

Garvin Bushell Interview

May 21, 24, 1968

Garvin Bushell

Born in 1902, clarinet, saxophone, oboe, and bassoon. He worked as a traveling musician with Maimie Smith, Ethel Waters, and others. Recorded with Bessie Smith, also worked with Sam Wooding, Cab Calloway and Chick Webb. Garvin Bushell was a member of the Chick Webb Band when Ella Fitzgerald first sang and won an amateur contest.

Jan: Edith Wilson?

Garvin: Yeah, (she) started it. Yeah, Edith Wilson.

Jan: You think more than us.

Garvin: Well, Ethel was unique. Nobody had a voice like Ethel. They all copied after her.

Jan: After Ethel?

Garvin: Sure. Even Billie.

Jan: Well, what about Edith Wilson. Was she, Edith Wilson, you think...

Garvin: Edith started recording in 1921, we did the first recordings with Edith in 1922, later part of '21. Maimie was the first. Then came, after Maimie, it was Lucile Hegeman and Daisy Martin.

(pause in tape)

Then we went out on the road with her at '21.

Jan: We were talking about Edith Wilson, who was not known as Edith. Did you say Edith Wilson started some of this new singing. Is that what you're saying? More than Ethel?

Garvin: Edith was a blues singer! Edith was what you call a shouter. As you see the comparison, Ethel was a melodic singer. As you see, a very sophisticated melodic interpreter. Edith was a shouter. A half blues and half Sophie Tucker style. And she got a lot of her style from Maimie. Maimie was a shouter. Although Maimie had a good voice, she was also a shouter. But Ethel was so sophisticated. She had great melodic sense.

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Side 1

interview starts out with the song "someday we'll live in a mansion..."

Garvin: That's an unforgettable voice; Lena and so many got the chart. Edith Wilson had a lot to do with it.

Jan: Edith Wilson?

Garvin: Yeah, that started it. Yeah, Edith Wilson.

Jan: You think more than uh....

Garvin: Well, Ethel was unique. Nobody had a voice like Ethel. They all copied after her.

Jan: After Ethel?

Garvin: Sure. Even Billie.

Jan: Well, what about Edith Wilson. Was she, Edith Wilson, you think...

Garvin: Edith started recording in uh, we did the first recordings with Edith in 1922, later part of '21. Mamie was the first. Then came, after Mamie, it was Lucile Hageman and Daisy Martin.

(pause in tape)

Then we went out on the road with her at 21.

Jan: We were talking about Edith Wilson, who was not as known as Ethel. Did you say Ethel Wilson started some of this jazz singing. Is that what you're saying? More than Ethel?

Garvin: Edith was a blues singer! Edith was what you call a shouter. As you see the comparison. Ethel was a melodic singer. As you see, a very sophisticated melodic interpreter. Edith was a shouter. A half blues and half Sophie Tucker style. And, she got a lot of her style from Maimie. Maimie was a shouter. Although Maimie had a good voice, she was also a shouter. But Ethel was so sophisticated. She had great melodic sense.

Jan: Ethel.

Garvin: Ethel, yes.

Jan: Let me go back and let me ask you some questions when you first started the profession. How old were you?

Garvin: Let's see. I started clarinet when I was just about ten, just fooling around with it. And I didn't make much headway because my uncle was a clarinet player and he was always out with the circus. And I was even playing clarinet with the wrong hand. I had the right hand up here and the left hand down here! No teacher. And uh, finally I had somebody, uh, old musician, around 1913 or 14...He said "Boy," I took my clarinet somewhere, on the other side of town, 'cause I used to carry it everywhere I went. Show off that I could play it...play it with the wrong hands. And he was there at this party that we were and he said "boy you're playing with the hand with the wrong hand. Put this hand up here. Can't you see how it doesn't fit?! This hand, you see that? These keys up here are made for this hand." I said "yeah, yeah." So I started playing that and I still hadn't got in touch with my uncle until about 1916, something like that.

Jan: So what were you about...when you went...

Garvin: I started playing piano when I was 10, a piano when I was about 10 and I started playing about...I actually started to play about 1916. I really got the idea that I really wanted to play.

