

Washington Rucker

Drummer Clarence Dixon told Rucker “this pair of sticks will take you all over the world if you want to go,” and they did.

Chapter 01 - 1:30

Introduction

Announcer: Washington Irving Rucker was born in Tulsa, Oklahoma on March 5th, 1937 and attended local schools through graduation from Booker T. Washington High School, developing a talent for the drums along the way. By his teens, Washington was working with bluesman Jimmy “Cry Cry” Hawkins and was soon off to UCLA to study and get into the Los Angeles music scene. A man of many talents, Washington got a degree in history and side careers in acting and cosmetology while playing drums with bands in a variety of genres.

Rucker has worked with artists as diverse as Stevie Wonder, Ray Charles, Gospel artists Rev. James Cleveland and Shirley Caesar, Jazz greats like Dizzy Gillespie, Sonny Stitt, Hampton Hawes, and Freddie Hubbard and singers Nancy Wilson and Linda Hopkins. He has also appeared regularly in film and television as a character actor, most notably in Martin Scorsese’s “New York, New York” and Clint Eastwood’s “Bird”.

Drummer Clarence Dixon once told him “This pair of sticks will take you all over the world if you want to go” and those words became Washington Rucker’s reality. He is a 1998 inductee of the Oklahoma Jazz Hall of Fame.

The song used for this introduction is titled Lucky and is one of many songs written by Washington. You can hear Lucky in its entirety at the end of this interview.

Washington recorded his oral history with Voices of Oklahoma, Preserving Oklahoma’s legac...one voice at a time.

Chapter 02 - 8:07

Loved Parades

John Erling: My name is John Erling and today’s date is July 2, 2015. Washington, will you state your full name and your present age?

Washington Rucker: My name is Washington Irving Rucker. My age is seventy-eight, born here in Tulsa.

JE: I have to ask you about your name Washington.

WR: Um-hmm (agreement).

JE: How does that come about?

WR: My great grandfather went to Washington, DC, to be a translator of the Creek Nation into English. He was impressed, named his son Washington, and I was named after my grandfather, Washington. So that's how I come about the name.

JE: What's the heritage of your great grandfather?

WR: He was half Creek Indian, part of the Creek Nation on the Creek Freedmen Roll. I think the letters, I think they started at 3,000, 3,065 and 3,065 on, but he was a part of the Creek Nation.

JE: So you have some Creek?

WR: Obviously, at some point in time, yeah, there is some. I don't deal with it. I've got a cousin who's doing a lot of research on it now. But I've known about it for awhile but I haven't really delved into it.

JE: I should say we're recording this interview in the studios here of Voices of Oklahoma. And you now live in California?

WR: I live in California, yes. Yes, I live in Silver Lake, which is about a mile out of Hollywood, actually.

JE: And at the outset I'm going to point out that you were inducted into the Oklahoma Jazz Hall of Fame in 1998.

Let's begin with talking about you loved parades and the music of the Booker T. Washington Parade.

WR: Jim Guve and I were talking yesterday about it. There was a man in the band they called Crazy Red. And he was a legendary drummer. And I think I met him, I had to be four years old. Long before I started elementary school the bands would come down Greenwood. They would top that hill and the music would cascade down Greenwood and everybody would come out.

So the parades and music itself were the two major influences that we had as a community, just the music. Beside the football team and the basketball team. But it was all predicated upon them marching down and playing for the football games. And I fell in love with Crazy Red. Ultimately, I got an opportunity to play in the band with him in 1952. And it was the greatest experience I ever had in my life as a musician.

JE: So you could say then, this interest in music started—

WR: Right.

JE: ...when you were three or four years old?

WR: Around three or four years old I first began to hear music. And, ultimately, when I moved on Oklahoma Street, Carver was north of me and I was right in the back of the music

room of St. Malcolm's High School and I heard music on both sides. So I picked up my mother's black skillet, a knife, and a fork, and that was my first instrument.

JE: You picked up what?

WR: In every family on the north side of town, everybody's got a big, black skillet. And I picked that up, a knife and a fork, and I began to play.

JE: At?

WR: I was around nine or ten when I first began to play. Yeah, yeah.

JE: There was a gang you ran around with.

WR: In Tulsa?

JE: Yes. When you were very young.

WR: There were about three people that I ran around with, but, actually, when I was in Oklahoma, per se, the Cissels, Mrs. Cissel owned the cleaners. He's the father of the family of Senator Maxine Horner. And I grew up with her younger sister Beverly and her younger brother Earl. The youngest boy was Chuck Cissel, who was running the Oklahoma Jazz Hall of Fame. That was the younger brother.

JE: Okay.

WR: So I grew up with those people, but later we moved to South Haven. It's pretty straight out the road southwest from here, about twelve miles from Tulsa.

JE: Off Highway 75?

WR: I don't know. We just went out and rode two buses. There was no 75 then.

JE: That's true. That was true.

WR: And so I basically, I grew up in that community and it was an all black community. If you know where Carbondale is? It was a white picket fence that separated South Haven from Carbondale. And that's where I actually grew up from twelve on.

JE: But where did you live then when you were three, four, five years old?

WR: On Jasper Street, which is where I first heard the band. I was born on Greenwood. At the top of the Greenwood hill there was a grocery store owned by Mr. and Mrs. Holdeness. She was a school teacher. She taught at Dunbar, I don't know what he did other than run the store. But he had two or three rooming rooms on top of his store, and I was born in one of those rooms in 1937.

We later moved to Jasper when I was about two or three. That's where I learned to walk and talk and eat mulberries.

JE: So that became the gang? There was a mulberry tree, was there?

WR: Right. The Mulberry Tree Gang, oh that's the gang you were talking about. Yes, uh, Morris Chestnut, he has a son who is a well-known actor whose name is Morris Chestnut. I grew up with Morris Chestnut Jr., so his father's name is Morris Chestnut. He had sisters and brothers. Doll, Doll was a part Indian boy and he didn't even look like he belonged

in the family, but he was. And there was Leonard, Big Sonny, because they called me Little Sonny. Big Sonny's name was Kenneth and Arnella, Della, Louella, and another Ella. Yeah, yeah and JB, and JD, and all of that. So when Ms. Arnella died she had 118 direct descendants, I recall. And I was at the film, they just assumed I was one of the sons, you know, 'cause they all knew me because we had grown up together.

JE: Would you say you had a fun childhood?

WR: I had a really, really fun childhood. Absolutely.

JE: Yeah.

WR: You know, we had a mulberry tree, you know, that was it.

JE: Your mother's name?

WR: My mother's name is Georgia Barnett.

JE: And where is she from?

WR: Wybark, Oklahoma. Wybark is one of the settlements right outside Muskogee. And there were a lot of freedmen, black freedmen Indian settlements out and around Coweta, Wybark, Tullahassee, they called it Tallahassee but the word is really Tullahassee. And four or five just around that area, that's where my mother was born.

JE: How would you describe her personality?

WR: Very quiet, was raised by her sisters. I loved her dearly but I think that she just felt as though she needed to have a lot of kids.

JE: How many?

WR: Eight of us all together. She lost twins before I was born, and when I was about three years old she lost another baby, a sister, and then had the rest of them, one, two, three, four, five, six, seven of us after then.

JE: Where are you in the birth order?

WR: I'm second.

JE: So then, your father?

WR: My name is Rucker. My real father, from all I know, was a Gaines. He was from down in the country, down there where I grew up. I didn't discover that until I was in junior high school. I played baseball with a guy named Pat Norton and Pat kept telling me, "Man, you look like my Uncle Lonnie."

Pat and I look like twins. And I finally went home with him and his mother said, "Well, what's your mother's name?"

I said, "My mother's name is Georgia Barnett."

She said, "You're my brother's son. Your daddy's name is Lonnie Gaines, look like he spit you out."

And I stay with my cousin Louise now. Pat is dead, but that's how I got that family.

JE: So, did you meet your family?

WR: I met him one time, just shook his hand. He went one way, I went the other. There was never a sense of responsibility. So, he was just another man to me. I had to be fifty-odd years old when I met him so it didn't really mean anything.

JE: And he knew you're his son?

WR: He knew, he knew I was his son.

JE: And it was just a shake hand deal?

WR: Shake hand, "Hey, good to meet you." Went his way and I went mine.

JE: So you grew up without a father, obviously.

WR: Yeah, it didn't matter to me. People talk about him growing up with one—that's pretty traditional in the black community. There were a lot of fathers but there weren't a lot of fathers. I was taken care of by my auntie. One of my aunties, Aunt Margery, had a barbeque stand and she took care of the whole family until she died. Once she died then that's how I ended up moving to South Haven. The family went in total disarray.

But that whole thing about not having a father, I had men in my life. First was Crazy Red and his name is James Williams, by the way. Then it was later Mr. Dixon. Mr. Dixon was a worn renowned drummer. From 1937 to 1942, he was voted the number two drummer in the world, next to Chick Webb.

Mr. Dixon basically took me in. He taught me the rudiments of how to play drums. And he was my greatest inspiration for that. He alone taught me exactly what I could do with the drums, and he said, "You know, you can take a pair of sticks and go anywhere in the world if you want to go."

It has come to pass many, many times over.

JE: And that became your slogan?

WR: It is.

JE: Yeah.

WR: It is.

Chapter 03 - 6:00

Shades of Black

John Erling: A little more about Crazy Red and the Booker T. Band. He played drums and you got hooked.

Washington Rucker: Right. Red had a cadence. I've done my own vision of what Red was all about 'cause they called him Crazy 'cause he was very inarticulate, but he played a cadence. It's a very simple cadence now that I look back on it, but then it was a thing that

collected everybody. When Red played his cadence at the football games the other team was in trouble. I always called him the twelfth man on the football team 'cause when he played it the crowd got revved up. And when that happened, it was all over.

So he, in actuality, even as inarticulate as he was, he was able to gather people together. And you see the football players and basketball players doing this today, that's what his cadence did. They didn't have to do that, his cadence did.

JE: Got the crowd revved up, didn't he?

WR: Oh yeah.

JE: Yeah.

WR: Oh yeah, yeah.

JE: But isn't there a time as you grew older and become a drummer that you and Crazy Red had a duet.

WR: We had a battle.

JE: Yeah, you had a battle. Tell us about that.

WR: Well, okay, well, I couldn't get in the band in Carver and I couldn't get in the band in Carver, and I don't want to sound like I'm sore but they picked and choose whomever they wanted to let in this band.

JE: Okay. Let me bring, this is Carver Jr.

WR: Junior High School, middle school, yeah.

JE: That's your middle school that you're in.

WR: Yeah.

JE: And you couldn't get into the band.

WR: Couldn't get in the band.

JE: And why?

WR: I couldn't get in the band because they picked and chose and it had everything to do with the color of my skin. The light-skinned kids got everything. If there was anything left then they would give to the black kids. The darker kids.

JE: And that brings us back to the time when that would have been what year?

WR: Late '40s.

JE: Late '40s.

WR: Late '40s. It was social stratification within the black community. A lot of people don't talk about it but at seventy, eighty years old, don't mean nothing to me because I've been saying it all my life. So people like myself always walked around with a chip on our shoulders because we knew we would not get the best equipment, the best whatever.

JE: Could there be blacks who were very light-skinned that, would also get in the band?

WR: Oh yes. Oh yeah.

JE: So it was about the shade of the color?

WR: Oh, oh, oh, it was about the color more than anything else.

JE: Then if you were black or white it was the color?

WR: Right, yeah, yeah.

JE: And we should point out, how would you describe you?

WR: A little more than medium-black. Not real black.

JE: Right.

WR: I wish I were darker.

JE: Oh do you really?

WR: Oh absolutely. I wish I were blacker, I'd fit my quota a little bit better.

JE: You're blacker? You're quite black, I can see.

WR: Oh yeah, I am. But you ought to see my son-in-law.

JE: So then this issue of the color of the skin, the lightness of it affected you because you had proven that you deserved to be the drummer?

WR: Well, the thing about it, as I said earlier, I live right behind St. Monica School. I heard the band play every day. I live in front of Carver, I heard the band play every day. So I knew all the marches. But when I got ready to take an audition I was not even allowed to pick up a drumstick. The band director said, "What's your name?"

The guy before me, "My name is blah, blah, blah."

"Go get a drum. What's your name?"

"Blah, blah, blah."

"Go get a drum. What's your name?"

"Washington Rucker."

"Step back. What's your name?"

"Charles Low."

"Go get a drum."

JE: My.

WR: That affect—I was eleven, twelve years old.

JE: Okay. Well, how did that affect you?

WR: Oh, man, it blew me away. The few classmates that are still around will tell you, I was a very smart youngster. I was smart going into junior high school. So I expected to be in the smart class. They put me in the less than smart class. So when I couldn't get in the band my grades went all the way to the bottom. Because at twelve years old, first of all, how can you digest this kind of—within your own community?

I had a conversation, I was playing with San Francisco with the great piano player Hampton Hawes. I was talking to one of my young ladies who had gone to school with me. I said, "You know, you light-skinned chicks with straight hair got everything."

She said, "Oh no."

I said, "Go home and get your class book and look in your class book." The football queen, the basketball queen, all light-skinned girls with straight hair. It was way in the '60s before they ever had a black football queen, that I know of.

And she says, "I'm the first real black one they had."

So it permeated our society.

JE: The band director who said no to you—

WR: Um-hmm (agreement).

JE: ...what was he?

WR: All black schools. I went to an all black school.

