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MERRILL ELLIS  
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Place of Interview: Denton, Texas

Interviewer: Martin S. Mailman

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Oral History Collection

Merrill Ellis

Interviewers: Dr. Martin Mailman  
Dr. Ronald E. Marcello

Place of Interview: Denton, Texas                      Date: July 1, 1981

Dr. Marcello:                      This is Ron Marcello and Martin S. Mailman interviewing Merrill Ellis for the North Texas State University Oral History Collection. The interview is taking place on July 1, 1981, in Denton, Texas. We are interviewing Mr. Ellis in order to get his reminiscences and experiences and impressions concerning his career in the field of music. This interview is being done in conjunction with the North Texas State University School of Music and the Music Oral History Project of the Oral History Collection.

Mr. Mailman:                      I thought I might ask you a question that frequently is asked of all of us in music, and that is, as you recall, how and when did you kind of first become involved with music?

Mr. Ellis:                              I was born in Cleburne, Texas, in 1916. There wasn't much music in Texas at that time. I didn't think about music at all, and I was kind of late getting into it. My dad sang amateur bass. He

wasn't really a singer or a musician, but he enjoyed singing bass in the church choir. He also sang with operetta groups in the 1920's, I guess it was.

Mailman: You told me he worked for the railroad.

Ellis: That's right. He was from Missouri. But he enjoyed music. There was a groceryman, Sam Woffard, who had Caruso records, and my Dad would go listen to them (chuckle) on Saturdays. Mr. Woffard had an old wind-up "dog" machine--RCA. I used to have to go listen to these Caruso records, but I didn't enjoy it much (laughter).

My mother must have had natural talent. She played the piano by ear...no training at all. She was from Missouri, also.

Mailman: Did you have a piano in your home?

Ellis: Oh, yes! We always had a piano. And I had two sisters, one of which died before I was born. Then my older sister, who is about twelve years older than I, named Lois, is the one that got me going in music--for no particular reason. She was a good pianist. Dad and Mom got good training for her. Now you're talking about early times, man, and there wasn't much around. She studied with Van Catwyck and Mickwicz in Dallas and Fort Worth. She also studied for a year-and-a-half

at Washington University in Saint Louis. So, you know, there was piano playing in the home. She could play sheet music. She couldn't improvise at all, but she knew all that standard piano repertory. Of course, I didn't know that then; I was just a green, dumb kid.

Those were Depression times...well, let's see... those were pre-Depression times. I don't know. But there was a woman named Boger, the wife of one of the presidents of the bank in Cleburne...that Boger kid was a holy terror, and he took piano lessons from "Sis." "Sis" traded lessons, you know, like they did in those days, so I had to take piano lessons from Mrs. Boger. So I had some piano lessons, and that was a fiasco--it didn't work. But "Sis" didn't quit.

There was a guy named George Saint Peter--and I'll swear that that was his name--and he was a full-time professional musician officer and conducted the 344th Infantry Band, which was stationed in Cleburne from an outfit at Fort Worth. He was the conductor and director of the band, and that's all he did. He couldn't do anything else because it would bother his drinking. He was an alcoholic for sure (chuckle). But he was a helluva fine trumpet player, you know, one of these

cornet players--silver cornet, boy.

Mailman: He knew all the Herbert Clark scores?

Ellis: Oh, yes, he used to know those rascals. So his daughter wanted to take piano lessons from "Sis" so "Sis" gave her lessons if he would teach me. We didn't have any money for an instrument--I was just a kid, you know, little kid--so he said, "We got lots of instruments. Come down and pick out whatever you want." They were all government issue. He said, "Come down here." It was on the second floor of an old building downtown.

I went down there to the hall and picked up a clarinet, so he was to give me lessons, which he did--in a way. He was a helluva neat guy; I loved him. He could play the hell out of that cornet, and he could play jazz...he could do anything. He was even a good conductor. But he gave me some lessons, and I was a rank beginner. I didn't know anything about it, but I liked it. And I liked the ambiance of being around that hall and those big, ol' guys drinking beer (chuckle). I could go up there, and my folks didn't mind it. Hell, they didn't know what was going on up there (chuckle). Obviously, that wasn't a very good musical situation, and "Sis" recognized that, finally. Incidentally,

that's when I learned where all the bootleggers were. Those were the prohibition days, and he had to get back from the bootlegger's before he gave me my lesson.

Marcello: You called this a "hall" where you were receiving these lessons. What kind of a hall are you referring to?

Ellis: Well, it was a small town, two-story building. You'd go up the steps off the main street, and there was a big, open flat up there, and that's where the band rehearsed, and that's where the instrument and uniform storages were. That was the National Guard center, see.

Anyway, I wasn't doing any good, of course. He'd give me a few lessons, stuck me on the third clarinet part, and I'd "suck on that horn," and that's about it.

So "Sis" found a guy named F. A. Gallant, and he was in Fort Worth. They had a pretty decent symphony in Fort Worth, and he was the principal clarinet player. He really was a Frenchman--a fine, French-trained player. He also had a good instrument. He also had the accent to go with it...genteel...just a fine musician. She talked him into taking me, and we commuted into Fort Worth once a week for lessons.

Mailman: How did you get there?

Ellis: In an automobile. My sister drove, and Mother would go along and shop. Now that was a long trip. That was an all-day affair, man--no highway and old, curving roads.

He was a good teacher. I paid attention, and I got a beautiful clarinet command, is what I got. That helped me. Immediately he insisted I get a new horn, so we had to go borrow money from the bank to buy a little ol' Ivan Mueller clarinet made out of wood--used. I practiced and got pretty damned good. Now I was still a little kid, but that's how I got started. So my sister was the big influence, but my folks always loved music. They didn't know anything about it, but they liked it.

Mailman: Were you in school at this time--grade school or high school?

Ellis: Yes, I was in grade school or junior high...that was about when I was in junior high.

Mailman: They didn't have any band program in the school?

Ellis: Oh, hell, no! Nobody knew anything about Cleburne, Texas, but they did have a good high school for academic things--so they said. I don't know. But there was no music. The first music class I ever had in grade school was when the state legislature



proclaimed that there would be music in the schools. One day we were herded into a room, and they played, doo-dy, doo-dy, doo-dy, doo-dy, doo-dy, doo-dy, doo-dy, doo-dy, (singing "Humoresque") and a few others like that...the "William Tell Overture." The teacher didn't know anything about it because she was a geography teacher, but a nice person. And that was "music appreciation." But it was nothing--nothing. In high school there was no band of any kind.

To show you how bad it really was...well, let's see now. How bad, really, was it? When I went away to college--we'll get to that later--there were two places in Texas where you could major in music in college--Southern Methodist University and Texas Christian University. That was all. There was some music instruction up here at North Texas, but it was a normal school. They even had a good reputation then, but offered no degree in music.

Now there was no way I could afford to pay tuition to go to SMU or TCU, so I had to go to the University of Oklahoma--because I went up there and got a job--myself, playing. And that's the only way I could get to college. Now that's neither here

nor there, so let's get back to when I was a kid,

This was a fun time because I got to where I could play my horn, seriously. Now Gallant didn't want me to play jazz, but I was playing in a band right along then, and doing pretty well. In fact, I was good, and it was not too bad a country band. We'd give concerts on the square on Saturday; we'd go to a two-week camp at Palacios, Texas, once a year, and that was neat.