Jan: Talking about your uncle playing for the circus, was that about the first time you were getting paid for playing clarinet?

Garvin: When I finally out to do the circus day, one summer I went out, after I learned to do the right hand, and played a few scales, they put me in the circus band, and I was the side show then. That was the summer of '16 or '17 I think.

Jan: How old were you about?

Garvin: 16 or 17 about that time. I'll be 89 this year, so I had to be about 16 or 17. Also that same year, before I went in the circus I had my first job. We played with Don Fry, Dave Wilburn. These are the guys in the Cottonpickers, the original Cottonpickers. We had a gig at the Artfellows Hall in Springfield. We were so _____, took a club, we

played for a club, the Douglas Debating Society. The next meeting they voted for us. We had a dollar and a half for the job, each a dollar and a half and they voted to take the dollar and a half back because we were so _____. After that, that summer, I think I went with the uncle Henry saying "you can do it, you can do it." I was there hiding behind him. That was my first experience. \$18 a week, and room & board.

Jan: Eighteen?

Garvin: \$18 a week, room & board. I was about 16 or 17, I'm not too sure about that date.

Jan: I read somewhere about the 1919 or early '20's you used to hear dance bands in Harlem and a particular place you went to, I think was called Manhattan Casino?

Garvin: Manhattan Casino. Oh yes. That was 1919. 1919 and early part of '20.

Jan: What were some of the bands that you heard there?

Garvin: The big bands were Happy Roseband had 50 pieces in the orchestra. Mostly bangos and bandolins. They were bangos with a violin echo. They played them like a violin but you picked them like a bango. They called them bandolins. Some guy in Harlem used to make them, Innis. When Happy Rose had his own dancers, _____ Casino, New Star Casino, had 50 pieces, 60 pieces and about 25 or 30 of them were banjos. So you can imagine what that sounded like. And about 5 or 6 bad sounding saxaphones. Everybody played miserable saxaphones in those days. Coleman Hawkins was the first one that came about and played a different sound on the saxaphone. Everybody in the _____, all the coast to coast, miserable sounds on the saxaphone. They didn't know what a saxaphone was all about. Hawkins interpreted saxaphone as a line, a melodic line and uh, with feeling, interpretation.

Jan: Were there any clarinet players that you heard there?

Garvin: Oh, there were clarinet players. Well, the clarinet players, they were ragtime clarinet players there.

Jan: Any that knocked you out?

Garvin: They played well. We had Amelian Hall and we had a few others. I remember Amelian very distinctly. _____ back in 1915 and he played clarinet with a miserable sound but a great interpreter of New Orleans jazz but a miserable (imitates fast vibrato) very fast vibrato. But in the 1919, 1920 the orchestra composed of saxaphones, violins, bandolins, and banjos, then trumpets, trombones. It amounted to about 50 - 55 pieces.

Jan: That's quite a bit.

Garvin: The stage was full.

Jan: Did you ever sit in?

Garvin: No, no.

Jan: You didn't do that?

Garvin: They were way ahead of me professionally.

Jan: What about singers. Did they have singers?

Garvin: Yes, we had singers like ... lets see who was one of the principal singers... uh, see, our singers were confined to Negro Time, and Lafayette Theatre and the black theatres of the country and on the T-o-p-a Time, that was in Atlanta, Minneapolis, Louisville, and some of the principal cities of the time that had large black populations. But singers came after Maimie. After Maimie made her first record "A Good Man is Hard To Find" on _____, seems she got the blood up all over the country on records. And became very popular and everbody said if Maime can do that, we can do the same thing in theatres. There were always black singers in the black theatres.

Jan: Oh yes.

Garvin: Oh yes. There were blues singers. Ethel was singing in the theatre, a year before she got on records. Bessie Smith was singing in the theatres. Edith Hagerman, Daisy Martin, they were all singing in the theatres and before they got on records.

Jan: So with some of those big bands at the Manhattan Casino, were there singers that you heard?