JE: It was an all black school? All right.

WR: But he was very light-skin, very light-skin. Never said why, he said, "The rest of you kids without instruments, find another class."

JE: So then at Carver you were out? You did not—

WR: I left Carver, I left Carver after seven because my grades went all the way down. And my mother couldn't understand. And I couldn't understand it, I didn't understand the dynamic, that whole social where you got and we'll give you what we want you to—I didn't understand that dynamic.

So my mother made the best decision she ever made in her life. And that was to allow me to go Sand Springs. And Mr. Simms, who just passed away here a couple of years ago, was a young, twenty-three-, twenty-four-year-old boy right out of college. And he let me in the band. In that band in Sand Springs, with three brothers and a cousin, the Long Boys, finest coronet players I have ever heard in my life playing classical music. They would be first chair trumpet players in any philharmonic today. And they were in high school.

Also, Jackie Tillman, Jim Tillman, who was the first black pilot for American Airlines, came right out of there. And he was the first chair clarinet player. And he was the first black pilot for American Airlines. Full captain.

JE: Sand Springs, were you aware then of Marques Haynes?

WR: Yeah. Marques Haynes was way before me but I took a course in agriculture. Mr. Brown, the agriculture teacher, used to say, "Young boys are out playing on the streets and Marques was out dribbling basketball."

He ultimately became the world's greatest dribbler. And he just passed away.

JE: For the Harlem Globetrotters.

WR: Yeah, Harlem Globetrotters.

JE: And we have his interview elsewhere on this website.

WR: But he went to Langston.

JE: Yes.

WR: And also, from what I understand, he was Langston's leading scorer while he was learning how to dribble. So when Bob Crews and all these people come along, no, they got that from Marques Haynes, 'cause they were all bouncing balls straight up and down.

JE: Right. He kept it low.

WR: Yeah.

JE: So then, did you stay there?

WR: I stayed in it until my eighth and ninth grade year. But then I'd grown up with these other kids at Carver, so I came back and go to Booker T.

JE: Here in Tulsa?

WR: Yeah.

JE: So let's talk about that experience.

Chapter 04 - 5:55

Whites in Norman, Oklahoma

Washington Rucker: Well, having been in this great band for two years, I come to Booker T., and the same thing all over again. If you didn't go to Carver find yourself another class. You might be a musical genius.

So I was walking out the door and Crazy Red only came to school to the first rehearsal to get his drum. As I was walking out he told Mr. Field, "Mr. Field, that's Sand Springs. Sand Springs can play."

And that's how I got in Booker T.'s band, 'cause he cosigned it. I had had a confrontation with him at Sand Springs. He played his cadence and I played it back. He played it and I played it and so it became a drum beat-off when I matched him beat for beat. But I'd been playing on the skillet all the while. First time I ever played a drum was when I went to Sand Springs. The first time, I'd been playing on the skillet with a knife and a fork.

So when I got a chance to play with him, dip, dip, dip-a-dip dip, dip, flip. And he'd improvise and I'd improvise and pretty soon he just stopped and said, "That's Sand Springs. Sand Springs can play."

So when I get to Booker T., he said, "Mr. Field, that's Sand Springs. Sand Springs can play." That's how I got in Booker T.'s band.

John Erling: So you were doing dueling drums, as it later became dueling banjos?

WR: Right, like the banjos.

JE: Right. Yeah.

WR: Absolutely. But all the while I was learning everything because Red was an unlearned drummer, and typical of people who can't articulate one way they find a way to do it, he did it with the drums, he did it with a drumbeat. And that drumbeat became synonymous with who he was.

And I really enjoyed, later when I began to analyze exactly what he had done and how he had done it then I read more into the cadence than the cadence itself. I read the whole history from the blacks from the north side of town probably the mid '20s on up.

JE: When is the first time you ever saw a white person?

WR: Oh, Mr. Sullivan. Mr. Sullivan was the insurance man, yeah, he came down Jasper. Mr. Sullivan always brought us paper dolls. And there's song, "I Want to Buy a Paper Doll I Can Call My Own," by the Ink Spots, okay? That was in the 1930s, but he brought us paper dolls and signed everybody up for insurance. And I think he charged a nickel or maybe a dime a month. And he came every week with a gray suit and a shirt and tie.

JE: How old were you?

WR: Probably three He used to make funny sounds with his mouth, [snapping his fingers sound] like you hear in the Disneyland cartoons. And he always tickled us, you know.

JE: That was a fun experience—

WR: Yeah.

JE: ...with this white man that you'd never seen.

WR: Yeah, pretty fun for us all, yeah.

JE: But wouldn't whites come to North Tulsa at night?

WR: There were several reasons. One, for the barbeque, and that is first thing that I knew that they came for. They came to eat barbeque. When I got older a lot of them came to the nightclub, the Flamingo Club in Love's Lounge. But they came to eat barbeque first.

Normally during lunchtime you see them coming because by then a lot of the women who worked in, we called this the South End, women who worked as maids in the South End would take barbeque to them and they liked it. So they're, "Wow, bring some more." And then they discovered it and they'd come and get their own barbeque.

My auntie had a barbeque stand on 1178 North Greenwood, which is the corner of Greenwood and Marshall, at the time. They would come by the truckloads because the bread man, the Rainbow bread man, his first stop would be my auntie's barbeque stand. And she would make him some duck, which is leftover barbeque from the night before. He would sit down and eat duck and he would sometimes come back and get a package and take back to where Rainbow Bread factory, which is out this way some way. And then they started coming over and getting their own barbeque from then on.

JE: Isn't there a place called the Chicken Shack?

WR: Chicken Shack, actually, that woman was my cousin, yes. Its on Peoria, Peoria and Louis, as I recall. She's from Anadarko originally but she came here and opened this Chicken Shack. And I understand that she's a cousin of mine. I saw her one time, but they slumped on this side of town, a lot of white people came on that side of town because it was a jig joint. And didn't open until eleven or twelve at night, and then till daylight the next morning.

So, yeah, I've heard of the Chicken Shack, yeah.

When I first saw the great alto player Oscar Astell, as he got in a car wreck right by the Chicken Shack. And I was on my way to the Christmas Parade in the Booker T.'s band, and I saw him sitting on the sidewalk with his leg broke. And these two white girls was telling a highway patrolman, you know, "We saw this car coming running over, blah, blah, blah."

But what the highway patrolman didn't know, they were with Oscar. And later Oscar was a great influence on me, a great influence on me as a jazz player, 'cause I played with him and a lady named Bumps Love. Mr. Love had a lounge called Love's Lounge.

JE: Yep.

WR: He later managed the Sweethearts of Rhythm and the whole bit. Bumps Love was his wife from Kansas City, a big, black chick, played piano and sang.

And we played out here in a club somewhere on the south side called the Hollywood Club in 1954. That was my first experience with talking one-on-one with a white woman. I'll never forget, the girl had red hair. She was driving a Holiday Olds, you remember those old Holiday Olds in the '50s?

JE: Yeah.

WR: And she wanted to buy me a drink. Well, I don't drink, didn't drink then, don't drink now. She kept saying, "I want to buy you a drink."

So Oscar said, "Give him a Salty Dog," whatever a Salty Dog is. It was for him, you know. Ultimately, they got together and they decided to come on our time to start a side time and slum, he took them to the Chicken Shack.

Well, they dropped me off at my auntie's house on Latimer, I was too young for that, you know.

JE: Did you ever drink?

WR: No.

JE: Early on you could have, thirteen, sixteen tried to drink like—

WR: You know, no.

JE: Why?

WR: For what? That's my question, For what? Why drink? I didn't have any need to feel any better. I guess that's why you drink alcohol, I didn't need to feel any better. Not that I would have tried because I probably wouldn't have tried that either.

Oscar, when we were playing at the Hollywood Club he borrowed a dollar from me to buy what was called Gunnie. A marijuana cigarette they used to call Gunnie, G-u-n-n-i-e. And he said, "Man, this is good for me, but this is no good for you." In 1954, he told me that.

And to this day, I've never even wanted, never had any ambition to try drugs.

JE: So you've never had alcohol?

WR: Uh-uh (negative).

JE: In your system? Or drugs of any sort?

WR: Never. Never.

JE: That's pretty amazing.

WR: Well, it's—

JE: It kept you on track, I'll tell you.

WR: Yeah, it's who I am, yeah.

Chapter 05 - 4:00

First Set of Drums

John Erling: There's a Big Sonny in your life. And your school days in 1942.

Washington Rucker: Yeah, Big Sonny. Big Sonny was Morris Chestnut's brother. One of Morris's brothers. Miss Olly had a big house. The mother's name was Miss Olly Ford. She had a big house, 623 East Jasper.

And we lived in a back house, we lived 623 1/2, on the north side, in a little, small, shotgun house in the back. And it burned down, I was in the fourth grade when it burned. I lost my sister that summer and later it burned.

JE: Describe a shotgun house.

WR: A shotgun house is a house that goes straight back, there are no sides. Everything is straight back. It's almost like if you build blocks and just lay them down longways. And there's no places, no corners, and it all it is straight back.

JE: You literally could shoot a shotgun through it.

WR: And never hit a soul.

JE: Right.

WR: If everybody ducked.

JE: In Booker T., in music then, you got in and had an enjoyable experience?

WR: I had a great experience playing music because along with playing music like this it was my introduction in 1952, to jazz. Cecil McBee was a clarinet player. Cecil's sister Shirley McBee was my classmate, and there were probably four or five different McBees. Cecil

was a clarinet player but he had been influenced by Oscar Pettiford who was another Okie. I think he's from Oklahoma originally but they had a music store on Pine, right off of Greenwood, I think it's west of Greenwood. And Oscar Pettiford was the first bebop musician to play cello. And he was one of the founding fathers of bebop, along with Dizzy Gillespie, Ian Diez, and I can't think of the piano player's name, were white cat and Ian Monk was in there and played during that time.

Yeah, so Cecil was inspired to play and he needed somebody to play drums. So he asked me, "Hey, man, come play drums with me." He took me to Love's Lounge, that's the first time I ever walked in a club.

JE: How old were you then?

WR: Sixteen. He took me in and I'll never forget, you walk in the door and right to the right, immediate right, there's a small bandstand and a set of drums. He tried to show me how to play but the drummer came in and showed me how to play a back beat.

But the most profound thing that happened that day was when I sat down to the set of drums for the very first time, I was comfortable.

JE: That was the very first time you sat down to a set of drums?

WR: A set of drums and I was comfortable, yeah. And when I was comfortable I said, "Oh, man, this is it." You know.

And then later, Mr. Dickson, when I lived in South Haven, we moved diagonally across the street from Mr. Dickson and one day, his plate glass windows were open. And there sat a gigantic drum set. Man, I stood there and watched that drum set like I was watching the Taj Mahal, it was an incredible sight. And he came up, Mr. Dickson was a little, very short man. Had a big wife, had to be that much taller than him. Very pretty woman, Miss Dickson. And the son was six foot three. Sonny Dickson, Sonny Dickson was one of the best basketball players ever to come out of Tulsa. If I'm not mistaken, he was the first high school All-American.

Judas Pike was in there but you probably know Judas Pike.

JE: Yes, I've interviewed him.

WR: They were classmates. Judas was a captain but Sonny was really the star because Sonny was really Mr. Everything. But Mr. Dickson invited me in, he said, "Come in. You play drums?" And I fumbled, and I said, "Yeah, I want to play."

He said, "Sit down." And he had actually a crown, they called it a throne, drummers sat on thrones.

In one of my songs I wrote, "I said the man that sits on this throne." Mr. Dickson had a, it was like a box, it was about like this, and it was about that wide, and about that long. And it had a calfskin head over it, it was like a throne. And he had a one-octave marimba set here, he had cowbells, he had a big Chinese gong in the back. And I said, "Lord, have mercy."

JE: You didn't even know, probably, they manufactured them?

WR: I didn't know. I didn't even think in terms of—

JE: Right.

WR: I just saw something I had never seen in my life.

Chapter 06 - 3:30

Joe Louis

John Erling: Let's go back a little bit because you were in the boys' choir.

Washington Rucker: Yeah.

JE: You could sing.

WR: That was in elementary school.

JE: You could sing.

WR: Yeah, I can sing now.

JE: So you have this musical ability of drums and you can sing. Could you play any other instruments?

WR: No. And yet I write a lot of songs.

JE: Name those songs.

WR: I wrote a song called "Lucky." And one of the little Hanson boys heard it yesterday and he's very interested in it. The young boys here, they play it.

JE: Yes, the Hanson Band, right.

WR: He said, "Man, I like this song."

I said, "Man, I wrote that song in 1970," which I did. I was in Copenhagen and I wrote it for a girl. Her name is Linda but I called it "Lucky." That's one of my songs. Really, the song I'm most ambitious about is called "My Ballerina," and I wrote that for a Romanian ballerina that I met probably ten, twelve years ago. And I've written a story that I want to talk to you about called "Broken Point." It should be finished by late September and I go to Switzerland for that.

So I've got about twelve, fourteen songs that I've written and I'm going to put them in a compilation and put them on the Internet if I don't get a record deal, you know.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative). There was an assembly at Booker T., I believe.

WR: Yeah. Yeah, I met Joe Louis there.

JE: Joe Louis. Tell us who he was.

WR: Heavy weight champion of the world.

JE: Yeah.

WR: He was America's hero. He's the black people's hero but he was America's hero because he had just knocked out Max Schmeling.

