz gig. She even managed to get her son to Agricultural and Technical College in North Carolina, thinking it would get him away from the jazz life, people and junk. Jackie found the campus life did not suit him at all, did not join in any of the activities and felt out of place for a whole year. And that was his first and last year: he headed back to NYC and carried on where he had left off. He jammed every minute he could, looked out for every jazz gig going in New York and played with whoever would let him sit in. (Ansell, 10)

During Jackie's one year at North Carolina A&T University, Al met him on a gig at a jazz club called *The Artist's Guild*, which was located near the university. Walking in

with his trumpet, Jackie spotted him and promptly asked him to sit in, asking him what he wanted to play. Knowing Jackie had recently recorded as a sideman on Miles Davis's album *Dig*, Al said "*Dig*, man!" Jackie said, "Damn, you know that tune?" (Neese, 3/9/13). Thus began a relationship that continued for several decades. Before returning to New York after his short stay in Greensboro, Jackie said, "If you ever get to New York, look me up," which Al did, soon thereafter.¹⁴

Having been inspired to play by Jackie McLean, his boyhood jazz heroes and his North Carolina peers, Al decided to make the journey to New York, in his words "to find a rhythm section," but in essence the move was made in order to find his musical voice and develop his art. He knew that he had to work out the vision of the music that had bitten him that night listening to King Kolax at the Play-More, and that it was not likely to get worked out in Greensboro. The fact that others—musicians like guitarist Tal Farlow and drummer Dannie Richmond—had left the relative safety of Greensboro for the proving grounds of New York before him may have given him courage to test the waters for himself.

¹⁴ The dates of Jackie's attendance at NC A&T and Al's move to New York are not entirely clear. Jackie did record *Dig* with Miles Davis on October 5, 1951. Al puts Jackie's arrival in Greensboro after the record date, but Jackie's biographer puts it before, though he does not cite the dates of Jackie's year in Greensboro. At age 81, Al's memory for people and events is remarkably clear, but his accuracy of recalling dates is not. The significance of this meeting is not in the tune that Al called on the gig or the date of Jackie's year in Greensboro, but the fact that the two did meet in Greensboro and it was Jackie who encouraged Al to make the move to New York, thus beginning a lifelong friendship between Al and one of the great alto saxophonists of his time.

CHAPTER IV

NEW YORK

Arriving in New York for the first time,¹⁵ Al promptly boarded the first available train to Coney Island, to find a saxophone player from Greensboro who, like Jackie McLean, had told Al to look him up if he ever got to New York. Though he knew Al, he was shocked to see him on his doorstep, or in Al's words, "He could've dropped his teeth!" (Neese, 6/4/13). He recommended Al go to the Arlington Hotel in Midtown Manhattan, home to many New York musicians, to find a place to stay. In addition to providing Al with an instant community, The Arlington also led him to his first roommate, Dutch accordion player Mat Matthews. Matthews had been playing with singer Carmen McRae and flutist Herbie Soloman (known later as Herbie Mann). According to Al, "They used to come by the pad and have a rehearsal. Herbie and I got sorta tight" (Neese, 10/20/12).

Al loved New York right away, especially the sense he felt of belonging to an artistic community. Just as Al's parents did not seem to understand his artistic pursuits, neither did his peers back home in North Carolina. Even after moving to New York, he would occasionally return to home to visit his family and friends. A conversation he recalls with a Greensboro friend summarizes the feelings of many he knew from back home:

¹⁵Based on the timeline I learned from Al, with his high school graduation in May of 1950, one year in Chapel Hill, one year at Guilford College in Greensboro, it is most likely that his move to New York occurred sometime after May of 1952.

When I came home, I'd see those people (that he knew when he lived in Greensboro). (They'd ask,) "When you going to work? What do you do up there?"

(I'd answer) "I go to these lofts and play."

"What kind of money do you make?"

"I don't make any money at all"

"You don't make any money? What the hell you doing that that for?" (Neese, 3/9/13)

The thought of having to receive a financial reward for doing what he was passionate about did not make sense to Al then, nor does it now.

On one particular trip home Al travelled to Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, where he met Shirley Taylor, a Greensboro girl he knew from High School. Shirley's dad, who worked for Southern Railroad, and later for Southeastern Express, died when she was five years old. Her stepfather worked at the Greensboro Daily News, was an engineer at WFMY television and later bought a Western Auto store in Thomasville. Her mother was a homemaker, and had two sons, Robin and Gill who were half-brothers to Shirley. Shirley married Al on July 10, 1954, and returned to New York with him (see Figure 7 for a photo of Al and Shirley). Her work as a department secretary for the School of Business at New York University for 20 years was instrumental in allowing Al the opportunity to pursue his musical career. As Al recalls, it was not unusual for someone other than the jazz musician himself to provide for the day-to-day expenses of living in New York so the musician was free to pursue his art:

Then I just realized, man, I had already met my wife, and she was just graduating from high school, and I just knew man, that I had to have some help. Everybody up there had help. Jackie and Bird, everybody. I mean, you just didn't do things without some woman working for you. You just couldn't do it. And Freddie Redd

was doing it, and I met all these guys in the Village; the Baroness¹⁶ was around and that's when Freddie knew her—and we used to go to her pad all the time. West of the RCA building, you know Monk wrote a tune¹⁷; you used look out her pad, man, and there's the RCA building, across the Hudson.

And (she) had this huge piano, man, and we'd go and, me and Freddie (Redd), we'd get the key and go out there man. I remember spending New Year's Eve day out there man, and she wasn't there, and Monk wasn't there, in the Baroness' pad, man! And Freddie was like the darling of these people. And that's why we'd get the Provincetown (Mass.) gigs . . . (Neese, 10/20/12)



Figure 7. Al & Shirley, c. 1973. Al is wearing a coat made for him by Calo Scott.

¹⁶ Baroness Pannonica de Koenigswarter or Kathleen Annie Pannonica Rothschild of the Rothschild family, known for her patronage of Charlie Parker's and Thelonious Monk's careers.

¹⁷ Thelonious Monk wrote the tune *Pannonica* in the Baroness' honor, recorded on October 9, 1956 on the Riverside label.

Al found the freedom to pursue his musical development in large part because of Shirley's stable job, allowing him to immerse himself in the New York jazz scene—sitting in at jam sessions during early morning gatherings in the many clubs and lofts that served as meeting places for New York's jazz culture. The loft scene, described earlier by Sam Stephenson, was a laboratory where an observer was as likely to run into an accomplished recording artist as an unknown musician trying to learn the complicated language of bebop, hard bop and later, free jazz. Often, musicians in the loft community shared common goals, desires, habits, and philosophies, and educated each other about the culture encompassing the music. Visual artists, writers, dancers and actors were just as likely as musicians to be present on any given night. It was this thriving and diverse artistic community that both motivated and fulfilled Al.

Many in the jazz community were not only trying to find their particular voice, they were also looking for a particular musical community to join. Often the choices were distinct—genres such as bebop, hard bop, dance band and avant-garde were all current—and with each community came its own language, culture and income level. Al highlights one aspect of this idea of claiming of a musical identity with an account of one of his earliest gigging experiences in New York:

Al: When I got to NY I went with a band that had seven or eight different versions¹⁸—Al Cohn was in one, Zoot Sims, people that had some names—mostly white musicians—all white, really. But we were playing out on Long Island—the same thing I did down there in college—and they didn't even look at

¹⁸ Al recalls later it was the Lester Lanin band, a legendary New York organization founded by Lester Lanin, and during his heyday booking 10-12 bands a night. These bands were criticized by musicians and music critics for providing dance music, but the crowds who hired them (including almost every President since Dwight Eisenhower for their inaugural ball) were thrilled.

the book, man. They played the, s*** so . . . but the thing was, if you played . . . anyway, they had a solo written out, and I stood up and played, made up my own thing (instead), and they (the other musicians) said, “uh oh.” I never worked with them again. At that time I was workin’ at The Open Door, and with Bird, and sittin’ in down there, workin’ with Jackie McLean, and I said, “either I’m going *that* way or I’m goin’ *this* way.” I mean, I still run into that down here (in NC).

Me: It’s still that way down here . . . you can play society gigs or be-bop

Al: Right, and you don’t even hang out with ‘em. (the players from the other crowd). (Neese, 10/20/12)

Even as a young musician Al showed a profound understanding of the choices he would have to make to create the kind of art he valued. The divide between commercial jazz musicians and those pursuing jazz as art music is distinct and deep, especially in large cities. Cameron, in his discussion of the jam session describes it well:

The session frequently takes place after the formal vocational "job," and the busman's holiday aspect of this is explained by the jazzman as "a chance to get the taste of commercial music out of my mouth." For outsiders, the intensity of distaste the jazzman feels toward money-making commercial dance music surpasses belief. In a very real sense the session is a ritual of purification for himself—a cleansing by the reaffirmation of his own esthetic values. (Cameron, 178)

Al was similarly drawn to the aesthetic experience rather than the paycheck. His approach to his music was more aligned with Sidney Bechet than Lester Lannin. Bechet explained the heart of the jazz musician this way in his memoir *Treat it Gentle*,

That’s one of the things that make it why a musicianer, if he’s real serious about the music, has to have this place inside himself. You’ve got to say that to yourself. I’ve got the music and I don’t give a damn for the rest. Rich or poor, the music is there and that’s what I’m for. (Bechet, 163)

Al had that place inside himself, planted there in Greensboro, now beginning to take root in New York. Becoming established in the New York jazz scene, with the financial security of a working wife, Al was free to pursue his artistic development (see Figure 8 for a photo of Al at the United Nations Building in New York City). Contributing to his musical development were many diverse factors, chief among them the relationships he fostered and his sense of belonging to the larger jazz community. Al's connection to people like Greensboro's Dannie Richmond, drummer for Charles Mingus—coupled with his engaging personality—allowed him to participate in the scene alongside jazz's leading practitioners and its other journeymen. The respect shown to Al by established members of the jazz community speaks volumes for their views of him as both a musician and a friend.



Figure 8. With Calo Scott at the United Nations Building, New York City, 1965.

CHAPTER V

RELATIONSHIPS IN THE JAZZ COMMUNITY

On my second visit to Al's house for an interview, I was handed a scrap of paper much like the one handed to Sam Stephenson by Lou Orensteen (see Figure 9). Scribbled along with reminders of some stories he wanted to share with me were the names of Al Haig, Freddie Redd, Webster Young, Gilly Coggins, Laymond Jackson, Wilbur Ware, Jackie McLean, and Bill Hinie. Notably, two of the people on Al's list—Al Haig and Gil Coggins—appear also on Lou Orensteen's list described in the introduction. This is not surprising, as the two ran in the same circles in the 1950s and 60s,¹⁹ and both were part of the community of musicians who all chose to go *this* way, following the path of pursuing their own artistic visions, often at great financial risk, while at the same time creating some of the most vibrant music of their generation. Many have since passed away, but some like Wayne Shorter, Sonny Rollins, Elvin Jones and others—still live, and are still searching, still pushing the boundaries of jazz music. It is this community of seekers to which Al Neese belongs.

¹⁹ Author Sam Stephenson writes about *another* list handed to him by saxophonist Pete Yellin on a recent visit to San Francisco (see Figure 10), containing many of the same names from Orensteen's and Neese's. Highlighted in the online article is composer/teacher Hal Overton, with whom Al studied composition. He counts Overton as one of the important influences on his music. The tradition of list-making does not seem to be significant to this story, only coincidental. The gentlemen interviewed by Sam Stephenson, like Al, are quite old, and would surely want to try and recall all the names that they could in preparation for an interview by an author.

F. Re [unclear] [unclear]

visits - ARTFARMER

" Webster [unclear]

" Gilly [unclear]

" [unclear] [unclear]

Jay Mac -

12-10 - [unclear]

Bill White - [unclear]

African Music

Records -

World's Fair - Rio [unclear]

Trips to [unclear]

Danny [unclear]

was some?

Be like Bird!

Story!

Art Blakey - [unclear]

around my [unclear]

Influ -

Duke Ellington

History of

Jazz



listening with [unclear] the

Museum -

Jenny Ford -

Heleny St. } Art

Br B'way - } Farm

Stella Starling's ti-

ny horn

" mini

" pad -

Figure 9. Al's list, front and back.

GIL COGGINS
 Tommy TURRENTINES Cedar
 G. COLEMAN Walton
 Sonny Clark
 W. Dockery Danny Richman
 Sam Dockery Al Cotton
 Sonny Donaldson
 STEVE Grossman JUNIOR COOK
 MIKE & RANDY Brecker
 Chick Corea Joe Farrell
 ✓ Tom Wayburn TONY FRISCH
 ✓ J. Stevenson
 Sunny Holiday
 Joe Soriano
 Charlie Haden
 Walter Bolden - Hal
 Horace Mabern Halper

Pete Yellin—list of names given to Sam Stephenson; from “Jazz Loft Project Blog”
<http://www.jazzloftproject.org/blog/general/another-poignant-scrap-of-paper>
 accessed April 19, 2013; used by permission

Figure 10. Pete Yellin’s list.

Like many in the jazz community, Al likes to tell a good story. The jazz life, with its frequent down time, nightlife and cast of characters produces its share of stories. As Al recalled the people with whom he played and socialized, several recurring themes emerged. One theme was the genuineness of his relationships with others. He often

related how he kept in touch with friends from the New York scene and their spouses long after he left that community. Another is the importance of those relationships and the shared goals of so many in the community. And a third is the way they were willing to help one another in life and in music. There was a true sense of community and family among those in the New York jazz scene. That sense of community is present among the Greensboro jazz community as well, though it does not seem as strong. Perhaps this is due to the lack of an urban setting, where proximity and a thriving jazz scene bring musicians into contact with one another more frequently than in suburban Greensboro.

A significant connection for Al during his time in New York was drummer Dannie Richmond, who grew up in Greensboro and moved to New York, becoming Charles Mingus' most trusted drummer. Richmond, who, like Al lived in New York but maintained strong ties to the Greensboro community of musicians, introduced Al to many of the top jazz artists of the day. He also served as a trusted friend and an objective voice in Al's musical development. One musician Al met through Dannie was alto saxophonist Jimmy Vass, well-known for his work with Charles Mingus.

I used to sorta relate it to all pentatonic scales, you know, but it was much more subtle than that, you know. *Freedom Jazz Dance* had just come out. (Talking to Charles Mingus' alto saxophonist Jimmy Vass, Al asks,) "Do you know *Freedom Jazz Dance*?" And I was just getting through it in the key of B-flat, concert. He knew it in every key. He said "you mean this?" You know I actually wrote him a letter the next day. I said, "Jesus, I've never been shamed like that, or inspired like that!" You know, 'Thanks for the lesson, man!' So we became great friends." (Neese, 10/20/12)

Though Al felt ashamed initially, he had been inspired to practice harder because a more experienced player took the time to teach him a lesson about what it would take to play at

the highest level. And Al's response, once he realized what Vass had taught him, was to pursue a friendship with him that lasted for many years.