Garvin: There was a male singer, not a woman singer and we usually had a tenor singer, what was his name, I'm trying to think of it. I see his face, but I don't remember his name. He sang with the orchestra. He sang a song like (sings melodic lines). What's another great song he used to sing...uh, (sings melody of unnamed song) and Dartenella. This is 1920, '21 and uh, what's the other big hit. Fanny Brice made a record of it...1920.

Jan: Fanny Brice made a hit of it..."My Man?"

Garvin: Not "My Man", no, this was "Second Hand Rose." (Garvin sings the melody)

Jan: Oh.

Garvin: That's 1920. Burns and Allen popularized it later but it was the biggest hit in 1920. It was from a show it think. I was on Broadway everyday because I would work on occasion to have a porters job and get a week's salary, then I'd quit, and get another _____, I was on Broadway everyday, on 46th street, that was my hangout. So I was...

Jan: Going there to work or to listen?

Garvin: Listen, to listen. And all the sound publishers were on the west side from Broadway west. And 46th, 48th, 47th street was Fletcher Henderson was the song plugger over there so I used to go to Handy's everyday and talk with Ted Lewis, I met Ted Lewis; and Fischer Publishers, 46th street, 48th street, Remick accross the street, lets see...everyday I was down there listening to song pluggers. I knew all the late songs because you could hear all the pianos ringing. Right next door, all of those brown fronts had been converted into studios, offices, publishers. Irving Berlin had the only building that did the publishing. He was at 49th and Broadway, 48th and Broadway, 49th and Broadway, upstairs, one flight above. That was his whole building, Berlin. Rest of them, Remick had the whole building. The rest of them had brownstones that they had converted into publishing houses. And the windows were open so you could hear the tunes. And vaudville acts in those days, you, the only way you got the new tunes was to go to the publishers and let them play for you. And you would go say "what do you got new?" "Alright, sit down and hear it." And you go to the next publisher. And you come

Jan: out with a handful of music. Music was free and you didn't pay for it. All the copies were free. Even bands, they'd give you orchestrations. They didn't cost you anything for orchestrations. Not a penny. A full band orchestration for free.

Jan: Garvin, you recorded with Maimie Smith, you mentioned her, we mentioned her a few moments ago, early 1920. I wanted know a little bit how it was, when you recorded with her, when you worked with her. I guess my first question is when you did the recording with her, were the arrangements written?

Garvin: No!

Jan: Did you just fake it?

Garvin: Never any music! Never any music!!

Jan: You just went into the studio and....

Garvin: When you walked into the studio you didn't know what you were going to play until you got into the studio! And Pryor Bradford, a composer, he written most of Mamie's tunes except "A Good Man Is Hard To Find", and he would stand in front and direct. His way of directing, if he want the trombones (Garvin does body movements) - he went through the motions.

Jan: You just had to hear it!

Garvin: There was a sheet for all of those tunes and the trumpet had the lead sheet. They never wrote a clarinet part. The lead, the melody.

Jan: So it would be the melody and the chords.

Garvin: No. The piano and the banjo part, if the banjo had a banjo, there was, excuse me, on that date...was a bass part, bass and uh, piano, and the banjo and trumpet. Now the clarinet or trombone had to fake it.

Jan: Forget it. Like in our lead sheets today, along with at least the melody, you will get the chords.

Garvin: Oh, there was no chords.

Jan: Nothing.

Garvin: Oh, there were no chords, that came later on, ukelalies parts written up there.

Jan: Your lead sheets comprised of a simple melody.

Garvin: And the banjo, he wrote the chords, he wrote the name of the symbol. B-flat 7, D min., so and so, and funny, they didn't have the 9th chord, or half diminished. Nothing like that, just straight dominate 7th and minor, diminished, minor and dominate 7th, and back. That's what it was. It was chosed and concepted on that basis.

Jan: Isn't that something. So you did the session with her. And you had to fake it.

Garvin: Fake with Bessie, yes, sure.

Jan: Do you remember doing that session, did you just cut the song one time, and that was it? Or would you go over it a couple of times?