JE: Who was the German champion.

WR: Who was the German champion.

JE: And he came to your school, when?

WR: He—

JE: Probably '44, 1945, in there some place?

WR: Ah, right, during the war.

JE: Right.

WR: And what they were doing, they were doing a recruiting campaign. Not in elementary school, but, you know, you set them up. You got this hero here. He was in the army, as a matter of fact. He just wasn't in uniform, as I don't recall him being in uniform. Yet he came in 1944. And later I met him in Las Vegas.

JE: Wasn't he promoting a certain drink?

WR: Oh right. He had a drink called Joe Louis Punch. There used to be a soda called Grapette.

JE: Yeah.

WR: In a little bottle like this, if you recall.

JE: Yeah.

WR: It was grape and Joe Louis Punch looked just like Grapette. But he also had a softball team. He had a softball team out of Chicago called the Joe Louis Punchers.

One of the really fine piano players here, Ed Hughes, played on his softball team. He could pitch with either hand. He ended up being a very good jazz piano player.

JE: Did they barnstorm? Did they come here and play?

WR: Yeah, they barnstormed, yes, because, you know, things were still as they were so it wasn't like they were going to do anything major. But they barnstormed, yes.

JE: Here you were like in the third grade and you knew that Joe Louis was—

WR: Yeah, oh yeah.

JE: ...a big hero.

WR: And it's the first time I'd ever seen white people come down to our school. At that time I was going to Booker T. Elementary School. The whole podium was loaded with the superintendent and everybody else. And when we went out to get sodas they got first in line. But we could, hey, we expected that. That's when I realized the importance of the impact that sports can have on people. Because the superintendent never came down to this end of town. He had somebody running it for him.

But when Joe Louis came to town I got to bring my family and my brother's and my daughter's family and, you know, come down to see the heavy weight champion of the world, Joe Louis. He had a truck right outside and he gave everybody Joe Louis Punch. It was an incredible day.

JE: As African Americans you had to feel awfully proud that he is one of us.

WR: Yeah.

JE: And by the way, you talked earlier about the different shades and colors—

WR: Um-hmm, um-hmm, um-hmm (agreements).

JE: ...of blacks. Would he be about as black as you are?

WR: No, he was lighter than me, much lighter.

JE: Oh really? All right.

WR: Much lighter, but it didn't matter, he could have been green because he was the heavy weight champion of the world. And that's the point I'm trying to make, you know. On that, you know.

JE: Right. Excuse me, I don't give in to laughter—

WR: I mean, did I say something wrong?

JE: No, no, no, you said he could have been green, that was superlative perfect. That was great.

Chapter 07 - 4:00

Salvation Army

John Erling: So, we move on. In the fourth grade, the Salvation Army and the food lines and all that. Talk about that time.

Washington Rucker: I don't like to harp on the fact that we were very poor, but we were. That might have, to a great extent, been the reason that I have always made positive stuff to get out of that kind of situation. Because there are people my age who were born in that situation who are still there today because they did not have ambition and that whole, "I don't have a father." That's not going to stop me, at all.

So, I, like everybody else went down on Archer. As I recall, it was a big building on the south side of the street, maybe three blocks west of Greenwood on Archer. We stood in line and got turkeys for Thanksgiving, turkeys for Christmas, and Christmas gifts. And there was always a Salvation Army band playing the Christmas carols and religious music.

For years and years, I went to Switzerland every Christmas and played in a jazz club called Mary Anne's and Evelyn's. But when I discovered the Salvation Army band would play at, it's called the Autobahn, which is like the train station. I began to take my snare drum and go play with the Swiss. They didn't understand but they welcomed me. They didn't understand why I did it.

I did it because so many years the Salvation Army took care of me. The first pair of white shoes I got to be in Mr. Simms band in Sand Springs came from Salvation Army,

you know? I'm a shoe freak now because I always wore hand-me-down shoes from the Salvation Army. And I never passed one of those things without putting something in that kettle, you know?

JE: A warm spot you'll carry to the end of the day.

WR: Yeah, yeah.

JE: For the Salvation Army.

WR: Even today.

JE: Right.

WR: Even today.

JE: Your house burned down at one point in your life.

WR: My house burned down when I was living on Jasper, when I was in the fourth grade. Me and Junior, Morris Chestnut Jr., and Clifton Tipton, and myself, we had gone to the movies to Ritz Theater. And we saw the smoke, fire engine, as I recall, didn't come this far down. People tried to put it out with buckets but the house had burned to the ground.

So we moved to a rooming house on Greenwood and Latimer called Speck Walker's. He had a small mom and pops store. We moved there in his rooming house for maybe a month or so, I guess. Because my mother was like a wanderer.

I wrote this in a story, I said, "When the house burned down we became a family of gypsies, always moving." Because we moved from there and then we moved to another place and then we moved to Oklahoma Street. And then right when I was to go to Carver, which was as far as from here to your car from where I lived, we moved to South Haven, and that's thirteen miles away. And I had to catch the bus.

And riding the school bus had a certain kind of social stigma to it. "He's from the country riding a bus." And I carried all that stuff with me.

Even today, when I come to Tulsa I always make sure that I come correct. Because I think I've lived beyond the expectations of a lot of people, based on the way I grew up. And I'm supposed to be standing on the corner drinking alcohol or using drugs or that sort of thing. They expect that if you're a musician and if you're an unlearned person coming in, they put all that together. "Well, how come you're not doing this?"

One of my classmates, I met her in San Francisco, took her out. I was on my way to Japan, I was in the military. We go out and she ordered a drink. I said, "I'll take a Coke."

And she said, "Well, you got a cigarette?"

I said, "No, but I'll go get you some." And I went to get her some cigarettes. So I opened a pack and I lit it.

And she said, "Whew (drawn-out sigh) you don't drink?"

I said, "Naw."

"You don't smoke?"

I said, "Naw."

She said, "It's going to be a long night."

I said, "No it won't." Put the last twenty dollars I had on the table, I said, "It'll be as long as this twenty dollars can take you." Walked away from her, have not seen her to this day. Because I'm not going to change.

JE: So when you come to Tulsa your brain can kind of almost default? You remember these events in your life more than when you're living in California?

WR: I think of everything when I come to Tulsa.

JE: Yeah.

WR: The way I grew up. And I don't hold any animosity toward it, I just like for people to know that you can rise above whatever station you have been assigned.

JE: And through all of this you had this passion for drums.

WR: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: And that's what was going to bring you out of all of that.

WR: Um-hmm (affirmative), right.

JE: All along.

WR: Right.

Chapter 08 - 2:30

Radio-TV

John Erling: There was a point, I suppose, that you were introduced to radio. And that was a big thing for you.

Washington Rucker: Miss Anderson had a radio and when we moved to South Haven we took an Indian woman with us out. She had a radio.

JE: You took who?

WR: An Indian woman with us, a Cherokee. She lived on Oklahoma Street right next door to us. I used to go to the grocery store, which is a block up, and she would invite me over to listen to the radio with her. And we always listened to Grand Ole Opry.

I played at just about every place in the world except the Grand Ole Opry. And I had an opportunity and was going out of town and couldn't do it.

JE: Do you remember who you heard on the Grand Ole Opry?

WR: Yeah, we'd always hear Little Jimmy Dickens, Minnie Pearl, and Red Foley singing that "Old Rugged Cross." That became my theme song, yeah, Red Foley, I love him. I love country music.

JE: How old do you think you were then?

WR: I was in the seventh grade.

JE: All right, was jazz—

WR: No, it hadn't come into my life.

JE: ...become—hadn't even come into your life yet?

WR: No.

JE: So, country and western really was the first form of music.

WR: That I really, really liked.

JE: Right.

WR: I still have a great love for country music. I made a couple country albums with people, but I just love the music. And I loved it, not in a way that do I want to play it? No, I loved it because of its honesty. To me, country and western music is the most honest music. That and the blues. And they run parallel to each other. It's honest music and I love it.

Brad Paisley is my favorite singer. I just buy everything that he records.

I had an opportunity to play it and when I did I was doing a television show called *Evening Shade* with Ossie Davis, Loretta Lynn was on, and two other country women were singing it. And I was the only black in the band. You know, TV being what it is they got to have one, so they hired me.

And I was playing and Loretta Lynn turned around and she said, "Man, you can really play the country music."

I said, "I played it on *The Bandstand* with Leon McAuliffe and his western swing band." She just stopped in her tracks.

And I said, "He's from Tulsa. At least his band was here, as you ought to know." And I said, "Yeah, I know Leon McAuliffe." He had a drummer had a set of drums, he just left Kenton's band so he had a set of drums like Mr. Dickson's. I hadn't done any research but this had to be one of the first television shows that was televised at the Cane Ballroom. Leon McAuliffe with his swinging band and I was playing with a group called the Stack Walton Trio. Mr. Dickson got me the gig.

We played "Red Top," and played another tune but I sat down to that set of drums. Well, I was comfortable then because I'd set down to Mr. Dickson's drums.

JE: Were you ever around Johnny Lee Wills and those boys?

WR: No, they came through here but they're from Texas, as I recall.

JE: Yeah. But they ended up, obviously here.

WR: Yeah.

Chapter 09 - 4:50**Jazz Structure**

John Erling: Swing music is kind of like jazz in that they just let it flow.

Washington Rucker: You mean western swing music.

JE: Yeah, western swing music, excuse me.

WR: It's very much like it but it's more like the swing impact on that kind of music because swing music was meant for dancing.

JE: Yes.

WR: And people danced a lot with swing music, even with the black bands, with the Count Basie and the Duke Ellington bands, a lot of the showpiece numbers were just meant for people to listen to them.

JE: Yeah. But I can see those guys take off.

WR: Um-hmm (agreement).

JE: And they don't know where they're going to go.

WR: Yeah, yeah.

JE: Just like you guys and jazz go.

WR: Yeah.

JE: And they have no idea where they're going—

WR: Yeah.

JE: ...and where it's going to happen.

WR: But you know, that is partially true, but the other side of that is, in spite of the fact that they sound like they're playing all over the place there is a structure. You have to stay within that structure.

JE: Okay.

WR: As long as they're within their structure whatever they play is immaterial. But there's a structure, they're hearing something.

JE: Is there a structure in jazz?

WR: Yes!

JE: Oh there is?

WR: Yeah.

JE: There still is a structure?

WR: Yeah, the structure was—

JE: We think you're just going wild and crazy but you're—

WR: That's the perception people want to have. "Oh, he's just playing outside." No, no, there's a structure. The head is called the melody, you play the melody and then you take a solo.

And when you take a solo all you're doing is having a conversation with the musicians on the bandstand. "This is the way I feel about this within the perimeters of this conversation. And this is the way I feel."

"Well, I feel this way." And they exchange four, they start taking four bars, so I play four bars, you play four bars, so it's like, "La-la-la-la, la-la-la-la, la-la-la-la," but there's a conversation. At the end they're all the way gone. There is a structure.

JE: Right.

WR: And that structure is universal.

JE: Man.

WR: Later I'll tell you about an experience I had in Romania that was just an incredible situation.

JE: Tell it right now.

WR: Okay. I have a book out that's no longer—I'm going to put it on the Internet within the next couple of months, it's called *Jazz Road*. Anyway, I went to the book signing expo in Constanta, Romania, and I was staying out on the Black Sea by the water. And then a guy comes up and I was staying in the suite that he normally has for his family for a week. And I was already there.

So he asked, "Who is this guy in my suite?" The guy came on a boat, he brought his boat. And he said, "Who is this guy?"

And he said, "He's a musician, blah, blah, blah."

So ultimately, he got around to finding out who I was and he invited me on the boat. We go on the boat and he said, "Man, I'd like you to play some jazz. Would you like to play some?"

I said, "Well, I didn't come for it but I got a couple of days," I was free, so I said, "Yeah, you know, we'll play some jazz."

He put together a four-piece group for me, bass, piano, drums, saxophone. We played and it was like, "You bebop play?"

"Yeah." They played all the bebop licks they'd been listening to because they were in Romania behind the Iron Curtain. There was a lot of tricks because it's conversation. I said, "Oh no, you didn't do that."

Well, he did it to see if I would respond. That's called Call and Response. And when he'd do it, I said, "Oh, that's what you want. Okay." Man, I hit him back and, "Okay, blah, blah, blah."

But then at the end, the gypsy kept playing saxophone. He played "Body and Soul," which was made famous by Coleman Hawkins, they called him the Hawk. His running partner was Ben Webster, he's from Texas, but he grew up in Muskogee and people consider him an Okie. He played "Body and Soul," which is a very slow ballad, a very salty ballad, "A-na-na-na-na-na." And at the end he plays what is known as an obbligato, where he just, "Lu-lu-lu-lu-lu-lu," that's the crazy part.

And all of a sudden he said, “Da-na-na-na,” which is Cherokee. And that’s typical jazz player, I mean, he was doing that stuff, and the bass player was just a phenomenal player, a classical player, and then he picked up the bass. And he and I were fiddling around and I was playing Call and all this. And, “Da-na-na-na.”

And all of a sudden, this cat, when he played the obbligato he took a deep breath and said, “Now-now-now-now.”

And I said, “Oh no he didn’t.” And the bass player and I locked up and drew this cat into the Black Sea.

And he looked around and he was speaking gypsy, ’cause I couldn’t understand it. I know he didn’t want to say, “Who is this end?”