I was about fourteen years old...I know you had to be sixteen to be in the National Guard, and it was about three years before that that I was sworn in (chuckle), and they wouldn't have it any other way. You didn't have to have any physicals or anything like that. Anybody would sign anything. And I had to go to National Guard camp because they didn't have a saxophone player, and that's where their jazz band was. So we had to play saxophone: "Go pick out your saxophone because we're having rehearsal tomorrow." And that's the way it was, literally, so I played third saxophone...I must have started before that, somehow. Anyway, I taught myself the sax...this sounds like a lot of "BS," but it's the absolute truth.

So they had this dance band in connection with the marching band, and we played dances for the Officer's Club and that sort of thing. I did that for several years...three or four years, even after I was eighteen or whatever age it was.

Now I'm going to brag. I was so damned good that they'd get me to go to other camps. One of them was a real "gas," boy. In Wichita Falls, Texas, they had another National Guard band which was the only mounted cavalry band in the world. At least that's what they said, which is easy to understand (chuckle). Absolutely one time, during that two-week encampment, the band had to mount and play the final review. That was a fun thing. Most of those guys were from Fort Worth and didn't know how to ride horses. They claimed to have old nags that would not go crazy when the timpani went off in their ears. But they had all the gear for it--special timpani harness and all that kind of stuff. Imagine trying to play a trombone on horseback and never having been on a horse.

Then, while in high school, I played jazz and played with Harvey Anderson's Dance Band and Minstrel Show. Harvey Anderson lived in Cleburne in one of those second-story flats. He had a son named "Toot'em,"

who was a part of that show, and his wife Mary, and "Snook'em," who was a trumpet player. We played dances all around the country. "Toot'em" Anderson, his son, is still in Fort Worth, and he comes up here, too. He's a friend of Leon Breeden's. He was one of the finest studio musicians around. They don't call him "Toot'em" anymore. And he played E flat clarinet, and he was a great player. You ask some of those old jazzers, and they'll know him. I think they call him "Harvey, Jr." He must be your age (referring to Mailman), but I don't know how old he is. But he was just a little brat then. Harvey, the old man, I think, died two or three years ago.

I got a lot of experience playing here. I also played with the "Monk" Peters Band. It was a sorry outfit, but we played at lots of dances. So that's my high school days, D-A-Z-E, and it was time to go to college.

Mailman: I want to ask you one thing before we get to that point. Did you ever do any arranging or anything at this time?

Ellis: Oh, yes, in high school. That was a thriller, it really was. I can almost remember a tune, but I can't right at the moment. I also arranged for a

a band, especially for "Monk" Peters. You know, we all kind of had to chip in to buy everything. So I just got a book out of the library and just started doing it. I wrote an original tune or two, but they weren't any good, you know. But I did it.

Mailman: That would have really been the first kind of writing, though, that you got into?

Ellis: Yes. The first arrangement I did was for Harvey Anderson's band. "Snook'em," his trumpet player, hot jazz trumpet player...I says, "'Snook'em,' can you play a high C?" He said, "Sure, man!" Well, in the first arrangement I laid those high G's on him, and he just about peed in his pants. They all talk that way, but they can't do it.

Mailman: And you then went on off to college from there.

Ellis: Yes. It was like I said awhile ago. I couldn't go in Texas, and then at the time my parents realized the frivolity of musicians, so they thought business administration was better. See, I didn't do things "by the book," but that's the way it was. Anyway, since my dad worked for the railroad, he had passes, you know, and all I had to do was get on the train and go, and that was the main line of the Santa Fe. There were no airplanes, except those that came by

once every spring and barnstormed in the fields. That's the truth! I remember all that! And I'm not that old, either. But, anyway, it was easier for me to get on that main line and go straight on up through Sanger and on up to Norman, Oklahoma. I could have gone on, but I got off at Norman.

I took my horns. I had a big old case this high (gesture). I bought it used over in a music store in Dallas, and that thing had stickers all over it, you know. I had my gold-plated--triple gold-plated--Buescher saxophone, and flute, and clarinet in that rascal. I thought I was going to town, so I went up and auditioned with this Rambler Dance Band--there were three campus dance bands--and got a job playing third sax again. For godsakes, I wanted to play first sax now, but the leader played first sax. You know, that was not enough to go to school on, but those were Depression days, boy, I'm telling you. But it was enough to get me up there and get in school. So I played at dances and went to school and majored in music--and loved it. Now my folks didn't like me majoring in music, but my sister was...I don't remember her ever soliciting or pushing, but she just kind of made things possible for me.

So at that time...now it sounds funny--me saying these things now--but they had a good music school up there--a good reputation, a good faculty. It was better than anything they had in Texas, it really was. But after the war they never came back--ever. They never did come back. They even had a good symphony, and Professor Carpenter conducted. Charles D. Girard was there; Spencer Norton was there. The Charles Girard Theory Series, you know.

Mailman: I knew Professor Norton. I believe he came back to Eastman to get his doctorate when I was just kind of just starting out up there.

Ellis: Spencer was a beautiful person. He was a beautiful musician, a good composer. He was very self-critical of his own compositions. Spencer was a very young faculty member at O.U. while I was there. He was only a few years older than I. It didn't seem like there were more than three, four, five years separating us. He was a very young guy--a real young starter. But I learned a helluva lot from them.

Mailman: Did you study composition with them?

Ellis: Yes, sort of. Composition was one of the remote kind of things...yes, I studied composition with

them. Absolutely, I did. But you never did come off strong about it, as far as association. Yes, I studied composition with him.

Mailman: Were these private lessons?

Ellis: Yes, private lessons. We had no class on composition because we didn't have enough students. They didn't know what composition was, really. They really didn't. This must have been before he got his doctorate.

Mailman: Oh, yes, because this was in the early 1950's when he came back to get his doctorate.

Ellis: There was another guy there who was interested in composition,..what the hell's his name? He's in Boston now. We used to get together and come up with some good ideas. I remember that now.

Anyway, I played in those campus bands up there,..and with the Ramblers just part of one year. Then I switched over to another band--The Varsity Club--and it was much more stable and better financially. We did lots of playing around Oklahoma City and all over Oklahoma. We'd tour around, and it was fun. And we made money.

I'd send my clothes home on the train and get them washed. They'd send them back on the train.



There just wasn't much money at that time.

So O.U. was a good school then.

Okay, that was good. Then I had an association with WKY in Oklahoma City. In those days they had live radio shows, you know.

Mailman: Did you do a lot of arranging for them, too?

Ellis: No, not arranging. I wasn't on the inside clique; I never was a good politician. I met the Teagarden boys and played with the Goodie-Goodies on Saturday night junkets.

Mailman: Is that Jack Teagarden, the trombonist?

Ellis: Yes. His sister played piano.

And then I got a job with the Oklahoma City Symphony as part of a WPA project. It was a good orchestra, you know, with all these destitute musicians working for WPA wages. And they had a copy room. I wish we had those things in these days. Boy, you really learn copy, you know. It was easy to take to class and learn all that good stuff. And it was right there--a good copy room, good supervision--and it taught you how to copy music right. They didn't have an opening for a clarinet or anything in their orchestra, and I wasn't good enough to play in their orchestra, anyway. So I worked in the copy room copying music.