Another influential relationship for Al was his friendship with Charlie Parker.

Any conversation with Al is bound to include stories of him hanging with Parker in one place or another. In one conversation with Parker, Bird himself tries to talk Al into admiring someone else rather than him:

He (Parker) says, "you know, I got a friend who you ought to base your life on. He doesn't take a lot of drugs—or no drugs. He practices a lot, he saves his money." So I said, "Well, who is that?" "Dizzy Gillespie." I said, "No man, I'd rather be like you." . . . And he (Parker) thought that was so funny. Because guys would come up to him, these white boys, crying, (makes whining, crying voice) "I'm strung out, man, my family's kicked me out, I've been taking that heroin and I still can't play like you." And he'd say, "Don't whip that on me, don't blame me." And when they'd walk away he'd say, "Man, you just don't know how much I get that." That's what killed him—one of the things. (Neese, 10/20/12)

Young and headstrong, Al admits he didn't understand Dizzy, with all his clowning around, dancing on the bar, cracking jokes. He interpreted Dizzy's free-spirited behavior as an indication that Dizzy was not very serious about his approach to music. On the other hand, Al wanted to be like Parker because he perceived Parker to be very serious. Al later came to see that he was wrong about Dizzy, but he did not have a relationship with him, and could only make judgments based on his stage persona. His firsthand experience with Parker, being around him outside the performance setting, conversing with him and being in community with him led Al to want to model his approach to music in the same way. In the case of those strung out young musicians he and Parker

encountered, many saw Parker's way of life, with its alcohol and drug abuse, and concluded that those habits were necessary in order to be a serious jazz musician.

Al tells several other stories about Parker that have had an impact on him even 60 years later. One tells of how he learned a lesson on the pecking order of the New York jazz scene. Despite hanging around with Parker, having him over to his apartment and going to hear him play regularly, Al had yet to be invited to sit in with Bird on a gig. Al relates the conversation:

Parker: "I'm playing down at the Open Door Sunday; why don't you come down, bring your horn and sit in."

Al: "I've been there every Sunday for a month with my horn, and you never ask me to sit in!"

Parker: "My name's Charlie Parker, I don't ask you to sit in . . . you ask me!" (Neese, 10/20/12)

The next Sunday Al brought his trumpet to the Open Door, asked Parker if he could sit in and was promptly invited up to the bandstand to play one tune. According to the protocol of the day, it was common to walk several blocks and get on multiple subway trains, staying out until 3 or 4 in the morning for the chance to sit in on one tune. Whether or not this was a deliberate system to keep out all but the most dedicated aspirants, Al considered the logistical challenges a part of the learning process, and was happy to do it.

In the course of telling stories about his life in New York, Al describes many instances of hearing Parker play in person. One time attended a gig where he heard Parker playing some jazz standards:

He put on a clinic. You never heard anything (like it). He quoted all this, like every piece of music . . . like Biblical s**t. It was like standing on the edge of the world. (Neese, 10/20/12)

His poetic use of language points to the musician who also values literature and the other arts and seeks their connections. On another night Al, Jackie McLean and Parker were looking for a place to play. They wandered into Arthur's Tavern on 4th Street where another alto player was playing. Al characteristically describes the people involved by the way they sounded:

It was like a Charlie Mariano kinda sound, it wasn't like Paul Desmond or anything; it wasn't that light – it wasn't that good either. It was a little more than a regular alto thing. And then Jackie McLean played, and it was like *raw*. And then Bird said, "Let me look at that thing." And it was another lesson, man. It was like that platinum flute thing (referring to Edgar Varèse's *Density 21.5* for platinum flute). Everything in there—every piece of furniture, the chairs, the tables, got his sound came out of it. Like he just filled up everything, man. And I was thinking "that was the same mouthpiece, reed, same horn." It was incredible. So it don't matter what (equipment) you play, man. (Neese, 10/20/12)

In this story Al shows his sensitivity to tone, his awareness and presence in the moment, as well as his understanding of contemporary classical music. Just as significantly to him, he remembers the moments shared with friends and fellow musicians.

Relationships on and off the bandstand build or break down trust between musicians. The complexity of the act of four or five musicians coming together on stage to create improvised art necessarily transcends the technical aspects of notes, rhythms and chords and enters into the social and cultural milieu. Musicians expect that those with whom they perform are listening and responding to what they play, in the same way that friends do in dialogue with one another. This necessitates that all participants share a

common experience and knowledge of the jazz vernacular, as well as its complicated social interactions. Monson summarizes the complexities in this way:

I am suggesting that interactive musical conversation in real-time performance, combined with intermusical and intercultural associations musicians and audiences bring to the conversation over time, have much to do with where the feeling in rhythmic feel comes from. The testimony of musicians and a close analysis of a performance confirm many common-sense intuitions we have about the emotional power of music, its interactive character in jazz improvisation, and the aesthetic centrality of linking sound to an ethos, cultural identity, and communities of participation. (Monson 185–86)

Throughout her research Monson supports these statements by examining in detail the interactive musical dialogue between practicing musicians, confirming her observations through conversation with the participants.

Al belonged to this community of participation, and extended it to every aspect of his life in New York. The people he hung around with were his family, and he was a beloved brother to many. He has carried those community ties beyond his New York years, staying in touch with many of his friends and their spouses until their deaths. And he has pursued relationship with colleagues in the Greensboro community in similar ways, imparting to the next generation the sense of importance he and his colleagues placed on relationship.

CHAPTER VI

MUSICAL VALUES AND INFLUENCES

One of the first questions I asked Al at our first meeting was about his musical influences. He responded quickly, paraphrasing a quote he attributed to French musician, composer and teacher Nadia Boulanger:

Al: Any time you hear something that you like—that's her quote—that knocks your socks off—that you learn it any way you can. Like, if you have to copy it down, or if you have to get the music, if you can't get the music, then find out a way of copying it down, and, not just knowing the name of it—you know, sometimes it's just hard knowing the name of it, but you want to find out what the changes are and exactly what's going on, man, and why . . . because anything that moves you that much, that's the least you could do.²⁰ That's kinda gettin' harder to do, you know. But that's sorta been my . . . that's what I do, man, you know.

Me: You hear something and then you try to figure it out.

Al: I've GOTTA figure it out! (Neese, 10/20/12)

A large part of Al's days spent in New York were dedicated to "figuring it out." This passionate pursuit of understanding is at the core of his artistic vision. To this end Al valued active listening, consistent practice, a high level of creativity, artistry and originality, and a desire to connect with the audience, the music and his fellow musicians.

His listening, transcribing, and practicing were centered on the tunes that mattered most to him—the songs that left an impression, or in his words, "knocked his socks off."

²⁰ An actual quote attributed to Boulanger on a similar subject is: "The essential conditions of everything you do must be choice, love, passion," although a second one attributed to her is also applicable to Al's life's work: "Do not take up music unless you would rather die than not do so." (brainyquotes.com)

And in New York in the 50s and 60s, new music was being created every day. He had the opportunity to hear, both live and on recordings, the most influential players of his generation at the height of their creativity. The tunes that seemed to have the biggest impact on him were those written by the most forward-thinking musicians of his time—Thelonious Monk, Charles Mingus, Ornette Coleman, Kenny Dorham, and Wayne Shorter, among others—and the music that moved him was often the most harmonically, rhythmically and stylistically complex. For Al, complex music contains an inherent depth not found in music that is simpler in nature. Again, the divide between dance music and hard bop music exists on one level because of the complexity of one and the lack of complexity of the other. Equating complexity with quality, though not universal among practicing musicians in any genre, is repeatedly demonstrated by Al's musical choices throughout his career.

Al speaks of the difficulty of finding musicians in Greensboro who are like-minded about his musical values, but even in New York not all the musicians were hip to play the new, complex music. In one 1954 session, Sonny Rollins' tune *Airegin* had just come out, and Al was working on it with pianist Al Haig and his trio. At one point the drummer asked "why are you guys playing such hard stuff?" Haig responded, saying "this is some of the new stuff." So Al (Haig) just sort of looked at me and winked, you know!" (Neese, 2/25/13). And of course, Al did know—he knew that this was the music he wanted to play the rest of his life. Attracted to the complexity of the hard bop style and the seemingly endless possibilities for improvisation presented by this music, he has sought to bring a fresh approach to this music even as he carries on its traditions.

Trying to figure out the hard tunes involved mastering the art of transcription, taught to him first by Jackie McLean. In the era of LPs, it was not easy to do transcription, which involves listening to small segments of music many times over. McLean taught Al to lay down on the floor sideways, one arm reaching across the turntable to pick the needle up, eye at disc level, and set it back two grooves in order to repeat the passage just heard, while the other arm, pencil in hand, works to write it down (Freundt, 5/28/13). At times, Al would take his work along with him:

What I used to do is that, when I would ride the subway, especially going to someplace like Coney Island, I used to just take a manuscript book and either copy down anything I had in my head, mainly just melodies and stuff, and then when I'd get back I just sit at the keyboard and see how close I had come to it.

And about the harmony, man, it just, it really drove me crazy . . . I could get most of it out of books, you know. But then it got harder and harder to find out . . . I didn't know what that "sus, flat-9," forget it, man! I'm just finding that out in the last 5 or 6 years, you know? (Neese, 10/20/12)

Remarkably, his pursuit of understanding has not waned since his early 20s—when he speaks here of “just finding out” now about some of the advanced harmonic relationships in the music he loves, he is talking about work that has been done since his 75th birthday!

This type of transcription requires deep, focused listening, another important value in the development of Al's artistic vision. While the roots of this kind of listening were evident in junior high school, certain situations in his New York career also contributed to the development of his listening skills. Al recants a story of another musician who inspired him to listen more deeply:

Al: Then another one was Jimmy Ford, was an alto player from Texas that I knew; Lenore Bigler is another trumpet player I know. I still talk to her—she's living out in Springfield, Missouri. She was a trumpet player, and Dizzy used to call her "Little Ham Hocks." She used to take her high heels and put them up on the bar and play a be-bop solo. She said, "You gotta hear this guy Jimmy Ford." And he played on the Maynard Ferguson band . . . I was with him one night, and we were out drinking and smoking . . . somebody put on a record and he went into this trance of listening that I'd never seen before. And I just want to say that influenced me . . . I never knew people listened like that.

Me: You almost have to be taught to listen like that.

Al: Yeah, right—it's just as serious as if you were auditioning for something. It's very serious—some serious listening, man.

Me: Did that change the way you listened?

Al: Oh, hell yeah, man. I mean a lot of times, you'd be talking too much, but it was almost like embarrassing to be around a bunch of people and someone would put on a record and all of a sudden you couldn't talk to them for another five minutes. You feel sort of like you might be acting funny, but you're not.

Me: No—when that's your language, you know?

Al: Serious! (Neese, 3/9/13)

Ever aware of the positive connections between listening and playing, he also was cautious about the potential negative effect. After listening to Dixieland trumpeter Bobby Hackett live in New York with his Greensboro High School classmate Bobby Rich, Al recalls the aftermath of the trip:

I remember when we got home he bought an album of Bobby Hackett playing trumpet, which I would never do. Even though I liked him, you know, it's like Red Nichols, I just never bought . . . actually, I was afraid to listen to too much of that kind of stuff—anything away from Dixieland—because I was afraid I'd start playing like that. I mean, you know, that was the worst thing that could happen to you, man. To me, the "sin" that could befall you is "in-between"—between like swing and bebop. There was a whole group of 'em, and they was tryin' to do—they didn't know what to do. Their minds were messed up. (Neese, 3/9/13)

The sin of being “in-between” refers to the issue that many swing-era improvisers had in the post-war world of be-bop, that of negatively dating one’s self by playing in the old style while bandmates were playing the new. Relatively few were able to adapt to the new musical landscape, and Al did not want to risk falling in that category by listening to players from the previous eras.

While he did not buy Bobby Hackett’s record after hearing him play live in the 1960s, he did buy the recording of a modern trumpet player he heard almost 50 years later. Just before our first interview in the fall of 2012 Al attended a performance by the young Oakland-born trumpet player Ambrose Akinmusire, and was inspired by his music. Toward the end of our meeting Al and I listened together to three cuts from Akinmusire’s recording *When the Heart Emerges Glistening* (Blue Note, 2011). As we listened Al closed his eyes, taking in the sounds without much comment until each song was over. Listening to this music together created a common experience through which we could more deeply relate to one another, and mimicked an experience that Al shared with countless musicians over countless records during his time in New York.

Though we had only recently met one another, there was an unspoken assumption that we had a similar grounding and experience, knew some of the same recordings and tunes, were both capable of understanding the historical references made by this young trumpeter, and that we would be able to converse with one another on that historical/stylistic basis. Monson uses the term *intermusicality* as a parallel to the literary term *intertextuality* to explain the tendency of jazz musicians to refer to another’s music, and for his fellow musicians as well as the audience to respond appropriately and with

understanding given its aural and cultural context (Monson, 127-129). When Al referred to Akinmusire's playing as "like Eric Dolphy on the trumpet" he implicitly believed I would know what he meant, and that I could catch the young player's musical references to a player of another generation and instrument. By describing his melodic inventiveness ("He doesn't play any phrases that you've ever heard. Not even two notes that you've ever heard together") Al acknowledged the value of originality as expressed by Akinmusire. In all of this Al demonstrated his sharp ear and mind identify with the most deeply challenging and complex music of yet another generation of jazz artists. Like the music of the hard bop era that caught Al's ear, this modern music appeals to Al's valuing of complexity as an important and meaningful characteristic.

Regarding originality, Al values this aspect of improvisation so highly that he is cautious about practicing too many prepared patterns and licks. Like many of his contemporaries, Al used a copy of Nicholas Slonimsky's *Thesaurus of Scales and Melodic Patterns* (1947) to learn new melodic ideas. But he was careful about their use and critical of those who applied them at the expense of traditional jazz vocabulary.

I played the *New Art*—it's an oboe book. And then I got the *Thesaurus*, the Slonimsky, and everyone was going through that. Of course, nothing was transposed. And then you got to the point that—what's the difference? What I did is just to learn . . . that's the difference between me and some guys, and I think maybe they do it too much. (What they do) is go ahead and learn the same phrase in every key, and just do it, you know, ad nauseum. I guess it's good to get it under your fingers, man, but it starts to come out like that after a while. You lose your individuality then, you know. So I'm afraid of that too.