But we had plenty fun but it just shows you about the world impact that jazz had. And the fact that the language, no matter what language you speak as the mother tongue, is very common among jazz players. I mean, it was the best jam session, it was on the Internet.

The lady Stella that I wrote the song for, “My Ballerina,” she had it on the Internet for a long time. But it was pheno—I said, “Oh no he didn’t.”

When he got through, he didn’t speak English but he came over and shook my hand. But it’s like they have, “This is what bebop players they use this, we heard this. And this is bebop players do this. We wonder if he knows all this?”

I said, “Man, that’s my era. You know? That’s my era.”

JE: This all comes like drinking water for you. And those of us who can’t keep beat we sit on the sidelines and we’re just plain jealous and wish we had—

WR: Well, you know the thing about it, jazz, as good as jazz can be it needs ears like those who can’t play. Because—

JE: So is that my part? My ears? I can listen.

WR: Well, if you can’t play it, but I don’t know, maybe you play.

JE: No I can’t.

WR: But being a writer and with having an incredible voice that you have because I did some research on you too, and I don’t go on the computer. You know?

Chapter 10 – 6:00

Birth of Jazz

John Erling: Name some whites that have the soul for jazz.

Washington Rucker: Chet Baker from Yale, Oklahoma. He was the first one. I never really cared for Chet, personally, and I had a bias against him. I had a bias against him because

he's a white player. Now I'll be honest about you, I had a bias against him. He's an ordinary cat. Man, if he was black you never would have heard of him, but that wasn't the case. Chet Baker was an incredibly fine musician. He died in Amsterdam under real strange conditions.

The bass player was Wilbur Little. Wilbur and I played together in Washington, DC, from 1959 to about 1964, and then he moved to Amsterdam. But many of them, Louie Belson, Buddy Rich, Kina Condoly—

JE: But you do have to reach, don't you? To find really good white jazz—

WR: No, not anymore.

JE: Okay.

WR: It used to be the case. You can't outrun everybody either. Those days are over. You know, you've got some really, really, really fine players, yeah. And the majority of them, when they get to that level, nine times out of ten or eight times out of ten, they're far more proficient because the majority of them have gone through the Classical School of Music.

JE: Yeah. Well, why do you think it is jazz came out of the soul of blacks?

WR: They needed an outlet. Blues is the legitimate parent of all jazz. If you hear some players play and there's a blue tonality in it, which is note between notes, they call them "blue notes." If you don't have at least one in a forty-five-minute performance of jazz, then, in my estimation, it lacks something. Anybody can improvise. Bach and Beethoven improvised way back in the sixteenth century but they weren't playing jazz.

We needed an outlet. I needed an outlet, which is why I got my mother's skillet, a knife, and a fork. I got a copper drum that's worth about three or four thousand dollars now, only one hundred were made. And when it came out I called the company.

"Oh, Washington, yours is in the mail." Didn't cost me a dime because of what I had done as a player. And I'm not bragging about what I've done as a player, but they respected enough about what I had done to give me that drum. I haven't bought a set of drums in probably about forty years.

But the thing about it, we needed an outlet. You can only suppress a people so long.

JE: It was because of the suppression? You were poor, put down, and so forth.

WR: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: And that's what obviously produced that.

WR: Right.

JE: We try to make lemonade out of everything and so—

WR: Right.

JE: ...that's the lemonade that came out of those—

WR: Right, yeah.

JE: ...poor people who needed to be expressing.

WR: Right, yeah, but you know, it's really strange, in actuality the original "jazz songs" came out of the church. "When the Saints Go Marching In," is a church song, it's considered to be the number one—if you go to New Orleans if you don't hear "When the Saints Go Marching In" you might as well be in Paris. And they called it the Devil's music because the church people didn't want to hear it. The only thing about it if it was not on "When the Saints Go Marching In," but the improvisational aspect of it, which made it what it was. It was the same music.

Because all these people were unlearned players. You've got to understand, they were unlearned. And nobody ever wrote anything down, they just played. "Hey, man, you'll hear it."

I was telling those ski youngsters yesterday, Hanson Brothers, I said, "Man, you probably got a hundred songs, a thousand songs written on five changes. They call them ice cream changes." All the rhythm and blues tunes you heard when I was growing up, all written on the same quad progressions, but different songs on the same changes.

The same thing when you came out of church, all the church music basically uses the same choral changes, even now in today's gospel music. So they needed an outlet, they needed a secular outlet as opposed to just talking about going to church all the time. They needed an outlet outside because everybody wasn't going to church. So they just took the same songs and turned them into jazz tunes. Those were the beginnings of jazz.

JE: Wow.

WR: Just as simple as that. Oh it's as simple as that. And when you go to New Orleans people get up out of graves when the band comes along playing "When the Saints Go Marching In."

Really, one of the greatest experiences I had was in Perugia, Italy. And it was on top of a mountain. We were there for a week with Roy Hargrove, he's one of the ladies' drum trumpet player who is a dynamo. And two or three Big Bands, people from Berkeley School of Music and just some jazz musicians all over. And my greatest thrill every day was to see the band do the second line.

The second line is where they march down the street playing. There's a march called "The Second Line." All of them unlearned players, the drummer might be playing with the left hand like this, all wrong but they're playing this music. And "When the Saints Go Marching In" it looks like a thousand people are trailing behind and marching in that band. It's called "The Second Line."

If you go to New Orleans and if you see them marching down the street—I'm sure you've seen them with the umbrellas?

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

WR: That's called "The Second Line."

JE: Okay.

WR: People get up out of graves to hear that. You know? That's how great it is. And all the sophisticated people, blacks, white, green, and anybody else, they'd go to these affairs. They'd sit down and be cool when the music is playing. But when "The Second Line" they got to get up.

And I've played at many affairs, in particular for the Creoles. A lot of them are light-skinned with straight hair and they're sophisticated, doctors, lawyers, and Indian chiefs, and they want to be cool. When "The Second Line" comes the wife will make them get up and then you see them reach for that handkerchief and start doing this. Hey, it's all over, because you're part of the club whether you like it or not. You know.

JE: You keep talking about "When the Saints Come Marching In," like that is *the* song?

WR: That's considered—

JE: What was it, the birth—

WR: ...probably one of the best songs to ever come out of New Orleans.

JE: To be the birth of jazz?

WR: Nobody can really define who—

JE: Okay.

WR: ...actually started jazz or what year. But the first jazz band was put together by Buddy Bolden. He had the first known jazz band. It wasn't the first jazz band to record because a lot of black musicians didn't want to deal with the white musicians over there. And the white musicians liked the music. So they began to emulate it and they took it to England. So the English people thought that the first original band was a white group. No, it was Buddy Bolden.

Buddy Bolden died when he was like thirty. He went crazy and died, but he had the first, long before Louie Armstrong. Long before King Oliver it was him.

Chapter 11 - 2:25

Jackie Robinson

John Erling: I got to bring you back.

Washington Rucker: Okay.

JE: To Dunbar Elementary and a guy by the name of Jackie Robinson.

WR: Oh, man, he came to town 1947.

JE: He was a great Brooklyn Dodger—

WR: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: ...baseball player.

WR: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: And you actually saw him play?

WR: I saw him play, it cost a dime, yeah. But they were playing the Tulsa—

JE: Oilers, I think, at the time.

WR: The Tulsa Oilers, right. And he came, he hit a single, he stole second, he stole third, and he stole home. Oh, man, after Joe Louis he was the next hero. Yeah, I saw him, I got a chance to see him.

When the teachers came in and said, “It costs a dime,” I was living at that time in Oklahoma, on Oklahoma Street, and I was going to Dunbar. And when she said, “If you don’t have a dime, if you can get you a dime.”

I said, “Can I go home?”

And she said, “Yeah.”

And I ran all the way home and got that dime and ran all the way back and got on that bus. And, oh yeah, yeah.

JE: And another guy who came to town that was famous was Lionel Hampton.

WR: Lionel came to town and I was in the seventh grade. I saw his band in the seventh grade, and he came to Carver and swung, swung everybody into bad health, man. You know, Lionel was a drummer and a vibe player. But Mr. Dickson played vibe. Remember I mentioned he had a one-octave vibe? Sitting on the top of his drum. But Lionel came and played like nobody’s business.

First time I saw a Filipino was in his band, he was a trombone player. Later, some years later, man, many years later, must have been 1963 or ’64, his wife, Gladys, called me from New York. They were playing at the Metropol. She called me and said, “We want you to come play drums for the weekend.”

I said, “Okay.”

“We’ll pay you thirty-five dollars.”

I said, “No, lady, thirty-five dollars a night, no, no, no.” She didn’t like to pay money, and she controlled it, she didn’t even give him money.

JE: I remember as a youngster I used to hear on the radio, Paul Lavalley and the Band—

WR: And the Band.

JE: ...of America.

WR: Oh, right. Mr. Simms introduced me to Paul. He used to come on Monday nights at six o’clock, I think it was six o’clock.

JE: On the radio.

WR: Right, on the radio. And Mama bought me a radio. When I got to Carver Mama bought me a little brown radio.

JE: In fact, I think it was the City Service Band—

WR: City Service, yeah.

JE: ...of the band, of America.

WR: Yeah, City Service, yeah.

JE: City Service was a gasoline brand.

WR: Yeah.

JE: And so that influenced you too, didn't it?

WR: Oh I loved it. To this day, I would love to play in a marching band. I love march music. I love it. And it's gotten real crazy now with all this different formations, it's become a show. But the musicianship itself, a lot of the march music I've played over the years, besides playing jazz, my most gratifying experience is playing march music.

JE: Hmm.

WR: Because you've got to be technically sound and the whole bit. Yeah, I love it, I love it.

Chapter 12 - 2:50

Deep Greenwood

John Erling: Let's talk a little bit about what's going on in Tulsa when you're growing up. Did you go to downtown Tulsa or did you stay in Greenwood? Could you shop and go in stores in downtown Tulsa?

Washington Rucker: No, uh-uh (negative), no. First of all, I didn't have any money. Second of all, I didn't go because in my mind, I'm only speaking for me, I don't know how other people think about it but Archer was a dividing line and most folks never went across Archer. Unless it was absolutely necessary they did not go across Archer. Because on the other hand, on Greenwood, the term Black Wall Street came to me later in life, we called it Deep Greenwood. And my mind had been so traumatized we never knew about Black Wall Street. We just knew Deep Greenwood.

But they said, "If a dollar hits Greenwood it doesn't have any reason to leave." Because the black community was self-contained. You had your barbershops, you had your barbeque places, you had Mann Brothers Stores, one on Greenwood and one on Lansing. Brothers, big, tall, light-skinned Mann. And I was in school with one of them, Antoinette Mann.

So, if a dollar hit Greenwood it didn't have any reason to leave. So there wasn't any reason to do downtown. You had clothes makers, tailors, shoe shops, and cleaners on Greenwood. No reason to leave.

JE: There would have been signs downtown that you would have seen.

WR: I saw them.

JE: What did they say?

WR: I'll have to paraphrase. "Colored people this way." "Colored people can't use this water fountain."

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

WR: They had all those signs. I saw it at the train station. It was at the train station. I used to go and ride the bus on 5th and Cincinnati going to South Haven. And you very seldom saw a black walking along 5th and Cincinnati unless he was working or unless she was working.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

WR: No, we understood, if you grew up in Ivy you don't really give it a whole lot of lot. You understand that there's a place you're supposed to be. Now, I thought it, man, I thought it in my way. I wouldn't go places that I know that treated us like this. And later, I think I can best explain it like this, when I joined the Navy then I saw it in its totality, how racism could just permeate peoples. You know?

For instance, they give you white uniforms in the Navy and I'll never forget. Right across from me was a little boy from Mississippi. You know you got the flap on the thing, you flap it up and you put your name across it and your serial number. And you flap it back down so you never see it. I do his and he does mine, when you come from around here. He took mine right across the top and the company commander made him wear it for the six weeks he was in.

JE: I didn't follow that, right across the top.

WR: He took a stencil with my name on it as opposed to stenciling in the back underneath my collar, he stenciled right across the front of my uniform.

JE: Why?

WR: Racism.

JE: He was white?

WR: White boy from Mississippi. I'll never forget him. I'll never forget him.

JE: And so they made him?

WR: Wear it. Made him wear it for as long as he was in boot camp. Because once you stenciled it it's there. Made him wear it all the way in boot camp. Yeah.

JE: Wow.

WR: Yeah.

Chapter 13 - 3:00

1921 Race Riot

John Erling: Back here, did you ever hear of the 1921 Race Riot? When you were young?

Washington Rucker: No. No. In my mind, they so traumatized people that people never talked about it. Because I was born in 1937, and I was born so close to where the Race Riot

actually took place, but it was a six-year period. So when I grew up in 1940s, early '40s, and particularly in the early '50s, Greenwood had already been rebuilt. And it looked old to me. Nobody every talked about the Race—I didn't hear about the Race Riot until I was in my later thirties or early forties.

JE: Wow. They didn't want to talk about it around here in Oklahoma.

WR: No, they were too traumatized. Because black folks were just totally—my mother was one of them. She was so totally, a white person come in she calmed down.

And I stood up, man, I was going to tell you, when I joined the Navy I came home with a pocket full of money and I wanted to buy her a new refrigerator. And I went down to Red Fork. I went to Red Fork to buy a refrigerator and a guy came to wait on her. He spoke to the woman and he called her Miss Such-and-Such. She was white. "Just a minute, I'll be with you Miss Such-and-Such," and then he went to wait on her leaving my mother and I standing there.