I was desperate, I guess. I was there about two years, commuting up from Norman.

Then I was promoted to arranger, and that was really fun--arranging for that symphony. It was all corny stuff--Christmas tunes and children's concerts and stuff--but I had a lot of freedom.

Marcello: Were you actually on the WPA payroll?

Ellis: Oh, yes. Then I was promoted to composer. There were two of us, but I don't remember the other one. But he was good. He was the slick arranger for WKY, so he had the good job. Anyway, I wrote a little orchestra piece for the orchestra.

In the meantime, when I was a junior or senior or somewhere in there, I got married. I met Naomi,,I met her when I was a sophomore because there was an opening,..both clarinet *positions in the symphony were available, so we* both auditioned, and that's how we met. I walked in and I saw this good-looking chick with big boobs. God, she looked good! I was still green...goddamn, I don't see how in the hell I ever got by (chuckle). Anyway, we met there, and he gave the first position to me and the second one to her. She deserved the first one. So we met and played together. She went home that day and told her mother she had met

the funniest-looking guy...anyway, we got married.

Mailman: Were you married while you were also with the Oklahoma Symphony?

Ellis: Oh, yes. I was doing both--going to school and up there.

Marcello: What kind of money were you making with the WPA?

Ellis: Oh, it was so many cents per hour. I don't remember how much, but it was less than a dollar.

Marcello: It was an hourly wage that you were getting?

Ellis: Oh, yes. I'd drive a car up there and do that. There was also an inter-urban

Anyway, I graduated and got a master's degree.

Mailman: From O.U.?

Ellis: Yes, an undergraduate degree in music and a graduate degree.

I got a job teaching school in Lefors, Texas. It's about fifteen miles south of Pampa...oil field, gas field, shotgun houses, sand and wind. They had a schoolhouse on the hill with more money than they knew what to do with. Nothing was there, but in those days it was supposed to have been a good job. They even had a separate music building, built just for music. I didn't know anything. I had been with the symphony orchestra, and they wanted me because I knew orchestra,

They were the only ones in that end of Texas who even knew what an orchestra was. And they had one, but they didn't have many instruments. I said, "Well, if you're going to have an orchestra, you've got to have oboes and bassoons." They didn't have any oboes and bassoons, and so we bought two oboes and two bassoons. They had money to spend! Cellos and everything, they just bought them. They even bought uniforms for the orchestra. They just shelled the money right out. I didn't know what to do with all that. I didn't even know how to play a damned oboe very well.

My son, Joe, was born in Lefors, and we stayed there two years. And by then the public school music was going, and the bands were going by then, of course--big stuff. Then the Pearl Harbor attack occurred while we were there, see, during that second year. BANG! Everything changed immediately.

So I got a call, and went up almost overnight, to go to Moberly Junior College in Moberly, Missouri. It was a nice junior college...quiet town about thirty-five miles north of Columbia. I was band director and theory teacher and music teacher. All the men went out in a hurry, and the band was quickly reduced to girls and cripples.

But I spent three years there--three years.

I got into choral music a lot because I conducted the church choir a bit.

Mailman: Did you do any writing at that time?

Ellis: No, Martin, you're so anxious to get to that.

Mailman: No, I'm not. I'm just curious because I was...

Ellis: I almost never got to that. I'm a late bloomer.

Mailman: We were talking about arranging and stuff, and I just wondered if you'd kept up after you'd been made composer there in Oklahoma.

Ellis: Yes, after the symphony, nothing happened composition-wise or arranging until I was in Columbia and met Roy Harris. That's when it happened. You know, I was married and...I don't know...you just wander. I didn't have much direction.

Anyway, we went from Moberly to Columbia, Missouri. I went to Hickman High School, which had a fine music program--big music school, good band, good orchestra, good chorus (two choirs). Also, I was teaching at Christian College in Columbia--a good girl's school, a society girl's school. I taught the music education course and conducted their orchestra.

I stayed in Columbia six years, and it was a good thing, with the state university there. While there, I took some graduate courses at the university--

musicology and things like that.

Mailman: You were doing a lot of conducting at that time?

Ellis: Yes, that's what I was doing mostly--one after another all day, it seemed like.

Mailman: You told me one time that you had a pretty fair orchestra there?

Ellis: Yes.

Mailman: At one point you had a lot of soloists there?

Ellis: Oh, yes. We had a good orchestra...good string teachers there...the university string teachers. Anytime I wanted to...I really enjoyed that because the orchestra was good enough to play pretty decent \_\_\_\_\_, and we could get the faculty members to play concerti. We did some good things. We did a lot of operettas...yes, I guess that's what you'd call them--show "biz" stuff. In the summertime we had at Columbia, Missouri, sponsored by the city and the schools there, a summer music camp with summer concerts for band and orchestra.

Mailman: Was this about in the late 1940's or something?

Ellis: Yes. I can peg it somehow. I was at Lefors two years, then Mobley for three years, Columbia for six years,

On, about the third or fourth year in Columbia, we were on vacation and went to Colorado Springs,

and I said, "Naomi, let's see where Roy Harris lives." She said, "Do you want to go see him?" I said, "No, we couldn't do anything like that." He was at Colorado College. He had a big home. Of course, he was in his heyday. He had money, and he spent money. There was just a continuous stream of nationally known musicians, performers, composers, and musicologists who'd come through there to the house and around. It was huge.

Anyway, I met him. I went to this Colorado College that summer and said, "I'd like to see Mr. Harris." He was down the hall. So he met me and talked to me a minute. I said, "I'd like to study with you." "Okay." I don't remember exactly what he said, but, anyway, I went outside and told Naomi---the kids were in the car--that I was going to stay in Colorado Springs and study with Roy. And that's what I did.

Now we hit it off immediately. I don't know why he took me on; he had no reason at all. But I studied with him, and it was the strangest damned thing. You mostly had to catch him to get a lesson.

But I learned a lot from him, and the association with other musicians and being around the concerts he'd give also helped. Musicians were

always coming and going. For instance, Nicolas Slonimsky was there, and I don't mean just overnight. Hell, he was there for weeks on end. I remember first meeting Nicolas Slonimsky. This was after I'd been there a few days...two or three days. I went out on the campus to get in the car with Roy, to go back to the house, and Roy saw Nicolas coming across the campus, about a hundred feet away. He yelled, "Nicolas!" and he shut his door. I didn't know who Nicolas Slonimsky was or anything like that. Oh, their conversation was something about one of the concerts...oh, I know what it was. Nicolas was gathering data for a biography of Roy for future use, when he died or whatever. Roy wanted to tell him what one of his big things was--to show him what a great man he was. It was actually inconsequential to Nicolas. But then he introduced me to Nicolas, and Nicolas looked at me...he didn't say a word. He just nodded and turned around and walked off. So that was my introduction to Nicolas. Well, that was fine; I mean, it didn't offend me. I didn't know who he was. He was a fine scholar, you know.

Mailman: Wasn't he here a few years ago?



Ellis: I don't know.

Mailman: It seems to me he was, but I don't remember.