You don't even try to learn these different scales – just practice them, play them, and then you'll be playing along one day and it'll jump out. That's the way it works. And that's the way it oughta work. You know, nowadays I hear too much of that—guys know the stuff—they know everything and they can play it in every

key, so they don't use it right . . . I wish I could do it . . . (It's the) younger generation, but they can't do "the licks." (Neese, 10/20/12, 2)

During one practice session Al remembers the feeling he experienced when he was able to play what he heard, where instinct overtook intellect:

Al: I remember like practicing one time, and I was doing like an A-7 to a D7 and I sorta jumped up like (sings a bebop lick) almost like *Hot House* (a Dizzy Gillespie tune, which he sings) —and you know, and being hesitant about that. And then I started playing my phrases like that. And to me it reminded me of these mountain climbers. And you know you get like "free," and you've got that one chance to go for that "free?" You miss it, you're dead. So that's the way—and I was thinking, "well, damn, that's what it is." Course, I'm not gonna be dead!

Me: I guess it takes a certain amount of confidence to play that way all the time.

Al (excited): Yeah! Right! (Neese, 10/20/12)

Another incident occurred on a night when he was hanging out, exploring with Freddie Redd. Al tells this story as an illustration of the improviser's desire to "connect" – to connect melodic notes and ideas together, to connect chord changes together and to connect with a listener.

Webster Young, Mal Waldron, Jackie McLean—they weren't the big boys—(they were) "junior high." (Speaking of Webster Young (trumpeter) who made an album entitled *For Lady* (Prestige 7106, 1975) dedicated to the music of Billie Holliday.) He connects those notes, man—I guess that's what I go for. Billie Holliday was a big influence on me. The way she would play like *Lover Man*, and connect these notes. (This immediately moves into another story, triggered by talking about Billie Holliday. This story involves going with Freddie Redd to a church one night with great acoustics. There was a black Shakespearean actor with them, a friend of Freddie's.) I had the Martin trumpet and this big mouthpiece, a Martin, and we played a ballad, and all of a sudden this guy (the actor) started crying. He said, "I should have known, I should have known!" And I looked at Freddie and Freddie was like, startled. It was a compliment to me, you

know. He just thought I was some white dude, you know. And Freddie was like, to himself “Known what? Hell, I know this guy, he’s not (that special).” But I know what he heard—he heard that Billie Holliday. I guess I crossed the line, man. I took it that’s what he meant, because I didn’t have the facility, so I had to (connect/express) in another way. (Neese, 3/9/13)

Part of the quest shared by many jazz musicians is the desire to connect with an audience and to aim higher than the audience’s expectations or demands. When Al chose to pursue hard bop jazz over commercial music, he knew full well that he was making an artistic decision with financial consequences. But the pay-off would come in those rare moments of artistic beauty.

You cannot play for the audience man, when you’re playing jazz. You’ve gotta play what you feel, man, of the moment. Duke Jordan told me that . . . I told you that story—we were playing on the East side of NY in front of a Mafioso crowd—they didn’t listen to anything, they talked through everything. Now here’s Duke Jordan, who had just played (piano) with Bird, and we’re playing—we played something one night, I think it was *So What* or something like that. Everything got real quiet in there, and Duke said, “See there, they don’t know what they heard, but they know they heard something, and they shut up.” He said, that’s what you play, and it’s true. (Neese, 3/9/13)

This moment, so meaningful to Al that he remembers it more than four decades later, echoes a similar story recounted by Berliner. Quoting trumpeter Lonnie Hillyer, as he recalled accompanying Miles Davis to a gig in Detroit:

At one point, people were dancing, and he (Miles) started to play a ballad. The people just stopped dancing and crowded all around him, listening to this cat play this ballad. You know? Miles STOPPED people from dancing, and I’ll never forget that as long as I live. That’s mood. And of course, Miles can also make people dance when he wants to. (Berliner, 256)

What initially might appear to be a contradiction—connecting with the audience by not trying to impress them—is actually a guiding feature of many styles of music. By emphasizing the personal, emotional, internal connectivity of the music, for example the connections between melody and harmony, the rhythmic connections between all of the members of the ensemble, or the connection between the intended mood of a piece as imagined by the composer and the demonstrated understanding of that mood by the performers, the audience will instinctively respond in an empathetic and positive manner. In contrast, the player who intentionally tries to impress the audience or engage them emotionally by gratuitous displays of technique or exaggerated emotional displays often falls flat, alienating the very audience they are trying to engage.

Sometimes Al even received encouragement from some of the greats who went before him, as in this incident he described at a Harlem jam session:

Then there was a place called Brankers – on the street that runs from upper Manhattan up into the Bronx. That’s the place where you stayed up on sort of a stage, and the people were down below. And that’s where I was playing one night and (a) guy (clapped and) patted me on the leg. Oh I know what I did, I played a solo, and I got through, and there was one hand (clap, clap) and it was Ben Webster. You know the guys used to put him down because he was older, but that’s who it was. And he patted me on the ankle. And I looked down and he said, “You hear that hand boy?” And I said, “Yeah, thanks!” He said, “Tomorrow morning, when you wake up, you’ll remember that hand, and you’ll get up and you’ll start practicing.” And he was right! And that’s what I found out about these guys—they were like sages; they had this great wisdom about them. (Neese, 4/26/13)

Al had connected with someone who understood and appreciated what he was doing.

Webster, one of the great tenor saxophonists from the swing era, was moved by what he heard, and he took the time to encourage a young musician who was working on his

playing. As part of the jazz community in New York, there were other unexpected interactions with well-known artists:

Al: I was living at the Arlington hotel, that's where Miles was living, and Chet Baker. Miles was at (recording) the *Walkin'* album at Birdland. He was right around the corner, through the window. Horace Silver was living in 608 and I was living in 508. That's when he (Horace Silver) wrote (the tune) *Room 608* (1954). He used to come downstairs and listen to me practice. I'd be in the closet with my cup mute, because I was bothering people. I remember there was knock at the door and he said "I heard you practicing." I said, "Yeah" (to me—'Arban's book'—the trumpet technique book), I said, "Man, I ain't doing anything." He said, "Well, there's nothing on TV" (to me—'and at that time there wasn't but one channel') and he said, "Man, I'd rather listen to you practice." So he'd sit in there and listen to me practice!"

Me: You were playing classical things, Arban, warm-ups?

Al: Yeah, da ba du de ba du da (sings major arpeggio up and down, swinging). So he got me to open up one time.

Me: Take the mute out?

Al: Yeah, and Miles answered me. I never heard such a sound in my life, really. (Sings a high note, sliding down to a lower one.) It was a peal of notes, like a huge bell rung. Years later I met his girlfriend, and she was in there with him. And as soon as he did that, I quit playing, you know, and he told her "Damn, I was afraid he was gonna do that. He thought I was puttin' him down."

Me: He just wanted to have a conversation!

Al: Yeah, and he said, "It inspired me to play." And that's the way all those guys were. (Neese, 10/20/12)

For Al, the former English major/music minor, drawn to the rhythms of Africa since reading about them in Blesh's *Shining Trumpets*, the following passage he recited

from memory to me from *Out of Africa* (1937), provides insight into the complexities of the man.²¹

If I know a song of Africa,—I thought,—of the giraffe, and the African new moon lying on her back, of the ploughs in the fields, and the sweaty faces of the coffee-pickers, does Africa know a song of me? Would the air over the plain quiver with a colour that I had had on, or the children invent a game in which my name was, or the full moon throw a shadow over the gravel of the drive that was like me, or would the eagles of Ngong look out for me? (Dinesen, 75)

Throughout our conversations, listening sessions and rehearsals the theme of African rhythm was woven into our discussions. Whether reading about polyrhythms, listening to recordings of African musicians, adding his African percussion instruments to his recordings, trying to incorporate the rhythmic impulses of Africa in his compositions, or playing his mbira on his front porch as he was the last time I dropped by for a chat, thoughts of African rhythms are never far from Al's mind.

He tried to include polyrhythms in his own compositions, such as *A Tale of Two Lovers*—eventually simplifying his rhythmic conception of this tune because, in his words, it “became too busy.” Though frustrated by the inability to execute his concept, the effect it had on him was still quite profound, and he thought it could be explored more by the jazz musicians of his generation:

That (rhythmic aspect of jazz) has never been stressed enough. You know, Art Blakey, I heard, went to Africa and you know, just soaked up some of those polyrhythms. (Neese, 2/25/13)

²¹ Al explicitly requested that this quote be included in the paper, due to the meaning it holds for him.

Of course, many jazz musicians and scholars throughout the history of the music have explored the African influence and content of jazz. Al's sense of its under-utilization may be more a reflection of his own desire to understand and incorporate these elements more than he has been able to.

Both Al and Shirley recalled, with great enthusiasm, the experience they had at the 1964-65 World's Fair held at Flushing Meadows Park, in Queens, New York. They and Dannie Richmond spent hours together watching the African drummers and dancers perform. Al describes this experience on at least two levels—the analytical and the historical. On the analytical level he marveled at the hundred-pound drums, the complex texture and the communication, where one person could signal and the whole group shifted rhythm and meter. The underlying rhythm was related to the Dahomean rhythms he had written about in his youth:

Everything was on that 6/8 (sings Dug-a-da, Dug-a-da) —that was just the whole basis of it; And then the other stuff was just symphonic kinds of things. (Neese, 3/9/13)

On the historical level, Al could somehow sense the cultural depth and reach of the oral tradition as he described how this group had not just been preparing for these specific performances, but that these performances represented “thousands of years of rehearsing.”

This last statement again references the communal aspect of jazz as well as Al's own personal valuing of community. Without using the phrase “oral tradition” he has a sense of what its impact is on the music of Africa and how that has had an impact on jazz.

And he has lived out the oral tradition as part of the New York and Greensboro jazz communities. As one who was educated in the jazz language outside of the academic environment he has participated in and benefitted from the many years of rehearsing that are represented in a jazz performance.

Our last shared listening experience involved listening to South African trumpet player, vocalist and bandleader Hugh Masekela's recording of *Coal Train*. This powerful song, part political statement, part historical ballad, part tone poem, uses mainly Western instruments, melody and harmony, but it still somehow represents something uniquely African in a modern musical context through its use of rhythm and tone color. The following is an excerpt from our conversation after listening silently to the ten-minute song:

Me: What do you like about that?

Al: The African thing.

Me: As much as I know about jazz, I really don't know anything about that.

Al: Yeah, well that's where it comes from—it's some deep, deep, deep stuff.
(Neese, 4/26/13)

While Al's knowledge of African music is not extensive, he does respond emotionally to the African components of American jazz. And he has tried where possible to present his interpretation and understanding of African sounds and rhythms in his own music. Where this empathy for jazz's African elements ranks in order of importance when discussed alongside the other key components in this chapter—relationship, listening, practicing, artistry, originality—it is difficult to

say. What is clear is that all of these influences, together with the relationships discussed in the previous chapter shaped Al in particular ways. And his recounting of the many stories associated with these values gives the modern student of jazz particular insights into the culture of hard bop jazz musicians.

Through his story telling Al gives the impression that most of the New York musicians he hung around with, regardless of their stature or their position in the jazz hierarchy were approachable and were genuinely interested in helping other musicians to learn their craft. This feeling is echoed by musician after musician in Berliner's research, which was among the first to catalogue the complex musical, social and cultural environment that is the jazz scene. Despite the fact that musicians were competing with one another for limited professional opportunities, the reality is that during the emergence of bebop and hard bop, most musicians in a given community were eager to teach and learn from one another. And while sharing musical knowledge was important, as essential to students as technical information and counsel is the understanding of jazz acquired directly through performance (Berliner, 41).

Many jazz musicians recall fondly the musicians who mentored and educated them, encouraged and rebuked them. Trumpeter Tommy Turrentine's fondest memories of the mid-forties concern Small's Paradise club in Harlem. Describing the excitement of an environment where the leading jazz musicians of the day played together, challenged one another and learned from one another Turrentine says, "That was Paradise University. You would hear so much good music each night that when you went to lay down, your head would be swimming!" (Berliner, 43)

For Al, the situation in New York could not have been better for his musical development during his time there. Whether hanging out in his pad with Charlie Parker, walking the streets of New York with Jackie McLean, getting composition lessons with Hal Overton, or sitting in at jam sessions all over New York, Al's jazz education was ongoing. The New York scene fed his passion for learning that accompanied him from his days in North Carolina as a child and young adult. That same desire that led him to seek out piano and music theory lessons while in high school, led him to find like-minded musicians in New York who shared that same singular pursuit. Despite a lack of formal education, Al not only learned the musical language fluently, but as will be discussed in subsequent chapters, he has gone on to teach it to another generation of musicians. Pianist Walter Bishop, Jr., speaking to Berliner sums up his education in this way: "I tell people, I was a high school dropout, but I graduated from Art Blakey College of Music, the Miles Davis Conservatory of Music and Charlie Parker University" (Berliner, 36). Based on his experience, Al's diplomas might have been earned from Dannie Richmond State University, Freddie Redd College and the Jackie McLean School of Graduate Studies.

CHAPTER VII

THE TURNING POINT

Despite Al's tireless approach to transcribing and practicing, hanging out with the best players, and pursuing the heart and soul of jazz, the reality of the jazz scene in New York was that he could not break through into the upper tier of jazz trumpet players. With the decline of playing opportunities in the 1960s and 70s and the numbers of world class trumpeters on the scene—musicians like Clifford Brown, Lee Morgan, Blue Mitchell, Donald Byrd, and Nat Adderly, among others—the challenges to making a career in New York were even greater after 20 years in New York than they were when he first arrived. With opportunities to play in New York declining, Al was beginning to sense that his place might be elsewhere. One opportunity he did have was a chance to go to the west coast with Charles Mingus, at the invitation of Vass and Richmond, both regular members of Mingus' band. But he declined their offer, saying "I just knew I wasn't ready. Thank God I didn't (go)" (Neese, 10/20/12). Al believed he wasn't in shape to go, and stories of Mingus's poor treatment of his pianist Freddie Redd concerned him.

Al's sense of his place in the New York hierarchy comes through in small comments and stories, as he tells of experiences where he became aware of his own limitations. He speaks honestly of these limitations as he tells his story, as in this example of his time as a member of Freddie Redd's quintet (see Figure 11). Redd once had Al dictate one of his compositions, *The Thespian*, which Al recalled:

I didn't even know what it sounded like until about a year later when I heard it, and I was flabbergasted. I could have never played it. I wasn't ready. You see, I knew all of these guys, but I wasn't ready to jump up there. I mean. I went to a lot of those recording things with my horn, but they just didn't have enough nerve to let me play, you know, because I just wasn't ready. (Neese, 10/20/12?)