Garvin: No, no, we usually had to do it a couple of times, sometimes three times. I've done more repeats in the days of the big bands when the charts were down there, than what we did in those days. 'Cause they figure, if you did a good solo, that's it, you kept that in. You weren't going to erase that. So the first time down you might do a good solo.

Jan: That's right.

Garvin: And that's it. It's good enough. That solo that she sang.

Jan: What kind of person was Maime. Was she easy to work with?

Garvin: Yes. Maime was a beautiful person, beautiful disposition. I was out on the road with her too. And uh, she had uh, always had some man that was involved, he was taking the money.

Jan: That's too bad, took advantage of her.

Garvin: _____ Long Island, Staten Island _____ Flaherty took her out. The ____ took her out.

Jan: That's right. I read that.

Garvin: She had a guy named Olse Wilson, black husky guy, collect the money and blew the business. He took the money too. And finally she married a white Jewish fellow named Goldberg, in her later days, and he took all the money.

Jan: That's too bad.

Garvin: So all the money she made, the men got it.

Jan: When you worked on the road, did she treat you, all you musicians good as far as...

Garvin: We all loved Maime. She always had a smile everyday. "How you doing - Buschell how are you?" Anytime I got hung up there in one of those hotels and I couldn't get rid of the shiksa I'd go to Maime. Maime said "Now listen, you let that boy alone. That's my clarinet player. Now you just going and call the police..." I know in Kansas City the women in those days were vicious. In Kansas City they were harder for men and especially when an attraction came to town, like ours, the flop, the hotel lobby everyday was like this. I'm not exaggerating. 10 or 12 women everyday come to the hotel.

Jan: They were waiting.

Garvin: That's right! So Maime chewed them off. That was her business. she was a great person. I loved it.

Jan: So she had a really nice personality. What were you thinking...

Garvin: She was different than Bessie. Bessie was a ty., she was a tyrant.

Jan: I've heard that. What, in your estimation, what was the distinctive thing about Maime Smith's singing? I have to tell you about, you probably know this, probably more today people are more curious. We don't have too much of Maime Smith's singing but say, there was something different about her and other singers uh, sort of borrowed things from her too and tried to imitate.

Garvin: Maime, Maime and Edith sang very much alike. Maime had a little more alert sound than Edith but uh, Bessie was a blues singer, period. Bessie said (Garvin sings in the style of Bessie - full voice) "I

got the low down blues and la la la. etc." She could sing that. Maime sang (Garvin sings in the style of Maime - smaller voice) "It's right here for you, you don't get it, it ain't no fault of mine." Edith would say (sings in the style of Edith) "It's right here for you, if you don't get it, it ain't no fault of mine." (Each each previous example is sung with three distinctive different inflections) That's the difference. Ethel would say with more...

Jan: Edith. You think Maime is, sounds to me, well, she had a clear voice, more melodic.

Garvin: I never termed her as a blues singer. She was a shouter.

Jan: What would you put her?

Garvin: I don't know. She wasn't really a blues singer. After hearing Bessie Smith, there's no more blues singers.

Jan: And yet, when she would go, did you travel with her down in the south?

Garvin: Maime?

Jan: Maime?

Garvin: Yes.

Jan: People would call her the blues singer.

Garvin: They did. They did. Maime sang (Garvin sings) "A good man is hard to find. You always get the other kind." Now, if Bessie would sing that, she would have a different turn.

Jan: That's true.

Garvin: Maime stuck to the melody.

Jan: She really did.

Garvin: So, (Garvin sings in the style of Maime) "It's right here for you, you don't get it, it ain't no fault of mine." But Ethel would sing with more melody, more quality.

Jan: Ethel. Ethel Waters.

Garvin: Yes, Ethel. But Bessie was coarse.

Jan: Maime was sort of in between. Yet it, it is strange that people in the south...

Garvin: They called it blues, it was labeled as blues.

Jan: One of the reasons that I'm asking you this, your opinion is because, you know, Connee Boswell and the Boswell Sisters were from New Orleans and they

Garvin: Connee was the real thing. Ethel, let me say it right now while I think of it, Ethel, uh, Ella Fitzgerald got her style from Connee Boswell.