Ellis: He may have been. He could write any kind of music instantly, but never his own. He was a musicologist, I guess. A great brain! My God, he could think of anything!

Anyway, the nature of the study with Roy was that he'd give a lesson and then tell me to go write, and I'd write and work, come back and show it to him, and he'd tell me to write some more. He didn't mind if the lessons were every day or once a week or once a month or every three months. It didn't make much difference to him. Anytime I wanted it, it was there.

So typically...I had quite a family now. So when a holiday would come up, about two days before I would go, I would call Roy on the phone, long distance, wherever he was. He was liable to be in Timbuktu or anyplace. I'd say, "Roy, I'd like a lesson." He'd say, "Well, come on." I'd say, "Well, where are you gonna be?" "Well, I might be at so-and-so, and I'll meet you." So I'd go wherever he was and have a lesson, and then I'd come on back home. Then I'd go in the summers. But I remember it was usually at Thanksgivings and...

anytime there was a holiday, that's when I'd go. And it seemed to work for some reason. He was traveling all the time, it seemed like.

Mailman: What was he doing on those trips? Do you know? Did he conduct?

Ellis: Yes, he'd conduct anytime he could. I didn't think he was a very good conductor, but he loved to conduct. He knew what he was doing; he'd get good music when he conducted. I saw him lose his place playing on a national broadcast, NBC broadcast, out there in Logan, Utah. He lost his place...didn't know where the hell he was. Joe Gingold, the violinist, you know, was the concertmaster, and he got clear up out of his seat and went all around trying to keep that orchestra together. I said, "Joe, golly, where'd we be without you?" "Oh, I didn't do anything." He was just a great guy. Did you know Joe?

Mailman: I don't know him. I've heard of him, but I don't know him.

Ellis: He's one of the greatest concertmasters we've ever had--a super guy. He had a Stradivarius, I believe.

Mailman: Did Harris teach permanently at any school, or did he do a lot of visiting?

Ellis: Typically, Roy could never sit still. He'd always

look for a post at a university, but he never did teach very much. It was mostly kind of an honorary position at a high salary and any additional money he could sweep off the top. He was a good con man in a way...a beautiful guy. Man, he lived "high on the hog" all the time. He always had a fancy home, and he never paid for it. He always had a fast car--always a fast car--and he drove it fast. It scared me to death, traveling with him.

Mailman: Did his wife ever continue her career?

Ellis: She was a fine pianist--super. Joanna was just a great musician, a great player.

Mailman: Did she bring in a lot of jobs and such?

Ellis: Oh, yes, she would bring in money. She was concertizing all the time. Roy was pretty good at getting money out of people. He'd go in and talk to grant people and people who support a university, alumni and so on, and he'd come away with money--big, huge amounts of money. He's the one who talked the American Federation of Musicians into the String Congress. All that was his idea. You didn't know that, did you?

Mailman: No, I didn't.

Ellis: The String Congress...every dad-gummed bit of it was his idea--that whole thing. Of course, he lost it. But all that program was his.

Mailman: What kind of things were you working on when you were working with Harris instead of teaching? All kinds?

Ellis: The "Roy Harris" kind of pieces (chuckle). It was model, you know. You see, he had a whole theory, a whole harmonic and contrapuntal theory, of his own, and he taught it, and it works. But mostly he was a superior talent, and he plowed right through that "Third Symphony."

The trouble is that most people, I think you included, never did know Roy when he was going great. Somehow, after he reached a level, after the "Third Symphony," he never was the same. But he was so popular! You wouldn't believe how popular that guy was! He was just honored and praised...he'd go into a cocktail party, and all the women would just bend over and...he was quite a ladies' man, too.

Mailman: That "Third Symphony" was in the 1930's, wasn't it? He wrote it in the 1930's?

Ellis: Yes, it was popular for a long time.

Mailman: I know! And it still is!

Ellis: Yes, I'm sure. I even made a trip with him and Joanna--a long drive from Logan, Utah, to Redlands University in California to give some concerts. I

wasn't doing it; they were doing it. To show you how he did it, he bought a new Lincoln automobile to make that trip, and he burned up the road going to California. He did that stuff and came away with a big pile of money--mostly Joanna's money--and burned it up coming back and burned up the damned car. That's all--it didn't bother him at all.

Mailman: Was he inspiring to work with?

Ellis: Oh, yes! Typically, most people didn't like Roy. He would sort of exploit his composition students, I think. He'd have them copy for him and run errands for him. I never did fall into that; I never did feel sucked in that way at all. And I did not live in his house. Now most of those apprentice-type guys would come live in the house. He'd say, "Come live with me a year or two and be my apprentice." I didn't do that. I always lived separate, and I came there just for lessons. There was never a fixed fee; I paid him whatever he said. He was never stingy with me; he was never gigging me. But he would everybody else, and I don't understand that. That's the truth, now; it really is,

Mailman: Maybe he saw something in you that he didn't see

in any of the others.

Ellis: Well, he visited in my home many times, especially when we were in Missouri. I started with Roy when I was at Columbia, and then I left Columbia and went to Joplin, Missouri, to Joplin Junior College. Today it's Missouri Southern University or something. And he visited us a lot there when he'd come through.

Mailman: Do you recall the names of any other people who were studying with him at that time and who have gone on to do anything in composition?

Ellis: No, I don't.

Mailman: Maybe that's why he was treating you so good-- because you did go on and do something.

Ellis: John Vincent worked with him. John Vincent was there in Colorado Springs playing his music. I don't know,..Vincent probably wouldn't admit that he studied with Roy. He was a different kind of composer--very straight. I never was impressed by Vincent's music. It sounded awful stodgy to me.

William Schuman was in the house when we were in Philadelphia. He was in Philadelphia while I was there for a while at the university. Schuman came down there...Schuman didn't study under him;

they were colleagues. Harris didn't like Schuman at all. I finally asked him why, but he wouldn't say. He finally got "out of joint," and he said, "Well, go listen to his symphony." I don't remember which one it was, but it was a direct steal right out of...that Schuman piece. It was there! But I think Schuman wrote better Harris music than Harris did. I really think so. You don't believe that?

Mailman: Well, I don't know. I like Harris. I don't know of another piece like the "Third Symphony" that anybody wrote that is as unique.

I guess what we probably ought to do is maybe pick it up again, you know, instead of trying to go all the way through. Maybe we can pick it up again tomorrow or the next day or whenever it's convenient.

Ellis: Fine. Am I doing what you want? I don't know...

Mailman: Exactly! No, I think it's going very well. I tell you what: I'm kind of like you. I don't give a damn because I'm enjoying it (laughter). I mean, if I'm enjoying it, that's one thing. Then the other folks can worry about it.

I guess we can bring it up to the place where you were fixing to come toward North Texas. Anyway,

you would be in Joplin before you came to North Texas, and then you were kind of composing now and working off and on with Harris.

Ellis:

The Joplin years were the most prolific years. Joplin is where I divorced myself from conducting and teaching school and started being a musician. And that's a late bloom. I'm what's known as a helluva late bloomer. That's when I really got started, I already had my family--all of my family. So that's the way it was. I wrote lots of music in Joplin, so let's start there the next time.