Figure 11. Al with Freddie Redd Quintet, Provincetown, MA, 1965. Left to right are Caro Scott, Cliff Jarvis, Al, Ron Brooks, Freddie Redd.

Another example of Al's awareness of his position in the hierarchy came as his time to leave New York approached:

I remember going someplace, this must have been the early seventies. I've known Freddie Hubbard ever since he got to New York, cause I was playing uptown at Count Basie's. Every week they had a jam session up there, so you'd go up there and play. And new guys would come, and I remember Freddie Hubbard came. And then I'd go down to Birdland, and Freddie Hubbard would be there with Donald Byrd, and I remember Lee Morgan came in, and they were all sitting back listening to Lee. So somebody told Dannie Richmond—oh, this was a friend of mine who was our drug dealer, he was from Greensboro—he was sayin' "How's Al doing?" He didn't know (that Al was going to be leaving New York). And Dannie just said, "Oh man, he ain't even in the runnin'." (laughs) It was true. You

know, it was true. It was hard to take, but it was true. I mean, I'm in the running now because there ain't nobody left! But now I know what he's talking about. (Neese, 10/20/12)

In the Fall of 1974, with Shirley pregnant and the prospects of a career in New York dimming, Al and Shirley made the difficult decision to return to Greensboro. While loading up a U-Haul truck after a jam session with pianist Hod O'Brian and trombonist Matthew Gee his colleagues broached the subject of his imminent return home:

(Gee) heard that I was going home. He was like, "You can't go home again"—you know the Thomas Wolfe thing—He said, "Damn, you going home to the Carolinas?" I said, "yeah." He said, "I don't know, man, I ain't got that much nerve to go back to Texas." And I said, well, I just sorta gotta go. I ain't doing anything here and if I stay here I'm just gonna . . . (trails off, chasing another thought). (Neese, 10/20/12)

Al and Shirley's U-Haul sat packed up and sitting right outside Eugene Smith's lofts for seven days. He was supposed to give it back the next day in North Carolina, but "I just couldn't leave, man, it was hard to leave." Oliver Boehner, who had helped Al load his truck said, "Man, you gotta get outa here Al, they're gonna haul that truck away, man." Shirley adds, "It was so big they couldn't do it. It was right out there on 6th avenue and 28th" (Neese, 3/9/13).

Telling of his eventual move from New York back to Greensboro, the ambivalence Al felt then still comes to the surface. On the one hand was his desire to continue in the pursuit of his artistic dreams and continue the strong friendships he had established in the New York jazz community. On the other hand was the imminent birth of his son and the desire to raise him in a more tranquil environment. Staying in New

York meant supporting a family of three on his musician's income—an unlikely prospect even in the best of times. Going home meant support from family and a certain measure of security.

And still, that U-Haul sat on 6th Avenue for a week, symbolizing the tension he must have felt—packed up to go home, but not wanting to leave, knowing he tried, but perhaps wondering if he did everything he could to make it in New York, thankful for the strong musical relationships he fostered, but not wanting to leave them behind. For a week he teetered, unable to let go of the dreams that caused him to leave home in the first place to pursue his artistic passion. When asked about this ambivalence, Al admitted “I was scared to leave—I knew what I was going back to” (Neese, 6/3/13). He anticipated the culture shock of moving back to North Carolina after living so long in New York. But, in hindsight he called the move back home “a blessing in disguise.”

Looking back on this chapter of Al's life, listening to him reflect on all of the stories of friendships made, music learned and gigs played, I have wondered why he didn't make it to the upper level of hard bop jazz trumpeters. He did all the hard work that those who made it did, hung out with the same people, played at the same jam sessions, and yet was not quite able to consistently perform at a level that made people sit up and take notice. When I asked him why he felt this was the case, he answered that he felt like he could “never catch up” with the guys who had gotten a stronger start earlier in their lives. As an example he cites a famous story of Jackie McLean's first big break, at age 19. McLean's biographer Derek Ansell recounts the event:

Earlier that day young Jackie had arrived home to find his mother in a state of excitement, telling him that although she didn't think he was going to believe it, Charlie Parker had been on the phone. The young man had eagerly demanded to know what the message from Bird was. Parker had asked that Jackie should wear a blue suit, go down to Chateau Gardens and play for him until he arrived, later in the evening. (Ansell, 1)

Summarizing the differences between his experience and Jackie's he says, "Jackie's mother was excited that Parker had called her. When I was fifty years old my parents still didn't know who Charlie Parker was" (Neese, 6/3/13).

Another obstacle to Al's success in New York was his struggles with the theoretical side of improvisation, especially advanced harmonic concepts and the corresponding challenges of matching scales to chords. He was on the scene during what could be best described as an explosion of harmonic complexity. Without the theoretical background to be able to process the complexities of hard bop fluidly, or perhaps the quick intuition to match aural imagination to execution, Al was at a distinct disadvantage to his peers. He overcame these challenges by practicing extremely hard, not giving up on a tune until he had mastered it and by seeking the help of those more advanced than he in their harmonic understanding. The tunes that once perplexed him are now easy for him, but at the time he was in New York there were many players who could play the more complex tunes and execute them more quickly and fluidly.

Regarding his tonal concept, compared to other trumpet players of his generation, Al lacks both the power and the range of the leading virtuosos. Not all hard bop trumpet players played with a bold, brassy sound (a notable exception is Miles Davis), but trumpeters like Clifford Brown, Dizzy Gillespie, Blue Mitchell, Lee Morgan all played

with big sounds and excellent range. Al's posture then and now is rather inward-looking, with his chin down toward his chest and his shoulders forward, rather than a posture where his head is up, shoulders back and chest full. He frequently plays Flugelhorn or trumpet with a Harmon mute on his gigs and recordings. Both of these options require less power than an unmuted trumpet, and place more emphasis on a light, colorful tone. Breathing limitations that are a residual effect of childhood asthma are almost certainly a contributing factor.²² Again, Al's tone is not a liability, per se, but when compared to the physical strength and stamina of many of the leading trumpeters of his day, his more compact sound may have been a factor in the caliber of gigs he was called to do.

Finally, Al admits to not having the quickest technical facility. This could simply be a physical limitation, or a technical inefficiency, or the technical facility could be directly linked to his limitations in the harmonic/melodic processes of improvisation. Al primarily attributes his lack of facility to not playing enough gigs during his time in New York. Despite the practice and jam sessions, players of Al's caliber need the nightly challenge of playing on the bandstand to continually hone their craft. In the changing jazz scene of the 1960s and 70s, none of his friends were working, and there were very few places where anyone was playing live jazz. Many of the jazz clubs had closed, and even the jam sessions had dried up. Al attributes the decline of the New York jazz scene to the rise of rock music (Neese, 6/3/13), though sociologists and historians might differ considerably in their view of the cause of this decline. One contributing factor is undoubtedly the ever-increasing abstraction and fracturing of jazz music by the very

²² Al keeps an inhaler nearby for his asthma, and takes oxygen at home, making it more remarkable that he still practices daily.

musicians creating the music, consequently shrinking the audience and limiting the venues in which it could be played. Whatever the cause, the lack of playing opportunities had both an economic and technical impact on many of the jazz musicians of the day.

Jackie McLean, speaking after he had begun teaching at the University of Hartford summarized the concerns of many of his colleagues, whether well-known or unknown, when he said, “I have been through several levels of the music business. I came out and went through the fifties, and made whatever name I have, and in the sixties, and it’s just the same thing out there now, man. You’re just either playin’ or you’re not playin’ and when you’re not playin’ then you gotta worry about how you’re gonna pay your bills, and a lot of things, and I don’t want to go through that anymore, man.” (Levis, 1979)

During this time period, some jazz musicians found refuge in Europe and Japan, where there was considerably more work due to a music scene there that embraced the ever-increasing avant-garde jazz. McLean and others found some measure of financial security in college teaching, as universities and schools of music were now opening their doors to jazz music. Some schools actively sought out musicians like McLean who could teach with the authority of one who had experienced the jazz life.

With none of these options open to him and a child on the way, Al and Shirley eventually did get in that U-Haul truck and leave for Greensboro in the fall of 1974. Upon their return they lived in the home which was formerly Shirley’s grandmother’s, on Howard Street in the Lindley Park neighborhood. On January 29, 1975 Mark August, their son, and only child, was born. Back in North Carolina, with Shirley a new mother

and Al not working much in the jazz scene, Al and his family felt the expected pinch of financial pressure. To alleviate the burden until he began gigging again, Al worked a series of day jobs around Greensboro. He describes three of them:

I worked at One Price Tire for two or three years. I used to say it was tiresome! (I worked) with Charlie Strong—a musical genius. And I told him about Coltrane—he'd never heard of Coltrane, so I brought in my record player and all my records, and that's all we did, man, was listen to Coltrane. He was just crazy over Coltrane.

And his wife was the maintenance head at Cone hospital . . . so then I got a job painting houses with her. And I remember one morning (out painting houses) and that was the morning that Dannie Richmond was flying to New York, he was going overseas. And I remember I was out there and watched the plane fly over—boy that hurt.

Then my daddy got me a job at McLeod Leather and Belting. Somebody bought it—Jack Bales bought the place. He's the guy that bought the Old Mill (in Oak Ridge). My daddy knew a lot of people that had big ideas, and it worked for them, but for my daddy it didn't. (Neese, 4/26/13)

After these manual labor jobs, Al says, “Then I started working (in music) – of course Shirley was working too.” Shirley later worked as a secretary in J. P. Stevens administrative offices, the property owner Hidden Lakes, Diversified Employment, and she also worked for Al's father. Additional monetary surprises were a helpful supplement:

I think we had some money—yeah, Shirley's mother owned the (land bought by K-Mart that used to be out there on Pisgah Church and West Market . . . and they leased the land for a hundred years. When they sold, the lease was still good, so hell, we were in New York and we got a check for 36 grand. Course we owed everything, you know. But you know, they'd split it up among the family. I mean, I had no idea, man. So we lived off stuff like that. (Neese, 4/26/13)

Finding musicians to play with and places to play, Al began working more regularly, most notably at first with vocalists Frankie Alexander of Durham, NC, and Melva Houston, of Winston-Salem, NC, who included him on increasing numbers of gigs (see Figure 12 for a photo of Al performing in Durham, NC). He says that playing in the unusual keys that singers often sing in actually improved his playing, forcing him to expand his technical abilities. Explaining what he referred to as “Australian music,” (everything was upside down, in the wrong key) he says, “Once I played in those crazy keys, I really learned how to play” (Neese, 6/3/13).



Figure 12. With Al Doctor, Pete Crawford at Carolina Theater, Durham, NC, 1975.

Before leaving New York Al got some Greensboro contacts from Dannie Richmond:

You know, Dannie Richmond told me about Jimmy Davis and all the guys around here (in Greensboro), you know, Foots Harrison, Melvin Smith and all these people playing these Horace Silver tunes. And Dannie says, “You going home this summer? You better brush up on your tunes.” He said, “man, cause the first thing their gonna do is like pull off like *Nica’s Dream* or *Straight Street*,” and sure enough, that’s what they did. And everybody was like, “Yeah, he’s from New York.” But you know, that’s how you do it, man, it’s like you got to keep up with this stuff or you’ll be embarrassed. You just got to be open to that stuff, and your ego, you just got to get that out of the way. You know, that ain’t got nothing to do with it. (Neese, 10/20/12)

He began playing regularly with Harrison, Smith, Davis, Bus Brown and Baltimore native Yusuf Salim (born Joseph Blair), in North Carolina and around the southeast (see Figure 13 for a photo of Al and Yusif Salim).²³ Soon he was working more in North Carolina than he ever had in New York, and as a result, he was also playing better than he ever had. His confidence grew as he began to rely on his New York education.

Al would do anything to play, even drive from Greensboro to Durham to pick up Brother Yusuf, bring him back to Greensboro for a gig—then reverse the process when the gig was over!

So I bought a car . . . that’s when I started going down to, with Brother Yusuf and them, and we’d go into Baltimore and Washington, D.C., you know—we went to Baltimore a bunch of times. And Gary Bartz’s uncle owned the place up there—believe it or not, the only jazz place in Baltimore. It’s amazing man, it is the home of Fats Waller and all those, you know, where Yusuf was from. So you know, with Yusuf we used to make like a hundred dollars a day, man. We used to go down to the Triangle and do two or three jobs. Course, I had to buy a piano, had to buy a car, had to buy a sound system, and Al Doctor used to get mad as hell at us (because he wasn’t working as much). I had \$500 in a sound system. I told Al, that’s why I was working. (Neese, 4/26/13)

²³ Besides this group of musicians, when they were in town Al would regularly arrange sessions with other prominent Greensboro jazz musicians such as Tal Farlow (renowned guitarist), Clyde Phipps (vibraphone), Irwin Stokes (trumpeter with the Mercer and Duke Ellington Orchestras), and Dannie Richmond (drummer with Charles Mingus’ band). Al’s parents gladly opened the doors of their Starmount Dr. house for jam sessions and rehearsals.



Figure 13. Al and Yusif Salim.

Al's desire throughout his career has been to play the music that has meant the most to him, learn it well, and present it at the highest level possible. In New York in the 1950s and early 60s there was an audience for the challenging music of the hard bop era, but Greensboro audiences did not have the same appreciation for the style as New York audiences did. Al recalls gigs at the old Bur-Mil club in Greensboro, where he and his band were playing all of the latest hard bop tunes, rather than the familiar music from the jazz and popular music repertoire. The risk Al and his fellow musicians took playing these tunes over tried-and-true jazz and popular standards was the lack of a return engagement. But as Al showed from his early gigs as a student in Chapel Hill, scoffing at the limited solo opportunities ("7 Bars – thanks a lot!") and in New York, spurning the sure pay of the Lester Lanin band for the economic uncertainties of the jazz clubs, Al was willing to give up security to pursue his music passionately.

As he began playing around North Carolina, audiences and musicians alike noticed his single-minded approach to jazz, the passion with which he played the music of his New York years. Still seeking, Al met others who were also seeking. Some were peers with similar musical backgrounds and experiences, others were young musicians with dreams of their own. Where he was once the young musician playing sessions, trying to learn as much as possible from the veterans, he was now the veteran. Back in Greensboro, Al was now the big fish in a much smaller pond. Armed with those degrees from the University of the Street, he could speak with authority and authenticity on the music that younger players only encountered on recordings or in the classroom. Having lived the jazz life for over 25 years, he gained the respect of jazz musicians around the state, who now sought him out to play on their recordings, asked to hang out with him and learn from him. While others like Jackie McLean and Donald Byrd successfully made the leap to academic teaching²⁴, Al taught jazz the way he learned it—informally in jam sessions, listening sessions and recording sessions, to musicians who sought him out as mentor. This influence will be explored in chapter ten. Initially reticent to move back home, he now calls it a blessing in disguise, as the frequency of his work picked up, and he began playing more regularly in front of an audience.