Jan: Yes, yes. Connee listened to blues singers and she listened a lot to Maime.

Garvin: Her roots were in blues!

Jan: Yes.

Garvin: Sure!

Jan: She used to go down and listen to the good blues singers.

Garvin: She didn't have to try very hard. All she had to do was sing the style she was brought up with and that was it.

Jan: That's it.

Garvin: Connee was the real thing. It's like Benny Goodman. Seeing Benny Goodman and Arte Shaw. Benny Goodman's the real thing in jazz 'cause he came up in the Dreamland Theatre. He used to live in the back stairs and listen to Joe Oliver.

Jan: That's true. Tell me how you got the job with Maime Smith anyway. Did she hear you play?

Garvin: Well, I was playin with the band at Leroy's on the corner of 135th and and 5th Ave, down in the cellar, which where all the cabarets

were in those days. Maime had, something happened with Elliot. Elliot quit and Maime just started to fire all the band that was _____ and she fired the whole band that had been on the theatres. They hadn't been on the road with her. They've been through Philadelphia, and over in Brooklyn theatre and some good spots up state. So, Maime wanted a whole new band. So she got Jake Frazier, Gus Aikens, then she brought in another drummer and her own piano player. But the three of us came from Leroy's, out of the cabaret. So they hired me along with Jake Frazier and Gus Aikens, the three horns. Then something happened to Jake and they got another trombone player, somebody named Carter, brought him in from Chicago. So, I got the job because they heard me at Leroy's.

Jan: They heard you.

Garvin: I played there every night. And they gave me an engagement for that.

Jan: Then you later worked with Ethel, and you were called the "black swan?"

Garvin: The black swan. Yeah. Black Swan Troubadores.

Jan: You mentioned again, I asked you, how was it in comparison working for Ethel. Was she easy to work with?

Garvin: Ethel, Ethel, she sort of had a double life. She was a double person. In other words, Ethel had uh, I can say this now because they are both dead.

Jan: Yes you can. Well, you know, artists are that way anyway, we know as musicians. Very complex.

Garvin: Yes. Ethel had her girlfriend right with her. I remember one night in Dayton, I couldn't get a room. So they put me on the twin. They had slept, the 2 Ethel's we called them. But Ethel, she'd been raised in the Tenderloin in Philadelphia. And then abused, and puffed around and she had it almost as hard as Bessie did. And she was tough. She was tough. Ethel was tough. When you would hear her sing the most....

Jan: Sweet voice.

Garvin: Real sweet, but she was tough. She was tougher than Bessie I suspected. And uh, what she said, and how she said it, she didn't have much education. Very little education. But she had a lot of experience in cabarets. She had worked in Edmunds cabaret on 5th Ave., which was one of the toughest on 5th Ave. then, Edmunds. And she worked in the Paladium in Philadelphia. And uh, she came up the hard way, the very hard way.

Jan: How old, I wonder, you were a very young man, and I guess she was young. I guess that's when they called her Ethel stringbean. She was real thin.

Garvin: She weighed 120 lbs.

Jan: They said a very attractive, nice looking...

Garvin: And about 5'9". And a figure out of this world.

Jan: That's what everyone said and nice looking, very attractive, pretty voice.

Garvin: Beautiful color, and about 120 lbs and she was tough as leather. She wouldn't take no teeth from anybody, no slip from anybody. I remember, I'll give you an item. We had been recording. This was back in the '40s or '50's with Eddy Mallory, we did a Victor recording. We were coming back from the recording date and the cop stopped us. We were driving Eddy, her boyfriend, husband, whatever. He was driving the car. The cop stopped him. Pull over to the side, traffic cop. So, what'd he do? So anyhow he gave us a smart answer. Ethel says "The only reason why you're doing that because" then he called us something, your negroes, we're negroes. Then the cop says "lady you keep your.." "don't me to shut up!" I remember. Benny Carter, Benny Carter is sitting in the back and I'm in the back seat. And there's this big cop and Ethel is sitting there and she said "you're just saying that and talking this way because were negroes" blah, blah, blah, and Ethel said "don't you tell me to shut my mouth! I got my rights!" She'd tell a cop, anybody. So Ethel was tough. She didn't take teeth from anybody. And finally he let us go "Sure your going to let us go! We don't have a charge against us! Come on, go on - lets go!"