Oral History Collection

Merrill Ellis

Part II

Interviewers: Dr. Martin S. Mailman  
Dr. Ronald E. Marcello

Place of Interview: Denton, Texas

Date: July 1, 1981  
July 2, 1981

Dr. Marcello: This is Ron Marcello and Martin Mailman interviewing Merrill Ellis for the North Texas State University Oral History Collection. This is the second interview with Mr. Ellis concerning his career in the field of music both before and after he came to North Texas State University. The interview is taking place on July 2, 1981, in Denton, Texas, at the home of Mr. Ellis.

Dr. Mailman: I was just thinking that I'd heard you mention one time that you'd done some work with several people, and I wonder if you'd comment about that.

Mr. Ellis: All right. I worked with Spencer Norton quite a bit, and he meant a lot to me and was inspirational. Then there was Charles Garland in Columbia, Missouri, at the University of Missouri when I took some graduate work there. I didn't learn anything there. I'll say those things; I don't care.

I think there were three sessions that I had with Darius Milhaud. This was at Aspen. I don't think Milhaud would know me now. It was a class, sort of a seminar, with about twelve, fifteen, sixteen students in a cabin at the bottom of the ski lift--his house there. It was auditing, and I never did get my music in front of him. But I observed his teaching.

Mailman: Did he play through pieces, or did he just look at them?

Ellis: He looked at them, like we do. He'd sit down on the right side of the piano, not the left, but the right--it sounds funny, doesn't it--and a guy would bring his music up, and the student would play it. He'd then make comments and go on. I really looked forward to these sessions, but they didn't work very well. I just didn't like the man. He was terribly sarcastic, and he'd just cut those guys to ribbons. There was a real young composer up there--ambitious and full of vitality--and he just stripped him to nothing. I couldn't stand that. I had a couple sessions, and they didn't work, either.

Then I had a couple lessons with Aaron Copland, and this was in Saint Louis at Washington University.

I wasn't enrolled there; he was just there, and I had a chance to get a couple lessons with him. He's a fine person, a fine composer... super person. I'm sure he's a great teacher for many people, but for some reason Roy Harris was where I got it. So that's the end of that.

Now to kind of get things in perspective, about the last three years that I was in Columbia, I was working very hard on craft, and I made pretty regular monthly visits to Harris cross-country. Even with all that conducting and everything, I'd get up at five o'clock a.m. and work early in the morning. I had lots of family then, and that's how I worked. I worked about three hours every morning. People can do that, and I really enjoyed it. I didn't mind it. I was young and vigorous then. Anyway, I did a lot of craft building.

But I gave it up and went down to Joplin. That must have been around 1951 through 1961 or 1952 through 1961. I'm not sure.

Mailman: That was the right thing to do at this time--go down to Joplin?

Ellis: You don't know why you do it...well, you get fed up somehow, and you probably...I wouldn't have ever had

the courage to do that--thumb your nose at a contract, which was a pretty good contract, you know, for those days--just not sign it and have no place to go. But it worked out beautifully.

At the last minute, I got the job down there. I didn't know where I'd go, but it was Joplin. I was in Joplin from 1950 to 1962--Joplin Junior College. I was the so-called head of the Music Department, but there was no faculty except about six part-time teachers. They'd teach privately, you know, and then come up. The choir director was full-time.

That's the interesting thing. Joplin had a big reputation in the public schools. A guy named T. Frank Coulter had good orchestras. See, in those days people didn't have orchestras much, you know. Well, we did and we had a community symphony. I wasn't half-bad; it was really pretty good. Coulter conducted it, and I played in it and supported it. I played contrabass in the symphony, and Naomi played clarinet and had children. (chuckle) In fact, we played a concert, went home...what was that?

Mrs. Ellis: A rehearsal...a dress rehearsal.

Ellis: Played a dress rehearsal, went home. You had a kid right then, didn't you?

Mrs. Ellis: Entertained the soloist.

Ellis: Oh, yes, you entertained the soloist...oh, well...  
anyway.

I keep coming back to that fact that I did not have to conduct. There were no heavy pressures--no heavy pressures--on me in Joplin. It was just like utopia. I had a great, big studio. It was really a former classroom, I had a fine Stanley grand piano in there, lots of bookshelves, playback equipment. And the second floor had a good view, and there was a big, ol' classroom next door. There were not many students. It was just a beautiful place to work, you know, and it was friendly.

Mailman: Were you getting to hear the things you were writing?

Ellis: Not as much as it should be. It got to be a chore there. Toward the end of the term, I was buggy about that, but that's one of the things you have to learn to live with.

To answer your question, that's why I knew I had to get out of there, so I worked hard to... in ten years, man, you lose all your contacts, and I couldn't have gotten another kind of job...see, I didn't have the background for a major university, really; I mean, I admit it now, but I wouldn't then. Then I lost all my conducting skill, and here it was

like...you were the provincial composer in Joplin, Missouri. Where in the hell's Joplin, Missouri? In the first place, it's west of the Hudson. So it was very isolated performance-wise, and the composer of the kind of music I wrote was unknown in a conservative community, as far as his music was concerned. They liked me, but they didn't know anything about my kind of music.

I was active, however, in the Music Teachers National Association at the national level. One time I was vice-president of the organization for the West-Central Division. I worked with a guy from the University of Illinois and did the program for the Philadelphia meeting. I enjoyed that very much--met all kinds of composers. We had a good program, and I worked my tail off on that.

Also, for several years I was president of the Missouri Music Teachers Association, but that wasn't composing. Composing was mostly lonely...except that in Pittsburg, Kansas, about twenty-five miles from Joplin, I got professional input from the faculty at Pittsburg State College. There was a nice bunch of guys over there, and it was a good, strong music school. It was close by, and we visited a lot. My best friend there was Marquid Holmes--a dear, lovely

person. He was a good violinist and a good composer. We communicated a lot. He was a conservative composer but well-trained, stable, a good deal older than I. They had a string quartet, and they had a pretty decent school orchestra and chorus and everything. They'd play my music. But not in Joplin--they wouldn't play my music (chuckle).

Mailman: What kind of things were you writing at that time?

Ellis: An organ cantata, which was also part of an oratorio that, I think, is pretty good. It's entitled "The Great Gift," the great gift being Christ's crucifixion, the great gift to mankind. It's for a small orchestra, chorus, soloists. It had, what were to me at that time, a number of innovative choral techniques used in it, and some collage. It was, for that time, pretty early, you know. And it had speaking rhythm things, you know. And they performed it. I don't think it ever got but one performance that I remember of. Do you remember, Naomi?

Mrs. Ellis: I don't remember.

Ellis: And I wrote a small symphony while I was there-- three movements. It's called "Second Sinfonietta."

I didn't write a first sinfonietta (chuckle).

That's a William Schuman trick. He has a second symphony, doesn't he, and not a first?

Mailman: I'm really not real sure because I think I only know about his third symphony, I believe.

Ellis: That's the one I know, but he didn't have a first symphony, I don't believe.

But the "Second Sinfonietta" was a pretty good orchestra piece. The third movement of it was, at that time, innovative. You know how it is when you've got multi-movement works. Maybe you'll get one performance with all of them, and then they start playing movements. So I got single movements played around. The Wichita Symphony played the third movement one time with Robertson conducting.