²⁴ Jackie McLean taught at the University of Hartford from 1968 until 2004, beginning as a drug counselor, founding an African-American studies program and then eventually their jazz studies program. Donald Byrd taught at Howard University, North Carolina Central University, Rutgers University, Cornell University, the University of Delaware and Delaware State University.

CHAPTER VIII

THE AL NEESE JAZZ PROJECT

At the time of this writing Al Neese is 81 years old. As he commented in our first interview together, referring to his generation of jazz musicians, “I’m in the running now because there ain’t nobody left!” From the perspective of many local musicians around the state of North Carolina, Al has been in the running around here for a long time. His playing is still remarkably fresh, his lines fluid and his musical mind as sharp as a man half his age.

For the past 10 years, one of his principal musical outlets is the music of the Al Neese Jazz Project. With friends and local musicians Scott Adair (tenor saxophone), Turner Battle (piano), Jud Franklin (guitar), Charles Gambetta (bass) and Jay McCracken (drums), Al still meets every Tuesday night for a rehearsal, plays once per month at a local club and performs occasional concerts and gigs around the region (for a photo of the Al Neese Jazz Project, see Figure 14). The music they play is the music of Al’s life, all meaningful to him, still challenging and vital. Many of the musical charts are written out in his own hand, transcribed decades ago when he was still learning his craft in New York. Some are his original compositions and others have been sent to him by friends over the years.

Having observed and sat in on his rehearsals and performances, I am continually struck by the depth of understanding with which he approaches this music. Al is as fluent

in his knowledge of the tunes and chord changes in this realm of hard bop as other jazz musicians are in the realm of popular and jazz standards. He corrects the band when necessary, usually in questions of form and rhythmic interpretation. In leading his group of peers he is respectful but holds fast to his vision for each tune.



Figure 14. The Al Neese Jazz Project, May 28, 2013.

The purpose of this chapter is twofold—first to introduce the reader to the work of the Al Neese Jazz Project, and second, through the extended interview format, to present a less-edited version of my dialogue with Al than has been presented to this point in the paper. This is done in order to convey not just Al’s communication style, but his way of thinking and processing the free flow of ideas we discussed in our interviews. For example, during one of our phone conversations, when I called Al to ask him the name of a few composers to match up with titles of tunes I had from his book, almost every song

title I gave him led to a discussion of the merits of that tune, the album it was recorded on, and all the players on that session. Stories about some of the players or sung versions of the interesting twists and turns of the tune were all ways of adding to the answers I was looking for, and demonstrated to me again the encyclopedic knowledge Al has of the recordings, players, harmonic and structural language and history of the music. In our conversations it was as though the mere mention of a song title opened the floodgates of experiences, relationships and musical knowledge in a way that was difficult to guide in a single direction.

In the long interview excerpt that follows I have tried to keep as much of the spirit of the original conversation as possible in the transcribed dialogue, using parenthetical commentary to clarify allusions and inferences. I include this lengthy excerpt in order to give the reader a sense of the type of dialogue contained in our long conversations. Contained in the excerpt are examples of Al's work ethic, his passion about the music of his contemporaries and his familiarity with a range of musical styles. This session began with a question about the type of music that appealed to him and its inclusion in the repertoire of the Al Neese Jazz Project:

Al: What I'm trying to do is to keep up with it. At first, when we were rehearsing in my loft (in NY), and Jimmy Vass was up there . . . he was sort of like a freedom rider—he was branching out into that new music. I was trying to play . . . (Mentions the music of Messaien) . . . trying to figure out everything, sometimes got very frustrating.

Me: Were you searching for a particular sound?

Al: I wanted to know what they (his contemporaries) were doing. (He speaks about the song *Plight*, by Charles Tolliver, which he calls “a masterpiece”) and I know Jackie (McLean) was doing the same thing. Then John

Ellis came out with this tune called *Isetan*. (Starts singing it and reciting the chord changes.) (Tom Harrell's) *Eons*—I'm afraid to bring that one in because it took me a year and half to even sing the thing. . . . And then you listen to that James Williams playing the piano—he was on there. And he'll just stick on one change and he makes it work. And I want to know how he does that. And you can't do it by just analyzing it, you gotta play it.

(Mentions Myrtle Beach, SC trumpet player Dan Ramsey's tune *Ode to Melissa*—describes complex, fast changes.) Now here's a friend of mine that I never thought could play anything but beach music. And all of a sudden . . . you know, he knows all these people. I think he's got a master's in music. And some of the guys (in his band), didn't want to play it, man. (They said) "I hate that tune, man!" It's because the first thing is like, you just hit that sus chord with a flat-9, and you do like 16 bars. Then you say, "Hell, that's what those guys have been doing for years, man." And we can't do it because nobody wants to do it. You know what I mean? How do you call yourself a musician, man, if you can't keep up with this stuff, you know what I mean? It's just crazy to me.

So now, like 2 years later we play that stuff, I sit down at the keyboard, man I don't have any trouble with it. But I still have trouble playing some of these things (on the trumpet).

Me: But you continue to process it and practice it, think about it and sing it.

Al: Oh yeah, yeah. I continue to do the "Boulangier" thing—every time I hear that I like man, it might be old, but I have to, you know . . . It's getting harder and harder to find something. I watched the Oscars, and I think they played one tune I liked. There's nothing that knocks your socks off.

Me: Can you put it into words, the tunes that do mean something to you? Is it a harmonic thing, a melodic thing, a combination?

Al: Yeah, it's almost like, Gambetta talks about Hindemith—I bought his book—his theory, Octave, fifth, then after you get through with that, man, then what? Stravinsky I always loved, but what really turned me around was reading how Stravinsky wasn't a great influence on music because he was so individual. He wasn't like Schoenberg or anybody like that. I don't really get it out of those guys (the serialists)—it's too formula-ized or something. You know, when I was in school, with the Bach thing (part-writing), if you wrote any parallel 5ths or octaves, they wouldn't accept your composition. Man, that's crazy. To me, that's alright for a while, but I mean. I was about to be ready to fail out of music school and go to Korea.

That's what I'm trying to do—to keep up. In classical music, they've been doing it for years.

Me: That's what I find interesting when we talk is that you have a knowledge of the classical world, and those sounds. You seem to gravitate in your jazz tunes to tunes that have that kind of classical sensibility.

Al: Oh yeah. Like in *The Hawk* (Alan's composition), I got that line out of *Melody in a Mist* from Bartok. And I just used his clusters. I can remember Mingus talking about clusters. If I hadn't have known Mingus I never would have played that (tune) *Orange (Was the Color of Her Dress*, that Al has transcribed and is now in his book). I would have been like some of these other guys around here—I won't mention no names! (alluding to our earlier conversation about guys that don't want to play unusual tunes).

Me: So you did find guys like Mingus, and Wayne Shorter, Tom Harrell, that were writing tunes with that kind of depth.

Al: Woody Shaw was another one. (Starts talking about a Woody Shaw tune where he had to buy the book to learn the blowing changes. He then talks about chord substitutions to get a certain effect.) Of course he's playing in fourths all the time, which I haven't really got the facility to do that.

It's almost like you just got to be born in a different era. You can hear guys, they just pick up their horn, and they'll be playing those like Tom Harrell phrases, and you actually know about when they were born. Because, you know, it's like a piece of cake for them.

(Talks about a guy in Durham who told him) “Man, I hear in your playing something else besides these be-bop licks. You could take it on out.” Yeah, I sort of figured I could too, I just didn't know how to get there. So that's what I'm still trying to do.

Me: So when you hear a tune for the first time that you like, what's your process?

Al: Well, I try to get it down on tape or something. I just sit down and copy it down. Mark (his son) showed how to—I can stop the thing and loop it (in order to transcribe it).²⁵

But that's what I do is, like find out who these guys are. And then some of them, knowing that my breath control is (not there), it's not possible (to play the tunes or solos), but I can still be inspired by them.

²⁵ Al's son Mark has shown Al how to use the computer to loop a digital sound file for easier transcription.

Me: So in your book, some of the songs you did buy the sheet music to, but the bulk of the tunes are in your handwriting.

Al: Yeah, I copy it off (transcribe it). That's actually how I got this degenerate neck, from leaning over (a table, writing out music)—I almost killed myself on that Greg Osby thing. (Comments on Osby's version of Duke Ellington's *East St. Louis Toodle-oo*). (Describing Osby's improvising he says) Then all of a sudden Greg Osby comes in and starts playing this disjointed—it's like when you used to play on a flat-5 and you end on the flat-5 or the 13th? But everything is like that! Everything you (play) is like that! Everything is bad! (Adds more about the form of the tune and its chord changes). It's incredible, man, I just had to get it down, man. It took me about six months. And my neck was, uh, I had two bad discs, my finger was paralyzed . . .

Me: But you got it down!

A: I got it down, man! And me and Scott got so we could play it. And every time we play it, and do it right . . .

This excerpt from our fourth interview is representative of the conversations Al and I have had over the past six months. The spiraling nature of his communication recalls the non-linear nature of improvisation—one idea leads to another, and then a possibly unrelated third idea, which may or may not get tied back to the original thought during the course of the interview. But those incomplete thoughts often return later, in a phone conversation or a chat before a rehearsal, as if Al could not let go of the idea until he eventually resolved it. Like Al's trumpet playing, his conversation is intertextual, transcending both time and space, referring to previous conversations and known sources of jazz history and culture, in the ongoing dialogue that has characterized our relationship. He is as content in conversation to follow wherever his ideas lead him as he is in his improvising. Regardless of the less-than-linear nature of our dialogue, the end

result is similar to one of his solos—deep, thoughtful, humorous, musical—a story told in the proper context and dialect of the ongoing conversation.

The music of the Al Neese Jazz Project—over 100 tunes—is an eclectic collection of some of the most interesting and challenging tunes of the hard bop language.²⁶ Many of the composers represented are musicians that Al knew personally, such as Charles Mingus, Freddie Redd, Horace Silver, Charles Tolliver and many others. In rehearsals with his group, Al is part bandleader part historian and teacher. The rehearsals are lively and challenging, and the musicians with whom he plays approach the music with the same integrity and artistry as their leader. This labor of love—no one gets paid for rehearsals and the pay for the regular first-Sunday-of-the-month gig is tips only (\$2 a man last month)—has gone on for ten years, and it is safe to say that through the Jazz Project, the music has indeed been passed on to the next generation.

²⁶ See Appendix A for an alphabetized list of the music played by this ensemble.

CHAPTER IX

THE OMEN SEEKER

Al made one recording as a leader, and appeared on at least seven others as a sideman (see Discography in Appendix B). His recording as leader, *The Omen Seeker* (1995) came about as a result of a North Carolina Arts Council grant. According to the NC Arts Council website, fellowships are awards of merit to individual artists to recognize excellence, as evidenced in a recent body of work. These unrestricted \$10,000 grants are intended to allow artists to continue developing their work by providing them with the time, equipment, or other support necessary to practice their art.²⁷ Implicit in the award is recognition of significant contributions to the furthering of original music in the state of North Carolina.

As with most things in Al's career, the receiving of this award came with a story. In the early 1980s, at the encouragement of a staff member at the North Carolina Arts Council, he submitted an application, complete with references and recordings of several original compositions. Applying regularly over the ensuing decade, he was regularly turned down in favor of other North Carolina jazz musicians, many of whom he played with and encouraged to apply for the same grant. Finally, in 1995, Al was awarded the

²⁷ The full guidelines and application for the award are available on the N.C. Arts Council website: www.ncarts.org. The North Carolina Arts Council's four music fellowships are available to composers of chamber, electronic, experimental, jazz, and symphonic music and to songwriters. Applicants are limited to one submission per year and may not apply for fellowships in multiple categories. At the time of Al's award the monetary amount was \$8,000.

Arts Council grant. I have again included an extended excerpt from our April, 2103 interview, in order to allow Al to tell the story of his music in his own words. This excerpt contains Al's recollection and interpretation of the grant application process, as well as his insightful comments about some of his original compositions from his recording:²⁸ Included in the excerpt is a reference to New York artist Al Broder, whom Al befriended in the 1960s (see Figure 15 for a photo of Al and Broder). Broder was attracted as much to the energy of jazz music as Al was to the interconnectedness between music, art and literature. A sketch that Broder made of Al hangs framed in his living room (see Figure 16), and the sketch he did of a session with David Amram and Freddie Redd served as the cover art for *The Omen Seeker* CD.

Me: Tell me a little bit about your album.

Al: Okay, so I get a call; I guess Mark must have been about six or seven (1982 or 83); and I get a call from this woman from the Arts Council in Raleigh. And she says, "So are you Alan Neese?" and I says, "Yes," and she says, "Do you play jazz trumpet?" and I says, "yes," and she said, "Do you know anybody that writes, you know, composes jazz and plays?" I said, "Yeah, quite a few people." She said, "Tell them that we had a scholarship—and it was \$5,000 . . . (and) for the last two years we haven't even been able to give it away." So, and she told me how to apply, and when you get it in by April, and then you get this list of things you fill out. So I told the people, and so the first one that got it, I think Bus Brown got it, down in Durham, and then Matt (Kendrick) got one, then he got two. I don't know who else got it, and then (Mark) Freundt got it. I think Greg Hyslop got it . . . so they all got their grant. Ken Rhodes . . . Steve Blake had a studio there before he moved out. He had a studio there . . . and he had 10 thousand, 20 thousand dollars' worth of equipment in there—Wolf Tone records, that's what it was called.

²⁸ The song list for the CD *The Omen Seeker* includes the following original compositions by Al: *Wood Heat, Blue and Silver, Miss Shirl, Please Don't Cry, The Hawk, The Tale of Two Lovers, Calo Fellow* and *No Pun Intended*. The remaining two songs are *Never Let Me Go* by Jay Livingston and Ray Evans, and *The Foreigner* by High Peterson.

So I went down there, and they said, “Ken’s gonna send in the thing (grant application) and Steve’s gonna send in the thing.” Actually I learned to play music playing with Matt and Steve, cause they all went to Berklee. So anyway, I just said, well since I’m here, I think I’ll just add (record) my tunes. They (the North Carolina Arts Council) didn’t want anything written within the last five years, or something. And that *Please Don’t Cry*, man, I wrote it in 1960. I remember Calo Scott, you know, he could hear something in it. And I didn’t even know what it was. But it was like, using that long chord (which lasts for 8 measures before changing), I used to think of it as, the way *Stardust* was—you know who would think of something like that?