But when he comes over to my mother to talk about a refrigerator it's not Miss Barnett, it's Georgie. And I said, "Hold it, you call that woman Miss, you call my mother Miss. I want to buy a refrigerator now and I'm paying cash."

"Oh you don't have to pay cash." You know why? Because if you don't pay cash you pay interest on the money. And a two hundred dollar refrigerator will cost you a thousand dollars by the time you get through paying it.

I said, "No I'm paying cash money right now and I want it delivered Saturday." And, see? That broke the mold, because they weren't used to that.

JE: Yeah.

WR: Standing up like that. My mama was scared. Naw, I'm a man now. I'm not going to do this. I'm in a position now that I come in in civvies, I'm not going to do it. It has to be broken at some point in time.

JE: So there was a time when you just really resented white people?

WR: No, but I do have certain biases because I've seen it work too many times. I can't say that I hate white people because the woman that bought me my first set of drums was a white woman, Miss Cullener. And if her sons ever hear this or her grandsons she bought me my first set of drums. When I didn't have money to pay for my uniform when I got to high school, when that happened I didn't have the money. My mother didn't have the money, my auntie didn't have the money, but she went to Miss Cullener, the same woman.

Miss Cullener said, "If the boy's good enough to get in high school take this money to pay for the uniform." A white woman from this side of town.

So, no, I can't hate all white people.

JE: I didn't mean that you were hating now today.

WR: Uh-huh (agreement), I didn't hate them then, no.

JE: But there was a resentment.

WR: Oh a resentment, absolutely. They resented us, they resented us.

JE: Sure they did.

WR: They resented us because we made the best barbeque, you know?

JE: Or they were jealous then?

WR: And there was a certain resentment then too. But how can you do that? If it's not TV, the barbeque shows, I mean, how many? Every now and then you might see a black face. So the resentment was both ways.

JE: Right.

WR: The envy was both ways. My reason for being envious of a person didn't have anything to do with the color of the skin because I'm very comfortable with mine.

Chapter 14 - 5:00

Cast System

John Erling: At Booker T., you were told your days at Booker T. were numbered and you wouldn't graduate.

Washington Rucker: Yeah. By Mr. Woodlow.

JE: Okay.

WR: Again, that system, that whole thing, that caste system. Light-skinned, black-skinned, black-blacks here. Mr. Woodlow resented the fact that I came in and began to question his authority. The principals at that time, ran their high schools and elementary schools like minor fiefdoms, you know? The principal's word was law.

We had made money doing a kind of high jinks kind of thing and a lot of folks came. High jinks used to be a big show, it was the only time you see a lot of white people come down to this because it was like a vaudeville show on the black side of town. So a lot of white people came down to see it. They didn't see that singing and dancing at Central, so they'd come down.

They cut high jinks out the year before I got to high school because of a food boycott, so he took that high jinks away. Well, the band, and I was a part of the band, decided to have a show very much like high jinks without calling it high jinks. So we'd earned this money to buy new uniforms, because uniforms went back to when Red first got in the band. You know, probably in the 1930s, and they were raggedy and old and all that.

And we had to go up here on this end of town for the Christmas Parade. They would have nice, shiny uniforms, shiny instruments. And we had to use raggedy instruments. So we earned some money.

The next year we got a new head of the music department, Mr. Trice. And I think to this days, Mr. Fields had to account for all the uniforms. Since I was going to be in high school another two years and he was missing a uniform, somehow my name got on the list as having lost that uniform. But the uniform was lost in 1951, before I got to high school.

So we had a band festival in Okmulgee. And we didn't get a chance to go to it. So I asked Mr. Trice, I said, "Why didn't we?"

He said, "We didn't have any money."

I said, "We earned five thousand dollars last year!"

The choir had taken that money and got new choir uniforms and two senior cruises. The beginning of the senior cruises of buses and gone to Sand Springs. They could have caught the streetcar, it cost a nickel, they could have caught the streetcar.

So I said, "Mr. Woodlow, that was the band's money."

"Oh no, it was ba-ba-ba."

I said, "That was the band's money, not the choir's money." So there was a confrontation.

Then he had to come down to the band room and he hated that because, you know, I'm questioning his authority. So he came down and all my classmates were saying, "Yeah, man, we'll do blah, blah, blah," until he got there. Once he got there I was the Lone Ranger because my classmates just slithered right on back away from me.

I said, "No, man, that was the band's money. It was not the choir's money. You did not have a right."

He called me to his office the next day. He said, "I'm going to see to it that you don't graduate."

I said, "Well, if it has anything to do with grades you can't stop me because my grades are way too good." And, hey, the way they got me was that uniform.

When I went to the office to see if I'd lost any books in the three years I was there, the woman said, "I was wondering when you were going to come and take care of this uniform."

"What uniform?"

"The uniform you lost."

"I wasn't even in high school in 1951. Every year I turned my uniform in."

"Well, you owe \$367.00."

And a poor black boy, where am I going to get \$367.00? So I went and told my mother and my aunt. I was living with my aunt on Latimer. She said, "I don't know, I'll see what I can do." Which is what people say.

When I asked Miss Cullener, Miss Cullener said, "We can't do that. Give the boy, we pay for that uniform."

And when I went in and gave them \$367.00 it almost took the roof off the school house. Because again, the system had not beaten me down.

And the last thing Mr. Woodlow ever said to me in 1981, he was sitting under a tree in LA, right by within a half-mile of my condo. They were having an Oklahoma day and he saw me coming, and he said, "Washington Rucker."

I said, "You remember me?"

He said, "Boy, I'll never forget you as long as I live."

And I said, "And I just graduated from UCLA." That day! And I said, "Now I just graduated from UCLA." That day!

"You did?" Because he told me, "You be lucky if you get a job down at Brown Duncan's with a broom."

JE: Wow.

WR: Oh yeah. I said, "I just graduated from UCLA."

JE: And on graduation day—

WR: Oh yeah, I went crazy. It wasn't done on purpose. I had this resentment towards the system and the way it had made every attempt to beat me down. And it had beaten many down. I just happened to be a lot stronger. And I think the strong point with me was the fact that I'd gained a certain amount of independence based upon the fact that I played music.

JE: Yeah.

WR: That gave me a certain kind of independence. So the white superintendent comes down, he hands you your diploma. You shake his hand, you shake the principal's hand, you walk off the stage. A millisecond before it happened, I hadn't even given it any thought, but when I shook the superintendent's hand I walked past Mr. Woodlow like he was a ghost. You could hear a collective, "Aaaahh, did you see what Washington did?" That was my going out thing. I said, "I got my diploma, the white man gave it to me. Bye," and walked off the stage.

JE: And then you didn't see him until?

WR: 1981 when I graduated from UCLA.

JE: Wow.

WR: He said, "Boy, I'll never forget you."

Chapter 15 - 3:48

Racism Saved My Life

John Erling: Let's touch a little bit on the Navy. You went to Washington, DC, to music school?

Washington Rucker: The Navy School of Music, yeah.

JE: And you must have impressed them there. Did you feel any prejudice there with your—

WR: Oh man, oh. In the book, I wrote a Chapter on Racism Saved My Life.

JE: And how did that happen?

WR: Did I impress them? Well, let me go back. When I got to the Navy School of Music, music was not my first choice. I was going to Hospital Corpsman School. The Navy had, at that time, an incredible drum and bugle corps. Marched one hundred strong, I think it was a hundred.

Clifton Tipton who lives down on Main Street right now, we grew up on Jasper together. Clifton was in the choir and I'd watched him one day, when the corps marched down, everybody stopped. And just like the president when everybody stopped. And I said, "You look like Clifton." But you can't talk, you know, and he's yards away.

But he found out I was in boot camp. So I was out watching my dungarees one night, crying, man. The Navy had wiped my mind out because, you know, they separate you from all realities, all the comforts that you know. And they just break you down and build you back up in the mode that they want you to be in.

And I felt somebody tap me on the shoulder and I turned around, it was Clifton. I turned around and just started crying in his chest. And he said, "I can get you into the corps."

I said, "Can you get me in the corps?"

He said, "Yeah." So sure enough, he went back.

My company commander, he wouldn't let me. So Clifton went to his company commander, who went to the base captain, boom, they got me into the corps. So I ended up getting in the corps. And within, I don't know, four or five weeks I became the chief auditioner. I basically auditioned all the drummers.

So this Navy guy saw me playing and said, "You need to be in the Navy School of Music."

I said, "I'm going to Corpsman School."

He said, "Washington, DC, has eleven women to every man."

I said, "Sign me up." So I go to Navy School of Music. There were 150 drummers, my name was 147, and I had to climb that high up. That's when I really became a real musician because I used to practice and study almost twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Didn't hang out, didn't do nothing, I just played in the band.

So, they decided to make this band a part of the US Navy band. And they said, "This is the band, Washington, we're replacing you with somebody else." So they replaced me with a little white boy.

When that happened, I went to the Pentagon to talk to the captain in charge of all the Navy music. And I'll never forget, he's from Little Rock, Arkansas. Very tall, rawboned man. He saw me when I came in, and you got to stand at attention until they tell you, "At ease." So he finally said, "At ease. What's your problem?"

I said, "I was in that band." Inside of it was a swing band too. I said, "I was in that band and they took me out and replaced me with somebody else."

He said, “Boy, you go back and be the best sailor you can be. Be the best musician you can be because if it was left up to me you’d still be shining my shoes and making my coffee.” And the whole band got killed.

JE: The whole band?

WR: The whole band got killed.

JE: How?

WR: Eisenhower was president then and he wanted to hear the dance band at Brets Hill. He sent for the band, the band was traveling, it was traveling all over. They sent a plane to pick them up and the plane went down and killed the whole band.

JE: Prejudice saved you.

WR: Um-hmm (affirmative). That’s what I said, racism saved my life because I was in that band.

JE: Weren’t you the official funeral band, Arlington Cemetery?

WR: I was in the band when the iconic Black Jack was there. Black Jack was a horse that had to be a hundred years old. The last time Black Jack performed was at President Kennedy’s funeral. If you saw the riderless horse with the spurs turned backwards—

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

WR: That was Black Jack. And I knew Black Jack well.

JE: That’s great.

WR: When we played rrahoom (sound he made) it’s called a dirge, which is old New Orleans tradition. We played the dirge and Black Jack would just lower his head and start crying. But he was at every funeral.

JE: Where were you when President Kennedy was killed November 22, 1963?

Chapter 16 - 3:00

JFK-MLK Deaths

Washington Rucker: I was delivering mail. I’d gotten a call to come play at the Howard Theater because the drummer couldn’t read the music. So when he officially died, I was on the bandstand of the Howard Theater, after the first act. And the comedian came out and said, “The president is dead.” And that was the end of the show. That’s where I was and that was the most frightening period in my life.

I said, “If they can kill him, they can kill anybody in the world. And I don’t mean nothing to them.” And that was the first thing that came to my mind.

John Erling: So then when they killed Martin Luther King—

WR: I didn’t have the same fears.

JE: When they killed Martin Luther King you didn't have the same fears?

WR: No, I didn't have the same fears, because, first of all, I didn't embrace all of his philosophy, personally. This country was not built on love. We know how this country was built. And ultimately it was going to happen to him, because when people want to get rid of somebody there's always somebody willing to do it.

So when Martin Luther King went through what he had to go through, it was unexpected in a part, but in another side of me it wasn't. Because if you recall, shortly thereafter, Malcolm X got killed. And I always said Malcolm X scared them more than Martin Luther King. Martin Luther King had the Gandhi philosophy, you know.

But I don't believe in turning the other cheek. I'm not doing that. It's a wonder I'm still alive. Because I don't, no, no, if you hit me I'm going to hit you back. If you leave me alone I'll leave you alone. But I'm not going to accept it.

JE: But would you agree that Martin Luther King's way is the way that prevailed? And that was really the best way?

WR: I totally agree with that except in part, it was a combination of his philosophy and the way it was done and what the world thought of us as Americans. Because we consider ourselves to be the leading country, you understand. We have the same thing they have in South Africa, to a lesser degree.

So, yes, I believe it was the right thing to do because one thing about it, I have seen the might of the Seventh Fleet, so I know what kind of weapons of destruction, in this city. I knew that but I think there's a better way. Because by the time Martin died he had basically become, in my mind, pretty ineffective. By then J. Edgar Hoover had him by the, by the, by both shoulders and he couldn't make a move. So it's a bad thing to say, but to say a man died and became a martyr is basically what it was because he had become less and less effective. And it, in part, because of the way the system is here.

And this is a great place. I love it, I love America, and it's the only place you can go, but I've been to some other places that to me were just as good. And the color of my skin didn't matter.

JE: In Europe?

WR: In Europe, always in Europe.

JE: Right.

WR: Yeah, and I've known many expatriates, many, and they all say the same thing. I mean, when I first went to Romania in 2006, if it had been 1986, or 1976, I'd still be in Romania.

JE: Right. Marques Haynes talked about the prejudice—

WR: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: ...that the Harlem Globetrotters felt here.

WR: Oh yeah.

JE: But when they went and played in Europe they didn't feel that at all.

WR: Everybody embraced them.

JE: Everybody, right.

WR: They didn't care anything about the color of their skin.

JE: Right.

WR: They brought an art form.

JE: Right.