Jan: You were saying too, she was like a, what a, you mentioned a double personality. She was different.

Jan: I had read that she had problems later in her life because of the same thing, they took all her money.

Garvin: They took all her money.

Jan: But working with her, how was, that was her personal life, was her personality...

Garvin: She was very crude and Fletcher, Fletcher such a _____, she'd tell Fletcher what to do and he'd say "all right Ethel." She'd dictate the policy.

Jan: So your saying she's a pretty domineering person.

Garvin: Oh yes.

Jan: Even when you're listening to her recordings and just as sweet as can be.

Garvin: She told all of her men what to do and how to do it. She bossed them.

Jan: Did she do that to you also?

Garvin: Oh yes. She'd tell us what to do.

Jan: I don't like the way you play this...

Garvin: She'd never tell us how to play it. She would never tell us, Fletcher looked after that. She'd tell Fletcher, "I don't want it to sound like that." "It's too fast, too slow" "That ain't the way" "Why don't you play the piano so I can enjoy it" Fletcher was a fine pianist and later became Benny Goodman's best arranger. But uh, Ethel was rough.

Jan: Working with both those singers you would have, Maime was much nicer.

Garvin: Maime. Yes, yes.

Jan: Sweeter working for.

Garvin: _____ was a great big guy. He kept her subdued. If she had another side she never showed it. She wouldn't allow it to show it. See, but Ethel would dominate her men. She would dominate whatever she was in.

Jan: Would you call Ethel Waters a blues singer or a jazz singer?

Garvin: I would say Ethel was a, (pause) that's hard to define because how they, in that day, there was a distinct difference but it is pretty hard to define now. Because, what they call blues now, in my mind isn't blues, it is more of a jazz style. Jazz style includes blues.

Jan: Many many singers have been influenced by Ethel.

Garvin: There's nothing more jazz than the "Basin Street Blues", its a blues idiom but it's still called jazz.

Jan: Would you call Ethel as a, one of our early jazz singers who sort of crossed over from blues into...

Garvin: Did you ever hear the thing Sophie Tucker did?

Jan: Yes.

Garvin: If you hear it, Sophie Tucker was what you would call a 'coon shouter. (Garvin imitates Sophie's style of singing)"Someday, you're going to miss my kind of lovin'" But Bessie Smith (imitates Bessie). Because the Indian and the slave were very closely related in their emotions. And they mostly lived, the Indians in the southeast and they lived with the indians. When they let the slaves, the masters, escape they went to live with the indians. So you hear, I've done 49,000 miles in Africa, had a chance to hear all the different styles from North Africa down to Salisbury, down into Rhodesia. I went to Nigeria and heard some of the roots, the things that we do and uh, I find out that the repetitious style of the African and combined what the Indians brought here combined with the Indian quarter-tone. The Indians sang (imitates indian singing style). The indians of the southeast, the Cherokee in Tennessee, N. Carolina, Kentucky, that's where the negroes came for refuge. They copied that style. Right in back of our house, in southern Ohio, we had indians living back there. Because, most of people are part indian, part negro, they sang the same thing. My grandfather used to sing the same chant. But it, and you turn it around and do it with the blues and it's the same

thing. The repetitious. (sings Indian style then sings blues style)
Same thing.

Jan: Very related. Again, Ethel Waters influenced so many singers. Today, now we talk about all singers. Young singers don't know about her yet; like they should.

Garvin: Well, the styles have been passed on. The young singers are getting like Lena Horne, Ella Fitzgerald, Connee Boswell. Very little deviations, but it basically...

Jan: Coming from Ethel.

Garvin: Yes.

Jan: What was the most special thing about her. Lets say, lets call her...

Garvin: About her singing or about her character?

Jan: About her singing.