So, and I remember Matt says, “Do something about that *No Pun (Intended)*, put some kind of intro on there.”²⁹ And I just sat down at the keyboard one day and went, (sings melodic/harmonic idea from *No Pun Intended*) “Deng, deng deng, ka chenga deng Deng deng deng.” And I did the same thing with *St. Croix*. It was like that drawing (refers to his description of the ability to just draw new artistic ideas without repeating oneself)—I’d cut into the muse, into the meat of the thing. And no matter what I did, man, it was pretty nice. I can’t do it now at all. I mean, I’ll sit down at the keyboard, and it doesn’t sound bad. (But) nothing is inspired like that. (On the tune *Wood Heat*) I used the Christmas song (sings opening phrase to *Sleigh Ride* which sounds a lot like his opening phrase to *Wood Heat*). Matt Says, “Change the melody.” And I tried to do it, and I couldn’t do it. And I said, “No man, because once you get into the thing (it doesn’t sound like *Sleigh Ride* any more).”

Me: No man, I love it

Al: Yeah, I do too.

I was always inspired by things, like on *The Hawk*³⁰ was, on the Bartok *Mikrokosmos*, he’s got something called *In a Mist*. I got that, those clusters—clusters have always interested me. Cause Mingus told me, he says, “Man, I don’t think of ‘A minor seven, flat 5’.” And like Duke Ellington wrote like that—when you hear his brass, God, it was like incredible.

²⁹ See Appendix C for the Alto Saxophone lead sheet to *No Pun Intended* and *Miss Shirl*.

³⁰*The Hawk* is named after a term used for the onset of winter, referring to the bitterly cold winter winds; short for “Mr. Hawkins,” a slang term for cold winter winds, especially in the black and jazz communities. Al’s use of it as the title for a song indicates his interest in nature and his desire to play songs in a kind of seasonal/cyclical rotation. When I first visited him at his home in October, he had the lead sheet to Wayne Shorter’s “Fall” on is piano, and remarked that he pulled it out to study it every fall.

Calo Fellow—the reason I did that is because he (Calo Scott, for whom the song is titled) plays the cello. I remember sitting in my loft up there—(the New York artist) Don Broder did (sketched) the (album) cover³¹—of the bass player—that’s Al Cotton playing bass, Dave Amram playing the French Horn and me playing trumpet. Course Freddie (Redd) was playing piano, and Don was in there sketching and Freddie says, “If you’re gonna sketch me, you’re gonna have to pay me some money.” And Don says, “Okay!” (Laughter from both of us)

Me: Cropped him right out!

Al: You got it!

Al: (Remarking on the tune *Blue & Silver*) Manny Duran, this Mexican trumpet friend of mine (said) it was better if I just put some harmony to it. But it was the rhythmic thing, what I was trying to write in like *No Pun*, you know when you play *No Pun* you can’t help play but play on it, because it’s set up for this, like this gypsy guitar player, you know what I mean? That’s what I learned from Dannie Richmond, and Jackie (McLean)—if you’re gonna write—you know Jackie used to say, “Where do you like to stand on the bandstand?” I said, “I don’t know, any place I can get.” He says, “Man, I like to stand in front of the drummer, because if me and the drummer are working, you know, it’s going!” And then he would say like, he would pick somebody’s face—I think he asked Miles that—or a light to look at and just concentrate on it, to get into your zone. But the main thing was *vehicles* . . . I never considered myself a composer, until I realized they were pretty good. But it was more like (I was composing) vehicles to play on.

I tried to write that *Tale of Two Lovers*—that was another thing of different rhythms.³² And like the rhumba. And I actually tried that Dahomean rhythm (sings 6/8 rhythms), but that didn’t work. I just couldn’t get anybody to do it, man. And then when it got to chords with that rhythm—you just don’t need any chords. You know, that’s a different genre, man. It’s like the Watusis getting a Glockenspiel.³³

Me: It’s not harmonized.

³¹ See Figure 17 for copy of the album cover to *The Omen Seeker*, sketched by Don Broder. See also Figure 18 for a publicity photo of Al taken in 1995.

³² Al also described this piece as two different grooves representing two different people whose stories intertwine, but who continually “miss” each other.

³³ The reference to Dahomean rhythm relates back to Blesh’s discourse on African rhythm that Al first began exploring in high school. The reference to Watusis relates to Al’s experience attending the 1964-65 World’s fair exhibition at Flushing Meadows, New York with wife Shirley and Dannie Richmond. The music and dance he observed at the African exhibition left a lasting impression on him.

Al: Right, you don't need to harmonize it. And then African music is not harmonized anyway.

Me: What's your favorite tune on the CD?

Al: Probably *No Pun*. I mean Frankie Alexander, Bus' (Brown's) old lady, she finally called me up and she said "You know Al, I like *Blue and Silver* the best." It is probably the most hard core (most Hard bop-like). But like I couldn't play but one chorus on it. You know Ken Rhodes recorded it on his own album. He used to say, "Man, play more than one chorus!" I said, "I can't!" I just can't handle those (chord changes), not really and get the right stuff out. Because I was playing stuff that was more like augmented chords and uh, yeah like the F7 flat5, I would start on an A augmented, and somehow it was coming out right then. Course I can play it better now. (Neese, 4/26/13)



Figure 15. Al and Don Broder, 3rd Ave., 1970.

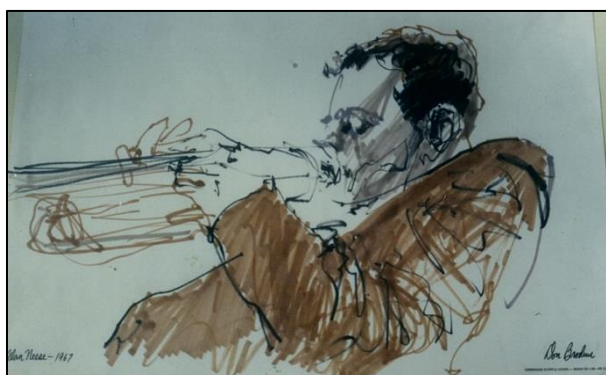
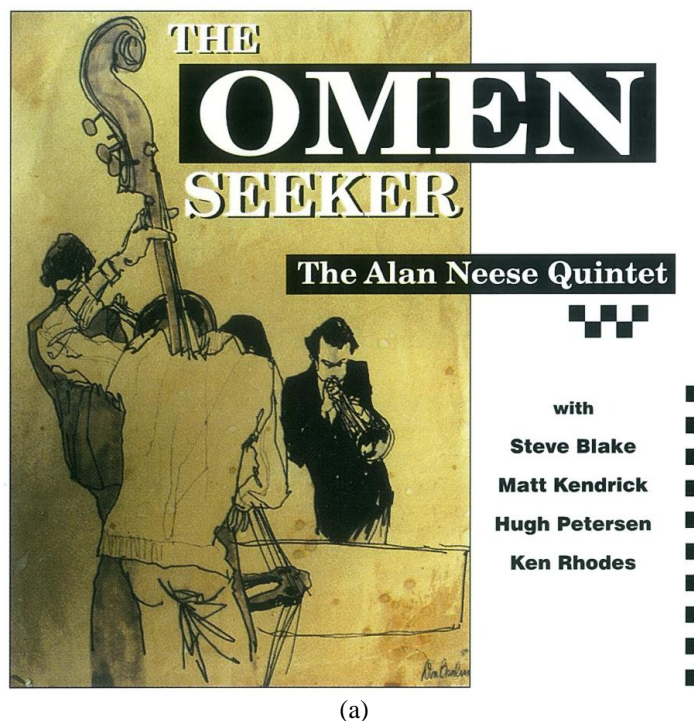
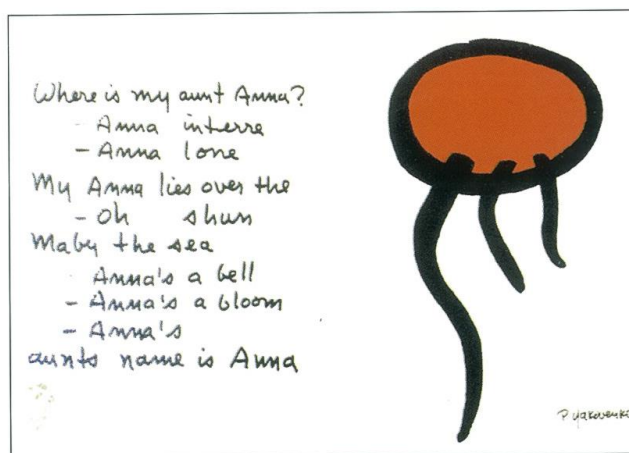


Figure 16. A 1967 sketch of Al by Don Broder.



(a)



Recorded December 4 and 5, 1995, direct to
two track at Reflection Studios, Charlotte, N.C.:
Engineer: Mark Williams
Producer: Matt Kendrick
Co-Producer: Alan Neese
Music Assistant: Mike Andrews
Assistant Engineer: Sam Napper
Editing: Steve Blake/Wolftone Studio

This recording made possible by The Jazz
Composer's Fellowship from the North Carolina
Arts Council.

Mastering: Studio B, Charlotte, N.C.
Cover Art: Don Broder
Back Cover Art: Paul Yakovenko
Typography/Editing: McGraw Design and
Communications

FOR INFORMATION, BOOKINGS OR CDS
CONTACT:
Alan Neese
2804 New Garden Road East
Greensboro, NC 27455
910-288-7877



(b)

Figure 17. CD Booklet cover of *The Omen Seeker* (1995). (a) front cover with sketch by Don Broder; (b) back cover with sketch by Petr Yakovenko



Figure 18. Al publicity photo, 1995 (*The Omen Seeker*)

Wrapped up in the grant writing and recording process is a complexity of relationships. After the initial phone call from the woman at the North Carolina Arts Council, Al encouraged many of his musician-friends to apply. The fact that he had to wait so long is more of a bemusement to him rather than a point of contention, as the following comment shows:

I know the people (on the committee) that turned it down—they're on my hit list! . . . (M)ost of them are teachers around here, but they sent it out to one professional – the bass player that used to play with Miles—what's his name? Ron Carter. So he heard the thing, and I know he just heard it and said "Hey, man, that's alright!"

I sent them another one that's called *Blue and Silver*. But I'm sure that's what won it. Cause we still play it, and it's still one of my favorite tunes. Cause when it gets to that interlude, and you get away from that minor blues—there's something about minor blues that come out of the Carolinas that's different. It's almost like, uh, blues from Texas, ya know, I mean, Kenny Dorham? He's got one called

Optional, and just as soon as he starts playing I just see “Texas.” And of course there’s Kansas City blues, and they’re all different. (Neese, 10/20/12)

The thought of Al having a hit list is particularly humorous. In fact, so accommodating was he as he waited his turn for the grant that in the interim between his first application and his eventual award, he played on grant-winning recordings by bassist Matt Kendrick (1991) and pianist Mark Freundt (1994).

That was the whole thing, when I first got the grant, man. I mean, I got the letter, Freddie Redd had won it too. Which was like, how many times is that going to happen? He had just moved (from New York), and you had to live here a year. And he had been living here about a year and a half. And he had heard about it—I wasn’t even seeing him (then). And he won the damn thing too. (Neese, 4/26/13)

After winning the grant, the process of recording the CD began. This meant choosing a rhythm section and working out rehearsals. Given Al’s history of being very particular about the players in his rhythm section, he took time to hire the right players for this recording, choosing Ken Rhodes (piano), Matt Kendrick (bass) and Hugh Peterson (drums). The following narrative describes Al’s thinking on choosing the players and in working out the rehearsals as well as some commentary on some of the music:

So Hugh Peterson had just moved to town. John Wilson wasn’t here—I probably would have used John. But Pete Crawford, I liked Pete’s right hand. And I’ll tell you man, it’s like when I was in Provincetown with Freddie Redd, and I got him to send for Jimmy Davis and Raymond Brown, a bass player down here—all friends of Richmond. And Pete Crawford, and Hugh Lawson played drums.

Hugh Peterson—when we went down to the island—St. Croix (for which one of Al’s compositions was named)—he (played) like the ocean.

We'd go into Ken Rhodes' pad, I would pick up Hugh here in Greensboro, and we'd ride over just about two or three times a week. And you know, most guys back in those days, wanted money to rehearse. They never asked for nothing, never asked for a damn thing. . . . The thing that I realized is that I couldn't play my own tunes; because I never had played them. I'd just written them, you know. But I never had tried to play *Blue and Silver*. . . . I remember we played all of Freddie's (Redd) tunes (in New York, playing with Redd's band). We used to play *The Hulk*—I loved that. But somebody came up to us—we played that *Blue and Silver*—and somebody came up to Freddie and said, "Damn man—great tune, Freddie!" His hair stood on the back of his neck; bristled. Didn't say anything about his tunes. He said (grumbling), "Yeah, trumpet player wrote that." "He did?!" "Yeah man!" (Neese, 4/26/13)

When dialoguing with Al about anything, but especially his own music and musical experiences, one is continually transported between the present and the past, Greensboro and New York. Some of the people he played with lived in both places, and the music he learned was also played in a variety of locations, so there is some continuity between these times and places. This sense of being out of time and out of space is so frequent with Al that it could be considered an artistic value or even a calling. His mission with the Al Neese Jazz Project is to preserve and work out the traditions of the hard bop era, and his original compositions and recordings serve a similar purpose. As with many artists, his own music contains elements of all that is meaningful to him. One can hear his primary musical language—1960s hard bop—infused in his music, but there is also a degree of the modern and the ancient in his music. And while it carries the aroma of New York jazz clubs, there is the scent of something local in it as well—the distinct sound of the blues that “comes out of the Carolinas.”

Many of the values and influences discussed in previous chapters are evidenced in this recording. His use of personal friends and local musicians reinforces the high value

he places on relationships. His thorough preparation for the recording, where arrangements were worked out through regular weekly rehearsals, recalls his regular practice sessions with his friends in the New York jazz community. The music is inherently complex, a value discussed in detail in previous chapters. The inclusion of eight of his own compositions and one work by drummer Hugh Peterson (out of the ten works on the recording) emphasizes the value he places on originality. And his subtle emphasis on rhythmic elements, through the use of percussionist Stanley Graham and some of Al's own percussion instruments, brings to the music Al's own personal interpretation of the African aspects of jazz.