My orchestra music really didn't get off the ground, even though we had a pretty decent community orchestra. The conductor couldn't conduct in the *first place, and I don't think he wanted to conduct, anyway.* But it didn't make any difference.

Now I wrote all kinds of music--choral music, wind music, chamber music. I grew a lot. I wrote lots of music, and I grew a lot. I won some awards--two or three of them--but they didn't amount to too much monetarily, of course, but it was prestigious.



One of them was the Ernest Bloch Award for a choral piece. In fact, I won the Ernest Bloch Award two, maybe three, times. It's on record that way. That's true. Strange, isn't it? I had a commission for a piano piece from the Missouri Music Teachers Association. These little, ol' things seem very insignificant, but they're motivators.

All this time, I always played jazz. Even in Joplin, as an "old cat" there with a family and all, a responsible citizen in the community, I still played jazz on Saturday nights out at the country club (chuckle). I enjoyed it, you know, just a combo--piano, clarinet, trumpet, drums, and bass. We got to play a lot, you know.

Then...of course, I knew about North Texas' good School of Music, and Frank McKinley used to come visit us up there, and he'd play some of my choral music with the a cappella choir. While I was in Joplin, he did some of this. That was neat, and I appreciated that. See, Frank McKinley studied with Roy Harris, too. He was a composition student of his for years. He went the choral route, and he was there before I was. But he traveled around, too, to take lessons and was in his home for a while. I don't think Frank ever considered himself a composer, but he studied

composition--absolutely! Oh, yes! He's proud of his association with Roy. He was good, but he wasn't a composer, you know.

And John Haynie came up...and, oh, McAdow, Maurice McAdow, came around for festivals and so on. Somehow, the idea of a band piece for something like that...I never did write much band music--not like you have, Martin--and I never did know why. I kind of wish I had gotten on that band gravy train in there, you know. If you hit it right, you can make some money. But I never did.

Anyway, you know what a promoter ol' John Haynie is, and he came up with, I think, \$600 from somebody for a commission. I don't know exactly what it was, but he might know. I just worked my tail off on that piece, and I think I spent about six hundred hours on it (chuckle). It was a good piece, and John played it...and I think I told you there is a more stripped-down version for percussion, piano. So John played the stripped-down version, and McAdow had never conducted some beats like that (chuckle).

Anyway, Sam Adler was over at the synagogue in Dallas and taught here half-time--composition,

He was commuting over here. Dr. Cuthbert was dean. George Morey also taught some composition, but it was too much, so they hired me as a theory teacher but also to teach composition part-time. So I was to teach half-time composition and half-time theory. I taught theory for years and enjoyed it.

Sam and I shared a studio over in the old music building, and I enjoyed that. Sam was a good teacher and a good composer. I had more and more students and got more and more into composition. Then, as you know, Sam left for Eastman, and you came in.

Mailman: And Bill Latham had come in, I think, a year or so before that.

Ellis: He had?

Mailman: Yes, I believe he came in a year or so before I came.

Ellis: Well, he didn't come in teaching composition full-time, did he?

Mailman: He was pretty much into composition by the time I got here, but I think that he, like all of us, used to teach another course or two and one thing or another. I think I taught some counterpoint when I first came here.

Ellis: Well, I thought that you came here sort of as replacing...

Mailman: ...Sam,

Ellis: Okay. So I came down here, and I joined this school. And the good faculty performers that we have here, that was a revelation--it really was!

Mailman: They seemed pretty interested in performing their music.

Ellis: Well, they're pretty conservative, but if you twist their arm and go by long enough, you'll get something done. That was never enough. They opened up, not like the people in Pittsburg, Kansas, did. They had some better players, too. George Morey was the orchestra conductor, but he never did play any contemporary music.

Mailman: Up to this time, you hadn't done anything with electronic music?

Ellis: Oh, no. I came here in 1962, and the second year, I think it was, that I was here--in 1963--two graduate students and myself, behind closed doors with the window blocked out, started discussing that "sinful thing" known as electronic music--that music from synthetic sources. These two guys were Robert Ehle, who had his undergraduate degree from Eastman and came here for a master's--he's now out in Colorado as an associate dean--and the other guy was Gerald Warfield. He was at Yale for a while.

He was also on this notation project at the Lincoln Center. He wrote the book on the new notation, the contemporary, avant garde notation. This guy is active in theory circles right now, and you see a lot of his stuff. He's in New York now--very successful. He's a wild composer.

Anyway, we met behind closed doors--secretly--discussing, studying, and researching electronic music, because it was so blasphemous around school. You know, you could get fired for it. That's the truth! You'd believe that--you know the deans and so on.

So we started making some pieces, mostly putting together a sensible package for Faculty Research. So we got a proposal into Faculty Research, and we had the beautiful support of Dean Toulouse, a beautiful, wonderful man, who has insights, and we're lucky to have him. We got the proposal passed without support...it's getting too close to home now, isn't it? But we didn't have any support outside Faculty Research. But we got some money, and then finally the dean decided it must be all right, so then he came through, and we got a synthesizer. We paid \$1,500 in NTSU money for our first synthesizer, which was the second synthesizer ever sold commercially

by Robert Moog. It's still up there at the school right now. That's kind of an historical bit right there (chuckle).

Mailman: You had some tape recorders and things before that?

Ellis: Yes. Oh, yes, we had that first--tape decks, microphones, white noise machines. We had a big, ol' TV set for white noise. Did you know that a TV makes white noise. You put a telegraph key on and do it. The centriging piece uses that. It sounded pretty darned good, but can you imagine playing that kind of rig on stage with the Dallas Symphony? That's what I did.

So then we needed room, and we managed to get room in the old orchestra hall before it was torn down--on the second floor. We got some good Ampex decks and had a good studio. We started our first class, and the thing prospered, except we always took what was left over.

There wasn't any \_\_\_\_\_ left in the end, but there was this old vacant house over on Mulberry, 1721 Mulberry. A lot of these suggestions came from Dean Toulouse, so he said we might try it. So we tried it, and it was okay. See, the Music School was glad to get us out of there because they needed the space. We then had that whole house--five-room

house--for the studios, and that just worked beautifully. It was private, and we could do what we wanted--nail things on the wall, stay up all night. We were supposed to be there one or two years...five at the most. I don't know how long we were there, but it must have been six, seven years.

Mailman: At least.

Ellis: Yes. Things moved nicely, and then Dean Meyers, when he came, gave us beautiful support--moral support and financial support--but mostly it was not getting in your way.

So we managed to get a new building, as you know, and the Electronic Music Center building actually was built under separate contract. It has separate utilities and everything. Everything is separate from the School of Music--the wing that we're in. That's legally what it is.

Mailman: I think if somebody asked me this question, I really would dislike it, but I'm going to ask you, anyway. I mean, I don't even know how I'd go about answering a question like this. What do you suppose it is that brought your interest and your attention toward the electronic thing and the media rather than, let's say, myself, who has not gotten into that. You

can't answer why I'm not into it, but you may answer what attracted you, if you can.

Ellis:

Yes, I can. For me...well, here's a way of answering it. A composer thinks of things that he wants to do but that he cannot get done with acoustical means, so he has to find the means to do it. He hears things that he can't get easily acoustically, so he finds a way to get it one way or another even if he has to invent the instrument, which is what we do. You invent it, or you get somebody to invent it. Now that's the truth! I've thought about that a lot.