Chapter 17 - 4:20

Instant Composition

Washington Rucker: I got to share this with you. One of the youngsters yesterday, we were talking about jazz, blah, blah, blah. And somebody had told him, he said, "You know, man, you know when jazz came up and it formed with classical music?"

And I said, "Where did you get that from?" Classical musicians, they think they're the greatest musicians in the world. And jazz musicians were playing some of the greatest music in the world.

I used to belong to an organization. The woman said, "We love jazz." She said, "And I always said classical music, the majority of those songs are 150 years old. So what's so great about them? They've been played literally thousands of times."

Whenever you get on the bandstand as a jazz musician it's instant composition, never played twice.

John Erling: Right.

WR: You know? And I got that from Oscar Peterson. Instant composition.

There's a lady in LA now who's married to a boy from Edmonds. She used to be the educational director for the Pasadena Symphony Hour Show. I have a program called Jazz for Wee People that I started in 1981. Everything was structured, it looked like it wasn't structured but there was a structure to it. There were lessons, there was the Call and Response, there was kids interacting with musicians and the whole idea is to introduce them to this fine world of music that we know. And I think that's really been my greatest thing that I've ever done. Because it ran until I stopped doing it.

She formed a thing called Classical Notes. Jazz musicians on one side of the room, classical musicians on this side. They each play, they talk about it, and then they come together. Well, I moderated one. Was a tall lady who was a first trumpet player

for the LA Philharmonic. I walked up and said, "Hey, I'm Washington Rucker." Shook everybody's hand, we all get together and jam at the end. I said, "Have you all worked on tunes?"

She said, "Yeah, we decided to play "London Bridge Comes Tumbling Down."

I said, "Wow. It's interesting, we do the same thing. What key?" And that threw her off but she just assumed that we didn't know it, you know. But if you know the head, the rest of it is pure jazz. So we ended up playing.

And so, the French horn player said, "Hey, man, what's your name?"

I said, "My name is Washington Rucker."

"You and I played together."

I said, "We probably did a record date, you know," and I told him about the few big record dates that I'd done where they used French horns.

But he said, "No, no, no, not that." He said, "Were you ever been in the Navy?"

I said, "Yeah."

"That's where I know you. You're the cat that they took out of the band and put that white boy in there." And everybody got quiet because he knew the same story. He was in the Navy band when it happened.

JE: Wow. So when the classical players are playing and you joined them—

WR: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: ...how does that work?

WR: Well—

JE: Because they're so given to the notes and you guys are just going the way you feel.

WR: But, okay? But if you play "London Bridge Come Tumbling Down," it has a melody. It's the same melody that the jazz players, they just use a different approach of playing the same melody.

She said, "We played this," and they might have played it with the stiff classical, but highly executed.

JE: Right.

WR: But the jazz musicians play it a lot looser. So when we got together and played it, hey, they played it their way, we played it our way.

JE: What a great sound that had to—

WR: Oh it took off. And I told her to bring it here, and she just now redoing this thing. Look for her, her name is Jerry Price and she's doing this. Because she called me about a month ago and she said, "I'm doing it again."

I said, "I told you a long time ago to do it. You develop that, you conceptualize that, not the Pasadena Philharmonic."

JE: So this might be a good time then to say, you're saying magic and grooves cannot be written on paper.

WR: No, grooves cannot be written. The young boy yesterday, I'm sorry, the young man, one of the Hanson Brothers, we were talking, and he said, "Man, we just met Bill Withers."

I said, "Yeah, I know him, he's not a really great friend of mine but I know him."

He said, "You ever played with Withers?"

I said, "No, that's got James Gadson." Gadson is a drummer friend of mine. I said, "Gad plays those sixteen notes on the high hat like that."

He said, "Where'd he get that from?"

I said, "The church." And Gad came out of Kansas City. He's playing, "Sti-di-di-di-di," the Japanese love him because they can't put it in the computer. Because you can't put feeling in a computer.

JE: Right.

WR: You know? No matter how they try. So we talked about it and I told him the difference in the Gad plan, Gad can't read a note, but he can play, he just played. Now, Gad has called me for reading gigs. I did a film called *Mob City*, and Gad called me because he knew there was some reading involved.

He said, "Now Washington Rucker, they got you on a call." And I played it and it was all improvisation.

The musical library had handed me a blank piece of paper and said, "This is what we're playing. It's just a title. You just play what you're feeling."

Gad could have played that.

Chapter 18 - 5:45

Famous Names

John Erling: I'm going to name some names: Sam Cooke.

Washington Rucker: Oh I loved him. I loved Sam Cooke. Played with him, played on the bandstand, got a chance to play with him twice. His drummer's name was June, I can't think of June's last name, he's from New Orleans. But Sam was the most soulful person I have ever seen. I met him in Washington, DC, in '60 or '61. He only carried a guitar player with him, a guy named Cliff White. Cliff was an old, old man, big guy with a white head of hair and played a big belly guitar and sang.

But the music was done by René Hall. René used to be in Mr. Ernie Fields band here. René's music was laid out so beautiful on a piece of paper that a blind man could see it.

Because Sam used the same ice cream changes. He must have written a hundred songs, and every song had the same changes. Boom-boom, boom-boom, ding-ding, da. Every song that he ever wrote got those same changes in it.

So, I was playing with Sam one time, I wasn't on the bandstand with him at this particular time. June was there. I played with him when June's father died and June had to go back to New Orleans. But Sam came back from right across the street. The Howard Theater is a watering hole called Cecilia's. And he came with a girl, a tall, blond girl. So he took a cigarette out and he told the girl, "Hold this, I'll be right back." And he went out, first show of the afternoon, you know, two o'clock show. Maybe fifteen or twenty people in a place that held probably five hundred, so you know there's nobody in there.

He started singing and locked in and about an hour and twenty minutes later he stopped. For eight people. Unreal. And nobody has, the only person who has the voice now is R. Kelly, if he would stick to singing the kind of song that Sam did. It's a rare voice and I don't think you can train for that voice. Sam had it but Sam came out of the gospel church. He came out of a group called the Soul Stirrers, as did Lou Rawls. They were in the same group together.

JE: The Howard Theater, where was that?

WR: It's in Washington, DC.

JE: Yeah.

WR: It's one of the iconic places.

JE: Yes. And you said you delivered mail. You worked for the Post Office, you were a mailman.

WR: I worked at the Post Office, yeah.

JE: You were a mailman.

WR: Mailman, yeah.

JE: Why?

WR: Well, you know, when I got out of the Navy I got out of the second class musicians, I had gotten quartered and my wife wanted to have a family. She wanted me to stay in the Navy and I didn't want to stay in the Navy, because by then, racism had just practically driven me to the edge. I said, "You know, if I stay in I'm going to lose all my fights because I'm going to fight somebody and you lose your stripes."

So she made me promise if I didn't get a job within ninety days that I'd go back in the Navy and keep my same job. So I went to work at the Post Office.

JE: You backed Sammy Davis Jr.

WR: Played with him one time.

JE: What was that like?

WR: He's interesting, very talented, but stupid in this regard, Sammy, I doubt if he had fifteen cents when he died because he lived well above his means. He saw me in 1965, that's how I met him. I was with T. Carson and the same bass player, Wilbur Little, who was in Amsterdam, we had a trio. I was actually playing with them but I played because T.'s original drummer didn't want to play a job free. But I said, "I'll play it for you," because I played with them all the time anyway.

We go out to David Brinkley, you remember David Brinkley?

JE: The newscaster?

WR: The newscaster, we go out to his house and we're playing. Well, Sammy comes in with Frank Sinatra and all those guys. They were in town for Kennedy. So he came over and played a little bass and a little drums and a little whatever, you know. And he liked my car. I had a new '65 Mustang, he liked my car so I drove him back in the motorcade back to the National Theater. So he did a command performance of *Golden Boy*, he had all the music.

JE: Yeah.

WR: So we ended up doing *Golden Boy* for that night and the next night. But Sammy just lived above it. If he made ten thousand a night he spent fifteen thousand the same night.

JE: We have a number of names like Buddy Rich, and you met up with him.

WR: Yeah, Buddy's interesting. Buddy is, you know, a little arrogant cat, short, arrogant. I had just come back from Europe. I was called to work with a singer that Motown was trying to make into a big star. And they said, "Buddy is kind of strange. You'd better take your own drums."

So I took my own drums to Caesar's Palace. That was my first gig in Las Vegas. I took my drums and I set them on the side and set them up. And Buddy walked in with his entourage, you know, yes men. His roadie had set up a new set of Rogers drums. Man, I just salivated. And he said, "They know I use a cymbal right here." Uses a cymbal right on the right hand side. He said, "They don't have it, send them back."

I said, "Man, give me those. I'd love to have those drums."

Anyway, the guy boxed them up. So the librarian came out with the music. Buddy has never spoken to me, and he looked at the music and, "Uh-huh," he said, "Hey, drummer, play this," and threw the music at me.

I played it. "Play it again, play it again," he said. "Would you mind if I use those drums?"

I said, "No," then he sat down and put them back, he didn't read music. So all he wanted to do was hear it. And he heard it. I played it the second time down and he sat down and played, Ba-ra-ra-din, put his stuff to it. Made my drum set come alive, you know?

But, the greatest compliment he ever paid me was three or four nights into the gig, I was watching him on the side. He could see me watch him and he played a lick that I had played. I said, "Man, that's my lick."

He said, "Yeah, this is the way you play it," and he called me out my name, you know.

So anyway, the next night I came in early. His manager ran up to me and said, "Man, you got to play."

I said, "We're starting early?"

He said, "No," he said, "Buddy just had a heart attack."

So I had to go play, and I had to play all his music. Well, Frank Sinatra and—

JE: Dean Martin and Joey Bishop.

WR: Yeah, yeah, yeah, and Peter Lawford.

JE: Sammy Davis.

WR: They all came—

JE: The Rat Pack.

WR: ...to support Buddy because Buddy is making forty thousand a week. So they needed something to fill that gap and I wasn't going to do it, you know. I don't know if I wrote it or not but Joey ran up on the bandstand and he said, "Holy smoke!" Sounded like Amos and Andy. He said, "Is this Buddy? This must be Buddy after the riots." But then he came backstage and said, "Hey, man, I don't mean you any harm."

I said, "Man, I know you got to make people laugh, it's what you do for a living."

Chapter 19 - 2:00

Breakfast with Joe Louis

Washington Rucker: Couple days later I was having breakfast at Caesar's Palace and there was Joe Louis and the Rat Pack. They hadn't even been to sleep yet. Joe Louis, and what's his name Jilly. Whenever you heard of Frank Sinatra knocking out somebody Jilly was his henchman. Jilly was the one and Frank was just taking credit for it, it was Jilly doing it. And Jilly came over and got me, and he said, "Frank wants you to have breakfast with him."

And I said, "Wow." So I go over and I sit down here. Jilly's sitting here, somebody is sitting there, Joe Louis is sitting there, and Frank Sinatra was sitting there. Well, I didn't want to talk to Frank Sinatra, I wanted to talk to Joe Louis. And I said, "Oh, Joe, I saw you in 1944 in my elementary school."

He said, "They still call them pretty Indian women?"

I said, "Yeah." So that was that.

The gig was over and one of the musicians walked up and said, "Hey, man, I've been in this band for seven years and it's the first time it ever swung." And that was a great compliment, because Buddy was a dynamo, man. You just, you had to hold on with him. And I just play, I play and I swing.

Ultimately, the greatest thing he ever did for me was two or three months later I was right outside the Palladium in LA getting some gas. And a limo pulled up. His limo driver was a black cat.

John Erling: Who? Who now?

WR: Buddy Rich's. He always kept a limo, you know, and he had a limo driver named Hank Aaron, but now baseball player. And I said, "Hey, man, I don't know you from Buddy."

He said, "Oh yeah, Buddy's in the back. Let me tell him you're out here."

He said, "Tell him to come back here." And I went back there, and he said, "Yeah," he said, "I heard you swung your A off," and reached his hand in his pocket and gave me a thousand dollars. He had two women with him, but with that thousand dollars I wanted to kiss him. He said, "I heard you played your A off." He gave me a thousand dollars, and that was my Buddy Rich story. It was quite nice.

JE: At that breakfast, Frank Sinatra, did you talk to him at all?

WR: Oh yeah we talked. He said, "Man, I love the way you play." He said, "I love your sensitivity," and he said, "I noticed it with the chick." Because he's a singer so he understood what a drummer could do behind. He said, "You go to the brushes a lot."

I said, "Yeah, well, that's my forte. I play with brushes a lot better than I do with sticks."

My best music friend Ndugu Chancler, who is a world-class drummer said, "Hey, man, you need to leave those drumsticks alone and pick up the brushes."

Chapter 20 - 2:00

Frank Sinatra

Washington Rucker: But later I ran into Frank Sinatra at UCLA when I was a student there. I won the Frank Sinatra Award in 1981, the last time he had that award. He saw me and he walked over to me, he said, "What are you doing here?"

I said, "I go to school here."

He said, "Oh, that's what they were talking about."

I said, "What?"

He said, "Why weren't you at the dinner?"

"What dinner?" They'd had a dinner for all the award winners but nobody invited me. UCLA.

John Erling: Was that on purpose?

WR: Absolutely.

JE: Because you're black?

WR: Probably 'cause I'm tall, you know. The Dean of Fine Arts, and he's passed away, I won't call his name, but he had always said when he and I talked, he said, "Welcome to the most racist university in the world."

JE: Wow.