In putting together this collection of highly personal music, with musicians who are friends as well as colleagues, all compiled in his 64th year, there is a level of maturity and confidence conveyed that is compelling. This recording is a valuable addition to the jazz narrative, and holds up remarkably well when played alongside the work of Al's more well-known contemporaries. Even some of his New York peers support this work as a high-quality artistic statement, as evidenced by the letters from long-time friends and fellow musicians David Amram and Art Farmer that Al used to promote this recording. Farmer, trumpeter with Sonny Rollins, Horace Silver, Gerry Mulligan and Benny Golson, among others, writes of Al's recording: "I enjoyed listening to your recording very much and would be very proud of it were mine" (see Figure 19). Amram, one of America's most versatile and difficult-to-categorize musicians writes a quote for Al to use for the (in Amram's words) "tin-eared, hard-of-hearing, Philistine music-biz pimps":

For the time I have know (sic) Al Neese nearly forty years ago, he has always been a musician's musician, uncompromising, devoted, original and creative. This recording shows why we all respect him as an improviser of inspired ideas and a composer of beautiful music. (see Figure 20)

ART FARMER
DÜRWARINGSTRASSE 40
A-1180 WIEN/VIENNA/AUSTRIA
EUROPE

222) 470 68 28
FAX 222) 470 68 70

Jan. 6th, 1998

Dear Al,

Please excuse me for being so late in thanking you for sending me your recording but last year was the busiest year that I've had and along with some health problems. Anyway I hope that all is well and that you are getting some work there.

I enjoyed listening to your recording very much and would be very proud if it were mine.

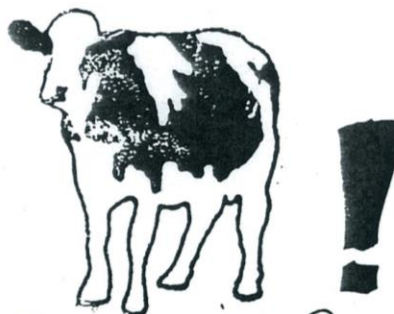
The way the music situation is, we know better than to expect too much for suce music. But its still good to do something nice. Who Knows.

I hope to see and hear you sometime, in the meantime, keep on playing.

Yours sincerely,



Figure 19. Art Farmer letter, Jan. 6, 1998.



Currently guest conducting seventeen orchestras including the Brooklyn Philharmonic (Director of Family and Parks Series, 21st season), Toronto Symphony (9th season), Grant Park Symphony (9th season), Minnesota Orchestra, International Jewish Arts Festival Orchestra (Music Director, 10th season), David Amram creates unique programs combining classical and popular favorites, jazz and world music designed especially for your orchestra's Pops, Young Adult, Family and Children's concerts.

DAVID AMRAM
PEEKSKILL HOLLOW FARM
928 PEEKSKILL HOLLOW ROAD
PUTNAM VALLEY, NEW YORK 10579
(914) 528-4305

Dear Al I'm in San Diego, just got back from Murfreesboro, Tenn on way to Wash D.C. OY VEY!
Love your recording.
Excellent unity-playing.

Here's a quote for
TIN-EARED HAND-OF-HEARING
PHILISTINE MUSIC-BIZ PIMPS-
WHO CAN'T JUDGE FOR THEMSELVES

"For the time I have known Al Neese nearly forty years ago, he has always been a

dedicated, original and creative musician, uncompromising /
showing why we all respect him as an improviser of inspired ideas and a composer of beautiful music. His time has come."
David Amram APRIL 17, 1996

Hope this will help. Hope to see you soon Popo. You feel
always

A moving note from the Amram!

"THE BEST IN CREATIVE MANAGEMENT"

Figure 20. David Amram letter, April 17, 1996.

CHAPTER X

LOCAL INFLUENCE

Greensboro, North Carolina has never been known as a jazz town. There are no legendary venues where local musicians honed their chops or visiting musicians played for appreciative audiences. As a working musician here since 1986 my observation has been that, while there have occasionally been restaurants featuring live jazz on selected nights, the music played there is more in the tradition of dance band standards than hard bop. Since at least 1986 there has not been a nightclub in Greensboro, though Winston-Salem had such a venue in the 1990s and High Point had a restaurant³⁴ known for its live jazz. But Greensboro has not been able to sustain a venue where jazz artists could play the type of challenging, boundary-pushing jazz favored by Al and his colleagues. This may be a residual effect of the old blue laws, where alcohol sales were limited or banned³⁵ or it may just be that the particular aesthetic of the city has not supported this genre of music. Whatever the reason, clubs dedicated exclusively to jazz music as one would find in major urban centers around the United States have not been successfully sustained in Greensboro.

On the other hand, Greensboro's location between major Eastern seaboard cities made it an ideal stopping point for dance bands during the swing era. Green's Supper

³⁴ J. Basul Noble's, which closed in 2010.

³⁵ North Carolina still prohibits the sale of alcohol between 2 and 7 am Monday through Friday and before noon on Sunday.

Club on Rt. 29 north of Greensboro (now closed) hosted many of the national and regional big bands that would travel between Washington, D.C. and Charlotte or Atlanta. Count Basie, Guy Lombardo, Jimmy Dorsey and many others stopped to play there, and even through the early 1990s the restaurant regularly hired a 5-piece house band for dinner music and dancing on Saturday nights.³⁶ Green's periodically featured live music for dancing from its opening in 1952 until the ownership changed hands in 2002. The new management stopped hiring the dance band shortly after took over, and the restaurant closed in 2012.

Two other dynamics have played a role in the life of jazz music in Greensboro. The School of Music at UNC Greensboro has attracted and trained many of the region's finest young musicians, even before the formation of the Miles Davis Jazz Studies Program. Those local jazz musicians who did not attend UNCG sought their training elsewhere, most notably the Berklee School of Music in Boston, MA. Many who attended Berklee returned to Greensboro, including Wally West, Scott Adair, Greg Hyslop, Steve Blake, Dave Fox, and others. Yet historically, as in cities large and small, there has been a division between those who play and teach jazz inside the academy and those on the outside. The current leaders of the Miles Davis Jazz Studies program at UNCG have done much to bridge this historical gap, and the local musicians have responded by being regular attendees at UNCG Jazz programs.

³⁶ Playing in the house band at Green's used to be a rite of passage for all of the area's jazz musicians. It was a place to meet the established musicians, learn standard jazz tunes and build a vocabulary and a reputation, as well as learn the "dos and don'ts" of the local music scene. I was introduced to the Greensboro jazz scene at Green's in the late 1980s, and played every Saturday at Greene's under Greensboro trumpeter Jay Lineberry's leadership in the late 1990s.

A similar division has remained between those musicians involved in the creation of society jazz—music for weddings, corporate gatherings and other parties, and the variety of hard bop that Al has pursued. As Al’s experience with the Lester Lanin band in New York exemplified, musicians serious about the art form of jazz typically do not play society gigs and the paths of musicians involved in these two branches of jazz music often do not cross.³⁷ Despite these barriers, the level of jazz talent, both in the professional and academic world in Greensboro, is quite high, but the lack of venues and limited audience has limited the flourishing of a jazz community as one might find in larger cities.

In this context Al has collaborated with many local musicians interested in creating the form of jazz music consistent with the historic jazz of the 1950s–1970s. Despite the lack of venues for live jazz, musicians from all around the state have come to Greensboro to play or record with Al. In order to get a sense of his contribution to the preservation and creation of jazz at the local level, I have spoken and corresponded with three musicians who have had significant and frequent contact with Al—Winston-Salem bassist Matt Kendrick, and Greensboro pianists Mark Freundt and Turner Battle.

Mark, a 1989 graduate of UNC Greensboro, was hired shortly after his graduation to provide live music at Crocodile’s restaurant on Tate Street. In his early twenties, just learning the professional ropes, Mark took a courageous step for a young musician—he called the best musicians he could think of:

³⁷ Again, there are exceptions here, as most of the members of Al’s current group play society gigs around Greensboro. The lack of jazz venues necessitates some “compromises” locally if one is to sustain a career playing music in Greensboro.

I was just hired to provide music a second night per week, so I decided to hire the best people I knew. I called Al Neese and Charles Duncy (bassist) and asked if they would play with me, thinking all they can do is say “no.” They’re not going to be calling me, so I might as well call them. They said, “yes,” and then proceeded to kick my butt! (Freundt)

Mark recalls that one of the things he learned from playing with these two veteran musicians was to know all the components of the standard jazz tunes beyond just the heads—introductions, vamps, endings, shout choruses, and other parts of the tune that musicians had learned on the bandstand in previous generations. I have noticed the same thing as I have sat in with the Al Neese Jazz Project: when Al performs a tune from one of his transcribed lead sheets, he includes every aspect of the original recording, including introductions, interludes, background figures behind solos, codas, *everything*. He is meticulous in his attention to detail. This practice is a standard one within the jam session community, and would have been learned by Al in his regular New York sessions. Cameron, the sociologist, explains the cultural implications of these pre-arranged components to the standard tunes:

Once the tune is selected, key and tempo are established in an introduction which is played typically by piano but possibly by any instrument or even a combination of several, according to prearrangement. This term “arrangement” requires explanation. Theoretically, jam session music consists of free improvisation around the melodies and harmonies of traditional tunes. Actually, certain introductions, cadenzas, clichés, and ensemble obbligati assume traditional association with specific tunes and come to be viewed as an organic part of the tune itself. These, however, are “folkways” informally established and are sharply distinct from the formally “arranged” music of the dance band, in that they are rarely written down but rather learned from hearing (“head arrangements”). (Cameron, 178–79)

By passing along the knowledge of all of the hidden components of the jazz tunes to Mark, as well as members of the Jazz Project, Al is furthering the traditional role of community elder to the younger members of the community.

Matt Kendrick's first experience with Al reveals much about Al's approach to the music:

I met Al on October 4th, 1990. He came to a concert I put together at the Reynolda House Museum of American Art in Winston-Salem. I had a group called the Eternal Winds. He came to the show and introduced himself. He liked the music and told me he thought what I was doing was cool. I was 33. I was at a pretty good place in my career. I was doing a lot of my own music and experimenting a lot. Al was interested in that. I felt that interest and wanted to get to know him. He was always and still is interested in new music. He came over to my house a little while after that and we transcribed Eric Dolphy's *Something Sweet, Something Tender*. I guess he was testing me. (Kendrick)

At the height of his New York career attending live performances of his peers was part of his training. He was doing this in the 1990s after returning to Greensboro, and continues to do so today. Always looking for inspiration and sometimes looking for other musicians with whom to play, Al is still willing to drive almost anywhere to hear great music.

From Matt's description, it is clear that Al sensed something special in the bassist's music. This initial meeting and follow-up led to a ten-year playing relationship, during which Al and Matt made three recordings and gave hundreds of performances around the southeast. The collaboration on Kendrick's *Art/Jazz* recording (1994), for which Matt composed a piece of music inspired by eight different paintings, led to performances at Art museums in Raleigh and Charlotte, NC, Knoxville and Chattanooga,

TN and other venues. Given Al's interests in art and literature, the work on Matt's *Art/Jazz* concerts and recording seemed to be a good fit:

Once I was wondering why I hired some of the people I did to come play with us. Al said "Matt, you're always looking for the good stuff." Al appreciates art, literature and how they interact with music. He was great during my *Art/Jazz* period. He's sort of a Renaissance man that way. (Kendrick)

When asked what it was like to record with Al, Matt responded:

Al was easy to work with. He was fun and had pretty sly humor going on. On his stuff he knew pretty much what he wanted but mostly in general sense. On my stuff he would practice it and have it together when we went in. Al's bebop trumpet lines and really intimate knowledge of the changes are always a delight to me. He was pretty adventurous too. He wouldn't say something was stupid without trying it first—with conviction. Then we could talk about and decide what we thought about it. (Kendrick)

Mark, who hired Al on his recording *Dance for the Moon* (1994), had a similar experience in the studio. Marks' praise for Alan's versatility was effusive: "He just played great on everything I threw his way. He was always able to find the lyrical line, no matter the changes. I could listen to him for hours" (Freundt). Al's sense of lyricism is something that seems to come very naturally at this stage of his career, but required decades of work to achieve. Where the musicians he played with in New York had acquired this trait in their twenties, Al, who while living in New York was aware that he might not ever catch up in this regard, certainly has done so in the later stages of his life.

One thing that is common to all I have spoken to regarding Al is their genuine love for and respect of the man. Many area musicians count Al as one of their most significant musical mentors. Mark speaks of his admiration for Al's artistic approach to

his craft “uncompromising—not playing rock n roll, country, staying true to the art of straight ahead jazz, whether there are gigs or not” (Freundt). When asked specifically what they learned that is attributable to Al, many of the same traits were named—“I learned about bebop. I learned some really good phrasing” (Kendrick). Turner Battle spoke of really learning how to play jazz under Al’s influence. Matt spoke of Al’s nurturing quality, how he makes other players feel good about what they are doing. (Kendrick) Mark echoes this sentiment, calling Al “always encouraging, no matter where you were. He has no pretenses” (Freundt).

Based on his life experience in jazz, his comments carry significant weight, and so does his encouragement. Playing beside him, when he gives a compliment during or after a solo, it can have a very positive effect on one’s attitude and growth as a musician. The musicians who play with him know that if Al compliments you then you know you did something well.

On the philosophical side, local musicians point to Al’s insatiable desire to learn. Matt Kendrick says, “I learned the music never grows old. There is always new stuff to learn . . . I learned to keep searching.” Playing Al’s own compositions Matt says, “I learned some deeper meanings to jazz styles” (Kendrick). It was Kendrick, in fact, who after playing several years with Al and then being invited to play on Al’s 1995 recording, gave Al the nickname “The Omen Seeker,” which Al subsequently used as the title of that recording. The desire to keep digging deeper, listening, transcribing and practicing is a remarkable quality, and one that has influenced many of Al’s colleagues. Matt comments, echoing the thoughts of all who know him, “Al never stops searching for

better ways of playing. He's in his 80s and still looking. That's fantastic." When asked what Al's legacy is in Greensboro Matt responded:

He has helped keep jazz alive around here. He taught me a lot about jazz. He helps people that have at least something going feel good about and maybe believe a little in what they are doing. (Kendrick)

And Mark recalls the enthusiasm with which Al approached his music and the learning process: "I remember going to his house, and he was always excited about a tune. He would say, "I just learned this tune, man," and he was always enthusiastic about every tune" (Freundt).

Somehow Al has managed to maintain this enthusiasm for over 60 years. Despite his decades in the business and the many disappointments that are part of a life in music, he is in many ways still that little boy running home to try and catch the end of *Jack the Bell Boy* on the radio; he is that middle school student playing gigs with his buddies in Mt. Airy; he is that high school student reading and writing about the history of the music he loves so much, dreaming about making his own music one day.