The advent of electronic music opened up a whole lot of new timbral possibilities and ways of hearing music, even changed forms, I think, that we wouldn't have had without the stimulation of electronic music--sweep signals, for instance. You can't sweep signals very well with an orchestra. It's not natural to the instruments. Let's see... I should say more here,

Mailman:

You know, it always interests me as to how people get attracted to something that they want to do. I think that it's a little bit like we were talking awhile back, where, when you said you made this decision: "I don't know why in the world I ever



made it at that particular time, but it worked out to be the right thing." And when you look back on enough of those decisions, you maybe decide, "Well, there's a pattern to the way I behaved." In looking at the "Einyah" piece of yours the other day, I was noticing gestures that you were making then and imagining them as kind of reaching-out gestures, you know, breaking the notation. It's kind of just thinking about what attracts you to do those kinds of things. You know, what brings you toward wanting to make a new sound, or what makes you want to find a notation, or media even...getting into the medium of a film or slides or lights or lasers or whatnot.

Ellis: Well, in getting into media, if you can speak well with sound, look how much better it might be if you can use visual with it. If we have five senses--you can see, hear, taste, touch, and all that--theoretically, perhaps, the greatest art would be bringing all these together, supporting each other in a complete emotional experience. So I guess that's it. Now that's a heavy duty, ambitious thing, an egotistical rot, to think that one person can become professionally proficient in all five areas. But composers are childish and naive and go ahead, anyway (chuckle).

So I like the idea of integrating visual and drama--anything. Now, of course, it may not in your eyes be music, or someone else's eyes. Some people don't think it's music. I think that it is. And then there's my cliché statement: The Greek word for music was musikos, and it meant poetry reading, dancing, playing the guitar, singing, dramatic action. That one word meant all those things, and that word was musikos. It wasn't just sound.

To write an intermedia piece implies--to me--that two or more of these elements are inter-related to a point that they must all be there. To have the whole, they must all be there. And the mixed media--to me--some of these elements may be withdrawn and not used, and you still have a piece. Intermedia seems to be the more serious approach to it. These definitions are not fixed or clean.

In fact the first attempt at trying to reach a definition of intermedia and mixed media and multimedia came from Stan Gibb. He and I talked, and he had some ideas on it, and he wrote a paper on it and polished it and published it. It's quoted in books nowadays,

Mailman: Let me comment about one other thing that kind of

falls along these lines. As we think back and look at where we come from and what we've done and all this, you have had kind of a steady development. You mentioned awhile back that in Joplin you worked on technique a lot. Well, here comes guys out of high school now and young composers, and they somehow get their hands on a lot of equipment, and they're able to really do some creative things with the equipment. But do you think that maybe they need to also go to Joplin and get a little technique (chuckle)?

Ellis:

I sure as hell do! Absolutely! We live in an instant world, it seems, including instant music and throw away music, and sometimes we lose something here. But that is the way society has been going. If they could make a set of encyclopedias that would absolutely destruct after five years, they'd do it. They try to do it with automobiles. You got to have...you need the craft, even though the craft is going to change on you or become obsolete. About the time I learned to write a good fugue--and I worked hard, learning to write fugues, I really did; I wrote fugues until they were coming out my ears--then they weren't popular any-

more (chuckle). But I don't regret it because fugue writing gives you that oily, linear thing or feel of lines working against one another.

Mailman: You might say that maybe that inspired a nostalgia where the strings had that contrapuntal section about midway through the piece of yours, where it was just lovely line writing. Nobody may be thinking back to writing fugues in Joplin, but that's the kind of place where those things occur or result from.

Ellis: Sure. Good contrapuntal writing is the quality of the goods inside it. You can slap chords up and do this sort of thing, like a lot of music is, but it doesn't have that silky feel like good counterpoint usually has.

Mailman: It has the lines...

Ellis: Yes, you're right. You ought to have the craft. Now, Martin, you develop craft by practicing a lot for years, and no one will sit still for that anymore. My students won't. You know, I studied a long time with Roy, and, hell, he had me write melodies...he wouldn't let me write harmony, just melody. I thought I was never going to get through writing melodies, before he'd let me write any chords. And I got to where I could write some damned good

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melodies. He called them melodies, anyway.

Mailman: In a way, I think, as I recall some of the early things that took place with the slides and films here, it seems to me like there was a lot of craft development going on there as well. In other words, some of the initial efforts were perhaps technically less skilled and smooth and silky, to use your terminology, than, let's say, some of the more recent things like Ives and whatnot.

Ellis: Visual portions?

Mailman: The visual portions of it.

Ellis: He's improving a little bit.

Mailman: Oh, immensely!

Ellis: Thank God for that (chuckle)!

Mailman: No, I think, really...don't you see that same kind of effort, I mean, where you're talking about writing melodies? Well, before you get into these other things, you need to get into...

Ellis: ...exactly.

Mailman: ...getting yourself together on visuals or whatever else may be involved.

Ellis: You keep improving. That's why you have research. That's the idea behind the Electronic Music Center-- to keep developing. You develop the methods and

then the pedagogy and dispense it and get it better all the time. Yes, I think work pays off, and ideals,

Mailman: Has there been any kind of a particular philosophy of composition or something like that that has motivated you or guided you, that you want to share?

Ellis: There's bound to be. Let's see what it is. Philosophy of...well, I'll just talk a little bit and see what happens.

I think that...now these are personal views. You wouldn't agree with most of them probably. But when you get right down to it, to me, at this point in time, a good piece of music must move me emotionally-- it must move me emotionally. If a piece of music moves me emotionally, to me it's a good piece of music. I'll give you a chance to argue about that with me in a minute. I don't care if it's a magnificently crafted fugue..,if it doesn't move you emotionally, something's wrong. And you could argue that if everything is not sweetness and flowers...now emotions are not all sweetness and flowers. We can have angry emotions and ugly emotions, contrasted with sexy emotions,

Musicologists will challenge that statement very



quickly and say that intellectual emotion from a well-made serial work...true, there is for musicologists. But to me that music also needs to speak emotionally. There's nothing so dull to me as a twelve-tone piece that has nothing to say except all these different positions in a row, and the matrix here and...that's the way I feel about it,

Another thing...somehow, a real masterpiece, *a true masterpiece, has an emotional appeal at many different levels.* A true masterpiece can be heard and enjoyed and be moving to a fine scholar, but it can also do similar things to an illiterate music scholar or someone who doesn't know anything about music. An example is a symphony orchestra. The tired businessman goes, dragged by his wife, to a concert in his tuxedo. He hears a Beethoven symphony, and he can get emotional enjoyment out of that. Even if he's tone deaf, he can hear the rhythms. And he can get charged up thinking about the drum and bugle corps he was in when he was in high school. He may not be able to analyze a sonata form or even retain the themes long enough to hear them develop, but he may even get theatrical enjoyment out of being there and seeing that oboe player wet

his reed, get his shot glass out,

We all don't listen at the same level, but a true masterpiece will have appeal to all these people. Now that begins to worry you a little bit,,well, we've all experienced a drum and bugle corps coming down the street--a drum corps with its "rrrumph, rrrumpñ, rrrumph"--and it makes the hair on the back of your neck stand up. I'm just really talking some "BS" right now (chuckle).