WR: Well, anyway, Frank Sinatra said, "That's what they're talking about."

I didn't know what he was talking about, and you don't ask Frank Sinatra questions, you know. He said, "Yeah," he said, "I'll take care of it."

His musical director Sonny Burke had just died, that's why he was there because normally that's Sonny Burke's gig. Frank Sinatra said, "I'll take care of it." So when he came out I got a picture of him giving me the award, and I got the original envelope that it came in because he autographed it for me. He said, "I won an Academy Award and I played in a film called *The Man with a Golden Arm*," and he said it was about Gene Krupa. He said, "I played with people like this. They would complain about I was a professional musician." He said that most of you youngsters go to schools that he can't afford to go to, and now you think you're being short-changed. The fact that he's a professional musician, he said, "I give X amount of dollars at the university every year and I got a better place to put my money." And that was the last time he gave the Frank Sinatra Award.

JE: Is that right?

WR: He gave it to the Dance Club of Harlem, on record. He said, "I'm not putting up with this."

JE: Because of the racism?

WR: He saw it.

JE: Yeah.

WR: He saw it where we just want to confine it to just music majors. But I was not a music major, I was a history major. He said, "No, I make money with people like this."

Chapter 21 - 2:18

Stevie Wonder

John Erling: Stevie Wonder, you were around him when he was a teenager, I believe?

Washington Rucker: Yeah, Little Stevie Wonder, yeah.

JE: Little Stevie, yes.

WR: Incredible player, incredible highly talented. I've only met two really musically talented people in my life. One was Stevie Wonder, the other one was Hampton Hawes. They were the most talented musicians I've ever seen. Stevie could take two piece of card and make a sound out of it and write a song at the same time.

JE: Wow.

WR: And he can still do it today. When I met him he was young and enthusiastic and I was telling the kids yesterday, “In music, timing is everything. The young girls whoop and holler, but with Stevie they whooped and hollered because of his music. He does a high tune, way up high, and then all of a sudden, drops down and picks up a harmonica and says, ‘Ba-ba-ba-ba-ba, Alfie.’ That’s like jumping out of hot water right into cold water.”

Every night I’d see them faint and I said the only reason I wasn’t fainting was because I was playing.

JE: But back then, I suppose, his hit was “I Was Born to Love Her”?

WR: Yeah, that was the tune that got us to London, his first European tour, yeah. I saw the impact of the media, radio and television, because if we played that tune on the TV show called *Top of the Pops*, and they sold literally 150-, 200-thousand copies that day for one tune. That day. And I realized the fact that the media has an incredible impact on how you deliver music.

JE: You had breakfast with him one time?

WR: Yeah, I had breakfast with Stevie. He asked me what time I got up. I said, “I get up early,” so the next morning I heard somebody scratching along the wall. I opened the door and it was him looking for my number.

He said, “Man, let’s go eat breakfast.” So we went to eat breakfast and they had him eating with his hands.

I said, “No, man,” I said, “This is a knife, this is a fork, eat scrambled eggs, whatever, but eat with a knife and a fork.”

And when I came back, I took him for a walk, and when I came back the “road managers” were in the lobby and four or five other people were there looking for him. Couldn’t find him and they were mad that I would take him off some place. They said, “Don’t you ever take him any place, blah, blah, blah.”

And then I realized the fact of what they were doing to him, you know? Because I do believe, and this is me speaking, they wanted to keep him dumb, blind, and crazy. And they didn’t want him to put a dollar in his pocket. “You just get up there and sing.” But genius will rise to the top, no matter what.

Chapter 22 – 2:00**Nancy Wilson**

John Erling: Nancy Wilson.

Washington Rucker: Everybody's greatest love, including mine. Actually, "Guess Who I Saw Today" was her signature song, it's an off-Broadway show. And from what I understand she's working as a secretary. John Levy, who was the iconic black manager for everybody told me and Cannonball Adderley had kept telling him, "You better go see this chick, this lady from Chillicothe." And when he heard her singing "Guess Who I Saw," he signed her. And he kept her, except for a short period when she went crazy on him, well, she didn't go crazy, her ex-husband did. But John had her for like forty-five years or so as an artist.

JE: You traveled with her.

WR: I traveled with Nancy several years, three or four years. I still maintain a very lovable relationship with her. She's wonderful, she's seventy-eight years old and she's very regal, she's very elegant, and she's always been that way. Even when I see her, her embrace, man, it's like, "Yeah, I could stay here forever."

JE: I saw her in Minneapolis many years ago.

WR: Yeah.

JE: She talks a lot during her—

WR: Oh yeah, oh yeah, it's a conversation with Nancy. It's never a performance, it's a conversation. Normally men and women. And I used to get on her because Nancy would do maybe eight songs, high-powered songs, and then she would come back and introduce the band, which might take fifteen minutes, and always with me she'd say, "My drummer, put the spotlight on my drummer. Look at those eyes, and he can play too." See, when you do that the innuendo is built in. She's a beautiful lady.

JE: About Buddy Rich, he helps an old black man by the name of Papa Jo Jones.

WR: Uh, Papa Jo Jones, Papa Jo Jones was a master of the brushes, played with Count Basie's band for a number of years. He's a master of the brushes. He took care of Papa Jo Jones. See, people give Buddy Rich a bad name. The first thing I said about him, he's short and arrogant.

JE: Yeah.

WR: But there was another side of him. He respected musicians. He respected musicians that didn't work for him, you know, because he got a bunch of little college boys who wanted him. "Oh I play with Buddy Rich's band," on their resume. So he didn't pay them a lot of money. But, yeah, he took care of Papa Jo Jones until he died.

Chapter 23 - 2:10**Clint Eastwood**

John Erling: And then you portrayed Papa Jo Jones.

Washington Rucker: Papa Jo Jones in the movie.

JE: In the film *Bird*.

WR: *Bird*, yeah.

JE: Which was directed by Clint Eastwood.

WR: Clint Eastwood, yeah, yeah.

JE: What was that experience like?

WR: Wonderful, you know, I went to acting school so I had like six years of acting. But I didn't read for the movie. I didn't get a call to read and when I did come in I read something and the guy said, "Hey, okay," and next thing I know I'm sitting behind the drums.

So we played it one time and Eastwood said, "I heard you read for my film."

I said, "Yeah."

He said, "Why didn't you take the part?"

I said, "Because what I'm doing now is real."

He said, "Okay." So they began to pay me. I had a screen acting card already. So he said, "Who did you study with?"

I said, "I studied with Robert Geiss." And I said, "Your ex-partner I met in Rome." His name is Richard Harrison. He and Eastwood did spaghetti westerns together when Eastwood first got started.

He said, "You know him?"

I said, "Yeah, I know him." I said, "I met him in Rome."

And then when I was in Switzerland, they called me back and said, "Hey, man, we want you to come back and throw that cymbal."

So when I went back Clint Eastwood met me. He said, "I want you to throw the cymbal and hit me." He said, "Hit me and put the camera right on your shoulder." So when you see it, it goes right into it. And I threw the cymbal, bap! One take, fifteen hundred dollars. I wanted to kiss him. One take.

And that's the thing that you see, it's a recurring theme, that cymbal going in. But that's a true story.

JE: You played the Apollo.

WR: Yeah.

JE: And that was—

WR: Apollo Theater. It's one of the five iconic black theaters that were on the Chitlin' Circuit. You had the Apollo in New York, you had the Howard in Washington, you had the Regal in Chicago, the Royal in Baltimore, and the Philly Uptown in Philadelphia. Those are the five ones.

JE: And Flip Wilson was an opener.

WR: Yeah, I knew Flip. Flip was the opening act, just before he got his television show we flew in on the same plane together from the University of Miami in Ohio. You know, that school, it's called the Cradle of the Coaches because a lot of NFL coaches go to that school. And he was opening for Nancy, and I was playing for Nancy. We came on the plane together.

He said, "I'm going to get you in the band, man."

I said, "Cool," but he didn't realize the fact it wasn't up to him. You know? It wasn't up to him.

Chapter 24 - 1:55

Presidential Pardon

John Erling: There was a presidential pardon from JFK.

Washington Rucker: For Hampton Hawes.

JE: Tell us that story.

WR: Hampton called me to play and Hampton's a jazz cat. Jazz guys tend to be loose, there's no great formality about them. So he said, "Hey, Washington, man, this is Hampton Hawes."

I said, "Hey, man, what's happening?"

He said, "Dig, I got a gig for you. Jimmy Hopps recommended you. I got a gig we want you to play, so come on over to my house and rehearse."

I said, "Okay, do I need to bring anything?"

He said, "Yeah, just something light."

So I brought a snare drum and a high hat and brushes. I walk in, he's living in East LA, and most Latinos live over there. His wife, Josie Black, was a Latino. I walked in, he had a fake fireplace up there and there was a presidential pardon. Well, of course, it's going to stick out because you never see those. And when we took a break I said, "Hey, man, how did you get that pardon?"

He said, "Man, it cost me sixty-five cents." That's the way jazz cats talk.

I said, "What happened?"

He said, "Well, you know, man," he said, "when I was doing a nickel," you know, a nickel is five years, he said, "I was doing a nickel as a three-time loser."

JE: What was he in for?

WR: Drugs.

JE: For drugs?

WR: Drugs, yeah, that's all he ever did.

JE: All right, so, right.

WR: He never stole anything. But anyway, he said, "I was doing a nickel and JFK was doing that speech, 'Ask not what your country can do for you but what you can do for your country.'" He said, "I couldn't do nothing, I was doing a nickel." He said, "And I know him."

I said, "Where did you meet him?"

He said, "Man, he used to come out to a club on the West Coast, Hod Rumsey's Room, he's a jazz and bass player, had a nightclub. And Hampton used to play out there all the time. He said JFK would come and sit in the back with a lady. So he knew him, knew him to see him. So he wrote him a letter. "Hey, I'm Hampton Hawes, you used to come see me play at the club. I can't do, I'm doing a nickel, man. What can you do for me?"

Boom. He said the cats in the cell laughed at him. He said about a month later the guard came and said, "Hamp, get your stuff together, you're out of here." That's how he got out.

JE: Wow.

WR: Sixty-five cents was the price of a special delivery letter at that time. That's how he got out of the joint.

JE: That's great.

Chapter 25 - 2:55

New York, New York

John Erling: We talked about you being in *Bird* but you were in *New York, New York* as well.

Washington Rucker: I was in *New York, New York*.

JE: What were you doing in that?

WR: I've always played musician parts, although I went to acting school, I always played musician parts. I'm on the bandstand and they got the music. I had my hand on my floor tom tom and Liza Minnelli is standing down there. You don't talk to actors and all that. I used to keep my nails really polished, and still do, and I didn't get around to it today. I'm sorry. But I had my hand on that and I'm looking at the music and she said, "Are you a musician?"

I said, "Yeah."

She said, "Well, I thought you were just an extra."

I said, "No, sweetheart, I'm a musician. And I saw your mother just before she died."

She said, "Where?"

I said, "Prince Albert Hall, I think it is, in London." We went to see her and Nancy was there.

JE: We should point out that Liza Minnelli's mother was Judy Garland.

WR: Uh, Judy Garland, yeah, Judy Garland. I said, "I saw your mother just before she died."

So Liza broke up. She said she liked my nails. I said, "I got three hundred hours in nails."

She said, "What does that mean?"

I said, "I went to beauty school," which I did. I have a cosmetology license, and I said, "You have to do three hundred hours in fingernails, in manicuring." I said, "I have to do my own nails."

Because Nancy told me, "You've got beautiful hands," and she bought me for my birthday a nice, gold manicuring set. And I still got it. Nancy's birthday was the week before and my birthday is March 5. So we got up closeness that way.

So Liza went and told Scorsese.

JE: Martin Scorsese?

WR: Martin Scorsese, that I was a real musician. He came and he said, "You're a real musician?"

I said, "Yeah."

He said, "Would you like to get a bebop group together for me?"

I said, "Yeah, I got one."

So he called me. I was going to do the scene and it was on the weekend. De Niro came over, said, "Hey, man, I'd like to find out where you all are playing."

I said, "51st and Broadway in LA."

He came down. He wasn't known then, he came down and dressed, they thought he was a narco man because he had a whole bunch of junk that never had been played. So the next Monday when we got in, De Niro and I were in a room together and the script woman brought the script in. I looked at it and I said, "Man, I ain't saying that."

He said, "What's wrong?"

I said, "Look at this dialogue." It was like, "Dy-no-mite!" I said, "No, that's that J. J. Walker crap, Uncle Tom stuff." I said, "I won't do that."

Scorsese had told the musical consultant to write some dialogue. I said, "First of all, I don't do that. If this is what it takes for me to work I won't do it." I said, "I don't do this, simple as that."

So Scorsese said, "What's the problem?"

I said, "This is the problem, he's got me doing some Uncle Tom crap that I don't do. The scene is this: I got a bebop band. De Niro is in a big band. He wants to come and play in my bebop band, so who's doing the dancing in the sandbox? Huh?"

The musical cat heard about it, "This is theater."

I said, "I got seven years in theater, how much have you? You've been chasing Charlie Park for the last twenty and ain't caught him yet." He never spoke to me again. I said, "No, I'm not going to do that." So he let me write my own dialogue.

JE: And you did that with De Niro.

WR: Oh yeah. I wrote it, they used my name, and gave me extra money.