CHAPTER XI

LEGACY

It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat. (Roosevelt)

This paper began with the premise that the story of jazz belongs as much to the tradition-bearers as it does to the tradition-creators, the second- and third-tier artists as well as the headliners. Around the country and around the world, jazz artists like Al Neese pursue their art with passion, intensity and integrity, just as the greats did. In many ways, Al's story is identical to that of his peers living in New York City in the 1950s and 60s—days spent practicing, hanging out, listening, transcribing; nights spent looking for sessions, dropping in at well-known jazz clubs, and staying up all night, pursuing the elusive dream. But in many ways it is not. His story *is* the story of jazz, much more so than it may at first appear. In some way, for every Elvin Jones, there a dozen Jimmy Wormworths; for every Clifford Brown, a hundred Al Neeses. In another, each musician is unique, with a singular vision and contribution to the narrative, overlapping with the larger story here, diverging there.

I have been impressed with the depth of knowledge that Al brings to his music. Not only does he possess an encyclopedic knowledge of the history of jazz music, its musicians, compositions and recordings, but he has demonstrated a consistent application of this knowledge over six decades of gigs, sessions and recordings. His original compositions demonstrate a thorough grasp on the hard-bop language, yet manage to obtain a measure of originality and depth that is rare in the music of a local artist.

Al's recounting of many tales of a life lived in jazz reflect the communal aspect of that era of jazz when artists hung out together without regard to stature or status. He paints a picture of a brotherhood where what mattered most was furthering the music that had become a way of life for so many. In his approach to the learning and fostering of the music, Al's goals are the same as other practitioners of oral traditions—to keep the art form alive in as authentic a manner as possible. The knowledge of his own technical limitations helped him to keep his goals realistic and his spirit humble. It also helped him to know when to leave New York, when he realized he was “not in the running.” New York's loss was North Carolina's gain, as Al transplanted his experience and knowledge of jazz tradition to a place less familiar with those pursuits. And as a result, his influence on the careers of younger jazz musicians in the region has been profound.

Al Neese was in the arena—his face marred by the dust and sweat and blood of the unorthodox life of the jazz musician. He may have erred in some areas of his life, but he did strive, continually, toward the unattainable goal, the ideal, with great enthusiasm and devotion—a lifetime worth. In all of our conversations, rehearsals, and gigs together I never heard a word of bitterness, nor one of regret. Al seems ever content with who he

is, satisfied in the knowledge of a life in jazz lived in honesty and humility. In many ways it has neither been an easy one, nor a perfect one. But it has been a rich one when measured by standards of friendship, integrity and artistry. With Shirley quietly standing by, supporting him financially, spiritually and artistically, Al has made a contribution to the jazz legacy that matters.

To the people who have known him, played with him, learned alongside him, were mentored by him and inspired by him, Al is not a minor-league player. He had his brush with the big leagues, figured out his place in the jazz panoply, and worked just as hard as those big leaguers. I don't think he ever gave a second thought to whether or not he would get a big-time recording contract or go on the road with a state-of-the-art band. Al took the opportunities as they came, knew what he could and couldn't do, and got right back to practicing. He instinctively knew that the music was made and learned in the doing of it, the listening, the transcribing, the practicing and the living of it.

It is hard to imagine future jazz musicians learning the music the way Al did—at Jackie McLean University, and the Freddie Redd College of Music, but some have now been educated at the Al Neese School for the Arts. He may be one of the last of a generation of jazz musicians who learned the music strictly on the streets, outside of the university or structured jazz pedagogy system. This experience in the field gives his voice the weight of authority when working with younger musicians. His contributions to jazz education fall much more on the side of the practical rather than the theoretical, a benefit to those both within and outside of the academy.

Some, after reading this biography, would ask “Why didn’t Al make it?” And the answer depends on one’s view of what it means to “make it.” If making it is defined by producing multiple recordings for large record labels, traveling the world to play concerts for sold-out audiences, and achieving a certain level of media renown, then by those standards Al most assuredly did not make it. But if making it is defined by passionately pursuing strong artistic ideals, treating colleagues with kindness and deference, participating actively in a musical community with integrity and devotion, and passing along a lifetime of knowledge to anyone who would ask, then by these measures Al has indeed made it.

Because of his experiences, Al understands jazz to a degree that few living musicians do. He has been playing and studying it for over 65 years, and if you go to a certain Greensboro band room on a Tuesday night you are likely to hear him still trying to work out the latest idea, still teaching the music to accomplished musicians 30 years his junior, still seeking. You might even hear him encourage one of his colleagues with a signature phrase—“Man, you inspire me!” To that, my colleagues and I would respond, “No Al, you inspire me, man.”

CHAPTER XII

EPILOGUE

The most enjoyable part of this project has been spending time with Al and getting to know him through the telling of his story.³⁸ Though I am a part of the local jazz community myself, prior to this project I had not had any personal interactions with him, but had only heard parts of his story from others in the jazz community. Our relationship before this project began embodied the divide between those two categories of jazz musicians, some of whom were going *this* way, towards the artistic side of jazz, and others who went *that* way instead, taking dance-style gigs for higher pay and fewer risks.

From the beginning of the process, my approach with him has been one of a dialogue between peers in one respect, and between elder/junior in another; what I have tried to avoid at all costs is projecting a sense of a researcher/subject relationship. Though I have benefited in that respect, to be sure, the greater benefit to the jazz community in Greensboro and beyond, and to Al and Shirley, is the documentation of Al's story. The overarching image I have of our relationship over the past eight months is one of a long, ongoing conversation, in which I have done the majority of the listening. During our interviews, rehearsals, phone conversations and gigs I have learned to listen in new and deeper ways, and have gained much from the lesson, becoming a better listener and a better musician. I have learned to play the melodic ideas of the hard bop language more

³⁸ My wife encouraged me to entitle the project "Tuesdays with Al," in reference to my regular attendance at his Tuesday rehearsals, and in homage to Mitch Albom's 1997 memoir *Tuesdays with Morrie*.

like the tradition-creators; I have learned to take risks in my improvisation, to work harder and know more about the primary sources—the recordings and compositions of my hard bop ancestors; and I have learned to be gracious and encouraging of the musicians with whom I have the privilege of playing.

Besides our verbal and musical conversations, we have also negotiated the telling of this story through the written word. At every step, from the initial class project to all of the drafts of the final paper, Al has read my writing and contributed his invaluable feedback and approval. He has corrected my factual errors as well as my mistaken interpretation of some of his statements, and has willingly allowed me to include some of the challenging parts of his story, while respectfully asking to exclude others. While not every detail of his life is included, it is my hope that what has emerged in this paper is a portrait of a man who pursued his art with a high degree of passion, integrity, and consistency for over 60 years, and who treated others in his community with respect and kindness. It has been my privilege to get to know Al Neese, and it is my desire for many to know him through the telling of his story.

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APPENDIX A

AL NEESE JAZZ PROJECT SONG LIST

Song	Composer
After the Rain	Legrand, Michel
After The Storm	Ramsey, Dan
Airegin	Rollins, Sonny
Al Hunduliah	Salim, Yusuf
All or Nothing at All	Altman, Arthur
All the Way	VanHeusen, Jimmy/Cahn, Sammy
Along Came Betty	Golson, Benny
April Mist	Harrell, Tom
Autumn Leaves	Kosma, Josef (Mercer, Johnny, English lyrics)
Avalon	Jolson, Al/Deyilva, Buddy/Rose, Vincent
Beatrice	Rivers, Sam
Big P	Heath, Jimmy
Bloodcount	Sytrayhorn, Billy
Blues a la Carte	Shorter, Wayne
Blue and Silver	Neese, Al
Boplicity	Evans, Gil
Bolivia	Walton, Cedar
Brother Hubbard	Garrett, Kenny
Calo Fellow	Neese, Al
Carol's Interlude	Mobley, Hank
Cedar's Blues	Walton, Cedar
Circle	Davis, Miles
Clockwise	Walton, Cedar

Song	Composer
Computer G	Garrett, Kenny
Conception	Coleman, Ornette
Contour	Drew, Kenny
Cookin'	Davis, Miles
Cookin' at the Continental	Silver, Horace
Curacao Do Lissa	Ramsey, Dan
Crazy Rhythm	Caeser, Irving/Meyer, Joseph/R.W. Kahn
Criss Cross	Monk, Thelonious
Dat's Dat	McLean, Jackie
Day by Day	Stordahl, Axel; Weston, Paul; Cahn, Sammy
Deception	Davis, Miles
Del Sasser	Jones, Sam
Dexterity	Parker, Charlie
Dig	Davis, Miles
East St. Louis Toodle-oo	Ellington, Duke/Miley Bubber
Ecaroh	Silver, Horace
El Gaucho	Shorter, Wayne
Enchantment	Silver, Horace
ESP	Shorter, Wayne
Escapade	Dorham, Kenny
Ezz-Thetic	Konitz, Lee
Fenjah	Gordon, Dexter
Filthy McNasty	Silver, Horace
Firm Roots	Walton, Cedar
A Flower is a Lovesome Thing	Strayhorn, Billy
Four	Vinson, Eddie (Davis, Miles)

Song	Composer
Fried Bananas	Gordon, Dexter
Gertrude's Bounce	Powell, Bud (Brown, Clifford)
Glad To Be Unhappy	Rogers, Richard/Hart, Lorenz
Glass Mystery	Harrell, Tom
Goodbye Pork Pie Hat	Mingus, Charles
Green Chimneys	Monk, Thelonious
Gregory is Here	Silver, Horace
The Hawk	Neese, Al
Hello	
Hi Beck	Konitz, Lee
Hi-Fly	Weston, Randy
Hip Strut	McLean, Jackie
I Only Have Eyes For You	Warren, Harry/Dubin, Al
I'll Get By	Ahlert, Fred; Turk, Roy
Ill Wind	Arlen, Harold/Koehler, Ted
Infant Eyes	Shorter, Wayne
Isetan	Ellis, John
Jackie & the Beanstalk	Garrett, Kenny
Joy Spring	Brown, Clifford
Kelo	Johnson, J.J.
La Mesa	Dorham, Kenny
Lazy Bird	Coltrane, John
Let's Call This	Monk, Thelonious
Liberated Brother	Silver, Horace
Little B's Poem	Hutcherson, Bobby
Little Children	Neese, Al

Song	Composer
Little Girl I'll Miss You	Green, Bunky/Lincoln, Abbey
Little Rootie Tootie	Monk, Thelonious
Locomotive	Monk, Thelonious
The Man I Love	
Miss Shirl	Neese, Al
Moment's Notice	Coltrane, John
Mood Swings	Gunn, Russell
Ms. Baha	Garrett, Kenny
Neesie	Salim, Yusuf
Never Let me Go	Livingston, Jay & Evans, Ray
Nica's Dream	Silver, Horace
No Pun Intended	Neese, Al
Nostalgia	Navarro, Fats
La Nostalgie de la Boue	
Nutville	Silver, Horace
O. P.	Mingus, Charles
On a Misty Night	Dameron, Tadd
One for Daddy-O	Adderly, Nat/Jones, Sam
Orange Was the Color of Her Dress	Mingus, Charles
Out of the Blue	Davis, Miles
Place du Tertre	Lagrene, Birele
Please Don't Cry	Neese, Al
Plight	Tolliver, Charles
Pug Nose	Shorter, Wayne
Punjab	Henderson, Joe
Red Cross	Parker, Charlie

Song	Composer
Rotomagnetics	Harden, Wilbur
Rosewood	Shaw, Woody
Round Midnight	Mingus, Charles
Sail Away	
St. Croix	Neese, Al
The Scene is Clean	Dameron, Tadd
Sao Paulo	Dorham, Kenny
Saudade	Haig, Al
Search for Peace	Tyner, McCoy
Senor Blues	Silver, Horace
Short Story	Dorham, Kenny
Sidewinder	Morgan, Lee
Silver's Serenade	Silver, Horace
Sippin' at Bells	Clark, Sonny
Smithville	Smith, Louis
Snuffy	Harden, Wilbur
So Long Eric	Mingus, Charles
Soulville	Silver, Horace
Speak Low	Weill, Kurt/Nash, Ogden
Split Kick	Brown, Clifford
Step Lightly	Mitchell, Blue
Steve Davis	
Straight Ahead	Dorham, Kenny
String of Pearls	Miller, Glenn
Strollin'	Silver, Horace
Summer in Central Park	Silver, Horace

Song	Composer
Sun Bath	Shaw, Woody
Sun Dome	Stern, Peggy
Sweet & Lovely	Arnheim, Gus; Daniels, Charles; Tobias, Harry
Tadd Walk	Dameron, Tadd
Tale of Two Lovers	Neese, Al
Tangerine	Schertzing, Victor; Mercer, Johnny
Tea for Two	Youmans, Vincent; Caeser, Irving
The Thespian	Jackie McLean
This Time Last Year	
Time	Powell, Richie
Una Mas	Dorham, Kenny
Vierd Blues	Rollins, Sonny
Visions of Grandeur	Harrell, Tom
W. 42nd Street	Ware, Wibur
Wells Fargo	Harden, Wilbur
When Will These Blues	Coleman, Ornette
White Christmas	Berlin, Irvin
Wierdo	Davis, Miles
Wildflower	Shorter, Wayne
Wood Heat	Neese, Al
Work	Monk, Thelonious
Worry Later	Monk, Thelonious

APPENDIX B**AL NEESE DISCOGRAPHY**

As Leader:

Neese, Alan. *The Omen Seeker*. Suitcase Music, 1995. Compact Disc.

As Sideman:

Battle, Turner and Buffy O'Neil. *People Make the World Go Round*. Self-produced. 1993. Compact Disc.

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Kendrick, Matt. *The Matt Kendrick Unit: Unity and Alienation*. Suitcase Music, 1991. Compact Disc.

Ramsey, Dan. *Everybody's Songs But My Own*. Ramdisc, 2005. Compact Disc.

APPENDIX C

LEAD SHEETS TO NO PUN INTENDED
AND MISS SHIRL (ALTO SAXOPHONE PARTS)

Alto

No Pun Intended

Al Name

Intro

A

B/C

Blowing changes

[A] Dm Gm Dm | Gm | Dm |
E7(b5) A7(b9) Dm | B | Csus | C7(b5)
| Csus | C7(b5) | Csus | C7(b5) |
Csus | C7(b5) |

40 MISS SHIRL AL Wren

HARMONY

AKTO changes

Am G7 Am D7 Am E7 Am9
 Dm7 G7 Em7 A7 F#m7(b9) B7 EMaj7 Em7 A7
 DMaj7 Dm7 G7 CMaj7(+4) Bm7(b9) E7 Am6
 Interlude Bbmaj7 CMaj7 Bbmaj7 CMaj7 Bbmaj7 Am D7
 F7 E7 Am6 Bb13

Miss Shirl