Garvin: Her singing. Uh, first place, it was a very pleasing voice to listen to. It aroused your emotions in the lyric, but the quality of it. Uh, you didn't get the same thing from Ethel singing, like she said (sings in Ethel's style) "Daddy, daddy..." You didn't get the same thing from that as you got from Bessie singing. Like _____ Top Scotch Blues. Uh, like you get, the same, you don't get the same first impression, like Billie Holiday. She was one of those genuises too you know. So Ethel was very sophisticated in her style. She didn't deviate too much from the melody and she had a style of interpreting; she put all the notes, all the good notes in the right places. She made the right turn. Tasteful, in other words, I would say. Tasteful.

Jan: Her diction, of course, many singers have admired.

Garvin: Her diction was, she had good diction. She had a big mouth, large mouth. She pronounced her words. Name some of the things that she did. I got 'em on here but I forgot.

Jan: I think I have right here..., well of course I have the two sides that you played, "Baby What Else Can I Do" and "I Just Got A Letter."

Garvin: I got all that here somewhere.

Jan: That was, when you played on those two, that was in 1939.

Garvin: Ethel was what you called a pretty singer. She sang pretty. Bessie sang rough, she shouted.

Jan: She had more roughness to her voice.

Garvin: You know this Barbara Dare, that lives in San Francisco, she's an exact copy of Bessie Smith and she sang with me down at the room in the bottom in the Village, some years ago, and uh, I told her, "you are the nearest thing to Bessie Smith I ever..." She said "What?!" She grabbed and hugged me and said "That's what I've been wanting to hear for all these years! Coming from you I accept it." I said you are the nearest thing to Bessie Smith yet.

Jan: Talking about Bessie, you did the, you did a couple of sessions with her. Same thing, were there any arrangements or did you just get a lead sheet again?

Garvin: Well, lets see. Clarence Williams, he had bits and parts made. He had arrangers. He was in the publishing business and quite successful so he had not arrangements but the melodic line, and had a clarinet part, which usually was a 3rd above. And uh, trombone part with the (imitates a stock trombone part) glissandos had to be in there. There wasn't much of an arrangement, just a guideline.

Jan: How was it working with her in the studio? Bessie?

Garvin: Bessie? Well, let me tell you about, in the studio Bessie was alright. There was no incident there. I think she was late _____ record at Columbia. And uh, she came in; she used to get drunk all the time and get fever. A guy would beat her up. When she played the Apollo theatre she got beat up. Her husband beat her up. She would come up and her lip would be (shows how her lips looked) her eyes closed this way (shows eyes). Well she fights. She would fight right back like a man. And the last time she was at the Apollo theatre she and her husband had a big scuffle right there in the theatre, fight in the theatre. I don't recall having an incident with her other than how she sang, we enjoyed. We used to get a thrill out of Bessie. She would swing. She was a swinger. She put a swing to it. Uhm, what was some of the things that she did...I'm trying to think, "New Orleans Hop Scotch" was one that she did.

Jan: Yes, that's one that you were trying to...

Garvin: Yes, that's one I can remember that I did Clarence with. (sings like Bessie) She sang with the same _____ all the time within the same 5th and root and 3rd and she sang between that. Her interpretation was mostly one line. (imitates the style) She stayed within that. Ethel sang all over the sphere. She sang the melody. Bessie never sang the melody. Never that I can recall.

Jan: Why do you think? Do you think that's the way she heard it?

Garvin: That's the way she interpreted it. And because the negro style in those days was to never sing the melody, turn it around. Sing it a different way. That's where jazz came from!

Jan: That's different, Garvin, than the white singers of that time, were pretty straight ahead.

Garvin: Sang the melody.

Jan: Never stray from the melody, or phrase.

Garvin: (gives example of white melody and how a black person would interpret the same tune) That's the way they interpreted it. That's a different thing all together.

Jan: Let me play...

Garvin: They didn't even play the melody at all. Don't play it straight. They called it straight. Don't play it straight.

Jan: Did they tell you that too?

Garvin: Oh yes. Never play it straight.