Mailman: You better stop that now! You can't rub it off on me (chuckle). I'm enjoying it.

Ellis: I feel silly.

Mailman: Well, you shouldn't.

Ellis: But just the rhythm of the drums with no tune or anything can arouse. And then a beautifully-played violin solo, delicately done, can arouse. A big, ol', fat chord moving to some other chords can make one feel very noble and strong, even with no tune or rhythm. Delicate color changes, timbres--like Debussy--cannot get a good tune, but it can just be a textural change.

Now rhythm is the powerful element of music, we've always been told, and the tune or the theme or the subjects are second, and then harmony and timbre and form. It isn't necessarily that hierarchy

in today's music. Timbre has moved to the top of the list in many cases. But there's something basic about rhythmic things at a gut level that appeals to any age. No matter how sophisticated that person is, he's got those basic body drives rhythmically at his gut level that he doesn't want to admit, maybe.

Well, okay, I'll philosophize some more. I believe...these are my viewpoints; certainly not everybody, even on our own faculty, will agree with this, and that's what's good about having faculty contrasts. Good music has surprise. Good musical masterpieces have surprises. Masterpieces are not perfect art objects. They're imbalanced and their imbalances make art. Good music has surprise. Now it contrasts. All of a sudden it's louder or softer, and then you get to where...you almost can take it, but it fools you a little here and there. It's always fooling you just a little. It even fools the composer. He thinks he's got it all cold, and he tried the Golden Mean...you never want to worry about the Golden Mean. The climaxes will fall in the right spot if you let them. I haven't made the point well about contrasts. But the surprises in music can be very, very subtle surprises. The change of a single note

or the slight change of a dynamic here and there makes a big difference...sort of a deception.

And that's where intuition comes in, also... and then form. My opinions are that all composers should know all the standard classical forms and have them cold--kind of a concrete recipe or pattern in his head. But you'll never find one that follows it. I just never have found a piece that followed it--the standard classical textbook form--exactly. "Eine Kleine Nachtmusik" almost does. The classical symphony of Prokofiev almost does. But they really don't. Form is the hardest thing to get hold of for a composer. After you know all these classical patterns well, then you forget them and write your music, and it deviates according to needs of the music.

I'm a great believer in intuitive writing, not in secure, not in mathematical...that you have to go right here (pointing) with this measure and here. Now that doesn't mean that that's wrong, because there's a whole school of composition that believes this, so don't misread me. But it's not for me, that's all. That doesn't mean that I wouldn't use a computer or two to section things off and help motivate directions. But the very instant that it's

dictating that you must go here, I'll rebel against that--not just for rebellion, but if it feels like it wants to go some place else, I'll do it. That's the way I feel about serial composition. One cannot write--I cannot write--a serial piece that's 100 percent "by the book."

After you have the craft of serial composition, when you work long, long, and hard, and you've got the good, solid craft of serial procedures, then you write intuitively. Now I know that's so for me. I was writing a string quartet one time, in the Joplin days. I got the first movement done neat. I worked hard, and it was slow. It was a good movement, but it was slow. Finally, I...second movement. Actually, when I quit, I didn't stop. I went right into the second movement and just started going--very simple, straightforward, beautiful. It laid just right out. I was several pages into it before I stopped and looked back. And there it was. It was as clean a row as you'll ever see--properly done, very emotional, and very lyrical. And that happened when I hadn't thought of row. I wasn't intending to write a serial thing at all. And that told me a whole lot right there. So then I straightened it up. There was one note I had to

change in it, and then I wrote the rest of the movement with that. Then I wrote the third movement, and I didn't do the serial. But that experience made me realize that you could write using your craft rather than the serial approach. You need that craft to help you get there.

So almost everything I wrote always used a row, but never strictly. I don't remember...does "Einyah" have a row?

Mailman: I didn't hear it when I looked at the score.

Ellis: I don't think you hear it. That's part of my point. It's tonal music. It doesn't sound twelve-tone. Like I say, twelve-tone music or serial... it all sounds like everybody else's twelve-tone or serial.

Mailman: I hear some of the things your saying, and you sure aren't going to get any argument from me. I was just wondering if it would be fair to say that you believe strongly in intuition, and you believe that your intuition is greatly enhanced by hard work and discipline, Then your craft gets keener and more perceptive.

Ellis: I believe that, I sure do. You've got to work hard. Composers are basically a lazy group, except you. They're always looking for an easier way, but there's

really not one. There really isn't. Now the machines make things easier, you know, but I'll agree with you, Martin, really, I believe in intuition, I believe in ESP, but the trouble is it never works when it's supposed to. You know, creative people work with mystical things, and you've got to be a little bit mystical and naive.

Mailman: Well, that's a lot said in a short period of time.

Ellis: I'd just like to close with some loose, unconnected comments about the Electronic Music Center. These are my own viewpoints, not necessarily the school's or the deans' or my colleagues'. But I think we have a beautiful thing here--an opportunity to have a facility of instruments, faculty, students to advance the cause of music, which means all music, in a creative way, to explore new ways of making music, legitimately, and then to test these explorations to see if they really work. We have a building and instruments and an intermedia theater where we can write music that uses new devices. Then we can play it publicly and test it and see if it works. Now that's valuable.

We're not just reproducing music that has already

been written and that will be played again and again and again. We're trying to reach out and see what's up there ahead. You know that a high percent of what comes through is going to be junk, but there are going to be a few pearls once in awhile, too. You know that there'll always be some strife or contrast. Some people will say, "Well, that's a pile of junk; that's no good." And if we can keep our sense of humor and live and let live and give it a fair shot, that's how it's going to happen, not by reducing ourselves to jealousies and things like that.

But that sort of attitude is important to the Electronic Music Center. For instance, we have some terribly exciting and innovative things happening in computer music right now at the Electronic Music Center. It's stimulated by Larry Austin. It's carried on by him. It's terribly exciting, and it's just moving by leaps and bounds. These are revolutionary and different concepts, and we need to support this sort of thing and test them, and then conclusions are drawn. The best survive; I mean, if it's good it survives, and if it's not it dies and withers away.

This thing was true of intermedia like I like to see. I'm prejudiced that way. I think it needs



to have its day in court and see how it goes. If it's not valid, it withers and dies; if it is valid, well, it goes on. To keep this balance and this excitement is what it's about.

I'd like to make this next statement because I think it's right. The only reason that we have a School of Music is to play and perform and execute music. If all we have to work with is old music, then that School of Music will die, unless we continually filter in new pieces and new works all the time. Otherwise, music will die.

That's what tends to happen to symphony orchestras. They play the same fifty pieces and make their money and go in debt. The conductor makes his reputation on these famous fifty pieces. Now not entirely. Most conductors make their big reputation on having done some contemporary music of some composer. You know, the young conductor, a "hot dog," is the champion of the young composer-- until he becomes famous. Then he goes to his fifty best orchestra pieces and forgets the others. I've seen it happen dozens of times. But that's their business.

I just like to see anything able to happen at the Electronic Music Center with a smile on their

face, you know. I think it's so neat having Larry Austin there, you know...and all of us, all of us.

Well, I guess that's it.