Chapter 26 - 2:18

Teach at UCLA

John Erling: Another movie you did was *Lush Life*, which featured Forest Whitaker.

Washington Rucker: Yeah, Forest actually played in *Bird* too, but he yeah, *Lush Life*, he played trumpet in that. I had trio behind him and, uh, he finally turned around because he never talks. He finally turned around and said, "Hey, man, how do I look?"

I said, "Man, every time you recite your dialogue you put your horn down. Not good. The horn becomes a part of you, you know."

JE: UCLA, you go to college there, but you were in Los Angeles City College—

WR: I went to Los Angeles City College first.

JE: And that was community college, community college.

WR: Uh, right, community college, right.

JE: And then you went on to UCLA.

WR: Yeah.

JE: And then you actually taught there.

WR: Yeah, I taught in the school of essential for two years. And the main teacher, I taught in his class the last year, Dr. Paul Tiner. He only called the roll one time, that's the first day of class and 750 people in there. So he was calling the roll and he goes, "Washington Rucker, where are you?" And I was way in the back. He said, "Come down and see me." On the way down, he said, "He's on such and such album." Tiner had one of those minds so he read everything so he knew some albums I was on.

His wife was always sick. Her name is Bunny and he would call me and say, "Hey, man, I'm in such and such chapel. Go and teach my class today." So he was trying to set me up to take over. He said, "You'd be perfect for taking over this class." But they wanted somebody with more than a bachelor's. He said, "You know, I didn't even have a bachelor's when I took over this class."

JE: You recorded songs that you have written.

WR: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: Like “Lucky,” “Forest Dance.”

WR: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: “My Ballerina.”

WR: “My Ballerina.”

JE: Songs that you have written and recorded.

WR: Yeah, um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: Do songs still come to you? Are you still writing?

WR: Yeah. You know, I lost my wife April 26 and I had not written her a song. And she had said that to me, she said, “You know, you have never written me a song.”

And I said, “Well, I will when I get that kind of inspiration.” And finally she passed away. And she was a flower, just any flower she knows about, she knew about, she was a cancer researcher by profession. And when she passed away, cancer researchers from all over the world came to see her. So I wrote a tune called “She Loves Flowers,” which I have yet to record, but that’s my next recording.

JE: And her name?

WR: Her name is Natalie Rucker. Natalie, N-a-t-a-l-i-e.

JE: And she passed away in April of this—

WR: April 26.

JE: Of 2015?

WR: Yeah. Yeah.

JE: How long had you been married?

WR: Forty-five years.

JE: Wow.

WR: Yeah.

JE: That’s tough, and I can see that that’s tough on you right now. I’m sorry.

Chapter 27 - 2:25

Joe Turner

John Erling: I want to talk about Big Joe Turner.

Washington Rucker: I recorded three or four albums with him. But the first one was called “Joe Turner Meets the Trumpet Kings.” And that band was Roy Eldridge, Dizzy Gillespie, Clark Kerry, and Sweets Edison, for Pablo Records. That was, again, Norman Granz magic. Norman Granz was the guy that had jazz at the Philharmonic. He ultimately at Pablo Records. That’s the—

JE: He's the one that took jazz out of the clubs, isn't he?

WR: Out of the clubs, and made it more sophisticated, yeah.

JE: Yeah, right.

WR: And took it all over the world and made a whole lot of money.

JE: About Big Joe Turner, there was a songwriter who said rock and roll would never have happened with him.

WR: In my estimation, in my estimation because Oscar Peterson said, "Jazz is an instant composition." With him, blues band's instant composition. For instance, we were singing a song, he had two little, small, little Pekinese dogs. One was called Rhythm and the other was called Blues. We were recording and they'd run across the floor. He might put them in the next line, based on the fact that they just ran across the floor. So he never knew all the lyrics to any particular song, it was just whatever came to mind. In my estimation. There were about three cats and he's got to be at the top because the bebop and all those guys, they came right out of Joe Turner's bag.

I wrote a story called "Zenobia," about a woman I met in Cushing, Oklahoma, when I played with Jimmy all the time. In Zenobia, you didn't have to tip her but if you give her a quarter to put in the jukebox she played "TV Mama" five times. And she swore that he'd written that song for her.

So the first time I went down, we were in the back of the limo with Joe Turner. I said, "Joe, do you know a lady named Zenobia from Cushing?"

He said, "She was a nice lady." Because Zenobia had all the parts and so that verified what she had said. Joe Turner was a very interesting cat.

JE: Could be known as the grandfather of rock and roll then, right?

WR: I would think so. Or rhythm and blues, which led right into rock and roll. It was during that period where it was going out of R & B right into the rock and roll, and that's where he fit in.

JE: Bob Dylan referenced him in the song "High Water."

WR: As well he should have. I can understand it. Bob Dylan had a very sensitive, not only history, but the authenticity of the creators of this music.

JE: And Joe Turner, the film *The Buddy Holly Story* refers to him.

WR: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: As well as Little Richard and Fats Domino.

WR: Yeah.

JE: And a major influence in Buddy Holly.

WR: Very much so. Yeah, very much so.

JE: And you got to play with Joe Turner?

WR: Yeah, yeah, many times. I did another album Peewee Craven and two others with Joe, yeah.

Chapter 28 - 1:39
Spiritual Awakening

John Erling: Major changes in jazz over the years?

Washington Rucker: Oh absolutely, it's always changing. The frame even moves because it's always an effort to find another voice. The one thing about jazz, it allows you to find your voice within the framework of jazz. I mean, I don't like some of the references like smooth jazz. No, that does nothing for me. I just like jazz. And jazz in its pure form doesn't have that commercial appeal to most people. Unless you're a true jazz lover you know the difference in jazz and cool jazz.

These jazz festivals now, they'll have one real jazz artist and all this commercial stuff. Gladys Knight and the Pips does not belong on a jazz show, no matter what she sings.

JE: And you were around her. You played with her?

WR: Yeah, I played with her a couple of times, yeah.

JE: Yeah. Do you still hang on to bebop?

WR: Beboppers hang on to bebop. I ain't the only one. Yeah, I hang on, but I'm open because even the songs that I write, I don't write jazz tones. I've only written two jazz tones. I wrote "Over at Jack's Place" for a very good friend of mine, a great jazz lover, had to be the greatest jazz lover ever known. He probably had ten thousand albums. All the many jazz genre from every jazz artist ever, and he died March 5. So I lose him and I lose my wife, so I basically lost my two anchors.

But I wrote a tune called "Over at Jack's Place" for Jack. And I'm trying to get his son to write some rap to it now, because that's the current thing. But I keep the jazz flavor in that, you know.

JE: So as you look back, who would you say your greatest mentors were to you?

WR: Probably I can call three, Cecil McBee, Dr. Simms, he ultimately became president of Langston University, and then Crazy Red.

JE: Yeah.

WR: Because I probably never would have picked up a knife and fork and a skillet had it not been for Red. That began my whole journey for playing music.

And then I love the fact that it has allowed me to get a really good education and, in part, it helps me when I write, because I write a lot. And it helps me when I write.

JE: And you've written the memoirs of your life.

WR: Yeah.

JE: Called *Jazz Road*.

WR: *Jazz Road*, right.

JE: It's not published yet.

WR: Uh.

JE: But will it be?

WR: It was published in Romania. Yeah, I sold ten thousand copies of it. I don't have it on a publication here. I'm getting ready to put it on the YouTube, or whatever that situation is now that you do. That's going to be my next thing because it's already done.

Chapter 29 - 1:40

Oral Roberts

Washington Rucker: Hampton Hawes is one, if you look up Hampton, like I said, Hampton is one of the great piano players that ever came out of the West Coast. And he had a tune that he wrote, it started off with, "Go down Moses. Way down in Egypt land, da-da," and then it goes into a jazz tune. Great tune.

Oral Roberts, he had Rusty Bryant. Rusty Bryant was Nancy Wilson, in one of Nancy Wilson's first bands in Central State Oklahoma with a couple of other people from Tulsa. Tallymoore, they all came out of church. And now jazz players go play in the church because it's the place to play.

John Erling: Oral Roberts, you heard him speak in North Tulsa.

WR: In the '50s, yeah, in the '50s.

JE: And didn't he bring a jazz—

WR: Yeah, first jazz group I ever saw playing jazz and a church was right on the corner of Madison and Pine right across from Dunbar Elementary School.

JE: So Oral Roberts knows that jazz band will bring people out.

WR: Will bring people out, it's a magnet.

JE: He knew just speaking of himself would not do that.

WR: Um-hmm, um-hmm (affirmatives), oh yeah.

JE: In and of himself.

WR: Yeah.

JE: So he—

WR: Brought them in.

JE: This guy was a showman.

WR: Way ahead, way ahead of his time, yeah.

JE: Way ahead, yeah. And so you heard Oral speak?

WR: I heard him speak, he had a revival for a week, or two weeks, I don't know. I'm sure the money from the black side of town helped build one of those buildings he got over there. Yeah, he was there every summer.

I had been on the road. I can remember the first time I saw him, I came down to the revival and I saw this incredible set of drums. And it was the Steve Bryant's band. As I said, Nancy Wilson sang with the Steve Bryant's band when she was in college. They were playing jazz.

JE: At Oral Roberts revival?

WR: Oh yeah, at the Oral Roberts revival.

JE: Speaking of drums, you did an endorsement for Pearl Drums.

WR: Yeah, for several years. I probably still have it, I haven't gotten any drums lately. Yeah.

Chapter 30 - 2:18

Jazz Changes

John Erling: Major changes in jazz over the years?

Washington Rucker: Oh absolutely, it's always changing. The frame even moves because it's always an effort to find another voice. The one thing about jazz, it allows you to find your voice within the framework of jazz. I mean, I don't like some of the references like smooth jazz, no, that does nothing for me. I just like jazz. And jazz in its pure form doesn't have that commercial appeal to most people. Unless you're a true jazz lover you know the difference in jazz and cool jazz.

These jazz festivals now, they'll have one real jazz artist and all this commercial stuff. Gladys Knight and Pips does not belong on a jazz show, no matter what she sings.

JE: And you were around her, you played with her.

WR: Yeah, I played with her a couple of times, yeah, yeah.

JE: Do you still hang on to bebop?

WR: Beboppers hang on to bebop. I ain't the only one. Yeah, I hang on, but I'm open because even the songs that I write, I don't write jazz tones. I've only written two jazz tones. I wrote "Over at Jack's Place" for a very good friend of mine, a great jazz lover, had to be the greatest jazz lover ever known. He probably had ten thousand albums. All the many jazz genre from every jazz artist ever, and he died March 5. So I lose him and I lose my wife, so I basically lost my two anchors.

But I wrote a tune called "Over at Jack's Place" for Jack. And I'm trying to get his son to write some rap to it now, because that's the current thing. But I keep the jazz flavor in that, you know.

JE: So as you look back, who would you say your greatest mentors were to you?

WR: Probably I can call three, Cecil McBee, Dr. Simms, he ultimately became president of Langston University, and then Crazy Red.

JE: Yeah.

WR: Because I probably never would have picked up a knife and fork and a skillet had it not been for Red. That began my whole journey for playing music.

And then I love the fact that it has allowed me to get a really good education and, in part, it helps me when I write, because I write a lot. And it helps me when I write.

JE: And you've written the memoirs of your life.

WR: Yeah.

JE: Called *Jazz Road*.

WR: *Jazz Road*, right.

JE: It's not published yet.

WR: Uh.

JE: But will it be?

WR: It was published in Romania. Yeah, I sold ten thousand copies of it. I don't have it on a publication here. I'm getting ready to put it on the YouTube, or whatever that situation is now that you do. That's going to be my next thing because it's already done.

Chapter 31 - 1:25

Advice to Students

John Erling: How would you like to be remembered?

Washington Rucker: That I made a contribution, a conscious contribution to education, to youngsters, and also as a good musician. And uncompromising when it compromised my integrity as a man. That's the way I'd like to be, anything else is gravy.

JE: Then a word to, let's say, young blacks, the world is different today.

WR: It's different.

JE: There still is racism today.

WR: Um-hmm (agreement).

JE: But it's different when you were growing up.

WR: Right.

JE: But you somehow cut right through all that.

WR: Right.

JE: What do you say to this next generation?

WR: I say the greatest weapon you can have is get an education, because they may cut off your arm or leg but the one thing they can never take away from you is your education. And education is respected. I've had conversations, in particular about jazz, all over the world with people. If you talk about jazz with me, you'd better know what you're talking about. Because I have read every book there is on jazz. I've come up through the jazz experience and all that, so I think I bring a wealth of knowledge that I don't mind sharing. But I won't compromise just to make you happy.

JE: Very good. Well, this was so much fun to talk with you and, in part, get to know you, and I appreciate you giving us this time for Voices of Oklahoma. It should inspire a lot. And jazz fans will enjoy listening to you.

WR: Thank you very much. It's really a pleasure and I consider it an honor to be here and talking to you about it. Because it's what I do.

JE: Thank you.

Chapter 32 - 4:31

"Lucky"

[playing a beautiful jazz song, "Lucky"]

Chapter 33 - 0:33

Conclusion

Announcer: This oral history presentation is made possible through the support of our generous foundation-funders. We encourage you to join them by making your donation, which will allow us to record future stories. Students, teachers, and librarians are using this website for research and the general public is listening every day to these great Oklahomans share their life experience. Thank you for your support as we preserve Oklahoma's legacy one voice at a time, on *VoicesofOklahoma.com*.