(Jan plays excerpts of Ethel singing "...made me feel much better, here is what he had to say...")

Garvin: Is this Ethel?

Jan: That's Ethel. I'm going to skip ahead and see if you can...

(Jan puts on music of Chick Webb theme song)

Garvin: Chick Webb, that's our theme song!

Jan: Uh huh.

Garvin: I loved this man. The man played well. Webb didn't play black music. He played white music. That's what his success, more or less, he played like a white band.

Jan: And you think that was his selling point? He was trying to get to the white....

Garvin: Yes, it was, it was. It accounted the fact that he could play like the white bands plus negro solo interpretations.

Jan: And that was making it special. Distinctive.

Garvin: When Ella would come in, sing her style, imitating, emulating Connee Boswell, what she did. She never admitted it, but I knew it.

Jan: She did, of course, later.

Garvin: She did?

Jan: Many times she said she really has uh, said she emulated Connee Boswell. Let me ask you a little bit about Chick Webb. Uh, you mostly played alto in Webb's band.

Garvin: I played all first three altos.

Jan: Rather than clarinet.

Garvin: Some of the solos Chauncey played that. Before I got in the band Chauncey played some of the clarinet but all the clarinet played after I got in the band was for me. As you hear a solo, here's a picture up here (showing pictures on the wall behind where Garvin is sitting) this was Webb at the Lowell State, taking a solo here. I had all the clarinet solos.

Jan: I remember seeing that picture. Did you, uh, I was wondering, in Chick Webb's band, did you have written arrangements?

Garvin: Oh, definitely. Al Feldman was our arranger, our chief arranger. The guy's in Hollywood now.

Jan: And except, you had it all written. What about the solos.

Garvin: Solos are never written. There were extemporaneous here.

Jan: You had to do the stock arrangements.

Garvin: Yeah, no, not stock arrangements. They were all special arrangements.

Jan: Special,....

Garvin: Never played stock. Never played stock.

Jan: So what did you think of Ella's singing in those early days.

Garvin: She was phenomenal. She had a perfect ear. And she had a technique, that imitated instruments. She was impressed by instruments, not singers. Although she emulated Connee Boswell, but she, Louie Armstrong, Connee Boswell, instruments. She was impressed by instruments.

Jan: Let me show you a little bit of this and see of her singing. This is when you were with them.

Garvin: I loved this band. Don't you know all these guys are dead, everyone of them.

Jan: Beverly Pier.

Garvin: He's the only one living.

Jan: Yes he is.

Garvin: I just got a letter from him about two weeks ago and he sent me a copy of some old albums. He's the only one living but myself. Chauncey Horton, he's got Hodgskins Disease, up in Sing Sing.

(Jan plays Ella recording "Heart of Mine.")

Garvin: She wasn't very resonant then.

Jan: No, she was young, and just starting out. And...

Garvin: She hadn't sat upon a quality that would make her unique. Distinguish her from anyone else. But she, you often hear things just like Connee Boswell.

Jan: You think so too! Did you hear Connee Boswell when you were out playing? Did you hear her?

Garvin: I didn't see her in person, I only heard her on records and radio.

Jan: Records and radio? What did you think? A lot of people said uh, well she doesn't sound like the rest of the white singers of the time.

Garvin: Well, no. Her background was black.

Jan: Yes it was.

Garvin: _____ was black so that was it. She didn't try to sing like the white girl. She tried to sing like the black woman. Sure, sure. And in doing so she had tremendous style. But there are other black singers that sang just like her, probably better, but she had it on radio. She had it on radio, sure.

Jan: I'm going to play a little bit...play a little of this in comparison and tell me what you think. This is the Boswell Sisters first. I think she has a solo in this. (Boswells singing "I Hate Myself For Being Mean To You.")

Garvin: That's a good record. Good players.

Jan: Mannie Klien played trumpet on a lot of these things. Do you remember him?

Garvin: He was one of the top

Jan: I'm going to be talking with Mannie in June.

Garvin: Mannie made many of Goodman's first records.

Jan: Let's see if I can find her soloing. (Connee solo in the song "Shout Sister, Shout".