

BLUESVILLE: THE JOURNEY OF SONNY RED

Anders Svanoe

INTRODUCTION

The first time I heard Sonny Red on record, I wondered, "Who is this guy?" Luckily for me, I had stumbled on Curtis Fuller's *New Trombone*, which started the nine-year (and still counting) love affair with Sonny Red (a.k.a. Sylvester Kyner). That particular record really caught my attention, since I had never heard that much trombone and alto saxophone pairing on the front line. But there was something almost suspicious in how these two masterful musicians blended and embellished every note together as if they were one. It seemed they knew each other well. Almost too well. Red's organic sound on the alto saxophone was a perfect match for Curtis Fuller. I couldn't explain why I liked it so much, other than to say it was captivating, heartfelt and *real*. Imperfectly perfect, if you can say that.

In the following weeks I looked for additional record dates that featured Sonny, but found very few sessions available on CD. Not even *Out Of the Blue*, perhaps Red's finest effort, was available in the U.S. Now Sonny's albums are finally resurfacing on CD, and are beginning to attract positive attention. When these albums first came out in the late 1950s and early 1960s, they were sadly overlooked. This was a common problem for bebop alto players recording in the 1950s: there were just too many other great alto players recording a similar type of music, and Red's style somehow got lost in the mix. Had he recorded the same music ten or twenty years later, would the reviews have been different?

Down Beat reviews of Red's early work on Blue Note, Savoy and Jazzland usually got caught up in comparisons with Charlie Parker or Sonny Stitt, instead of assessing Red on his own merits. Pete Welding writes in his review of *Out of the Blue*, "Red merely uses Parker's mannerisms in his playing without having integrated them into an overall organic conception... It's as if his sole criterion in the employment of Parker phrases in his improvising is that such and such a phrase fits over this particular chord, this line of Bird's over this chordal sequence... At times, however, he gets a sound amazingly like Parker's, much closer, in fact, than Stitt has ever been able to get."¹

Other *Down Beat* reviews from this period compared Red with Parker more favorably, and hinted at Red's promise as an alto saxophonist. John A. Tynan, in his review of Tommy Flanagan's *Jazz It's Magic*, wrote: "[Red] is revealed as a strongly assertive Bird-follower whose forceful, if not particularly independent, solos are carried on a tone not so tortured as some of his better known contemporaries."² In the review of Curtis Fuller's *New Trombone*, Don Gold wrote: "Kyner is a Bird-calling shouter, with fierce drive and emotional strength."³

¹ *Down Beat*, vol. 27 no. 25 (December 8, 1960), 46

² *Down Beat*, vol. 25 no. 15 (July 24, 1958), 36

³ *Down Beat*, vol. 25 no. 1 (January 9, 1958), 26

Not until the late 1960s, after the ranks of Bird disciples had thinned, did Red garner favorable notice from the jazz critics. In his 1968 *Down Beat* review of Donald Byrd's *Blackjack*, Harvey Pekar wrote: "Charlie Parker obviously had a strong influence on Kyner, but it's also clear that he has developed his own style. His playing is at once gutty and plaintive...His work is full of fresh and attractive melodic ideas, and well paced. He's an admirable musician – a jazzman whose playing is strong, imaginative and tasteful."⁴ Finally a record reviewer was giving Sonny Red credit for being his own man. A recent entry on Sonny Red in the *Virgin Encyclopedia of Jazz* sums up how a musician such as Red should be viewed today: "A vigorous soloist with an inventive flair, Kyner's recordings suggest that his reputation deserves reevaluation."⁵

Sonny Red was a jazz survivor. Despite the extreme hardships he faced, Red still produced one of the prettiest sounds I've ever heard on the alto saxophone. And to these ears, his saxophone sound is brought most sharply into focus through his ballad performances. Ira Gitler best sums up my feelings for Sonny Red in his liner notes to *The Mode*: "But then whatever Sonny Red does is authentic, for this is no jive cat out there looking for a gimmick. He has a flair for picking good old and new tunes which have not been overdone; his modal moments are thoughtfully taken; and when he plays the blues, as on 'Ko Kee,' he illustrates the statement that says, 'Jazz is not only a music but a way of life.' "

ORAL HISTORY

Unless otherwise specified, the interviews for this oral history were conducted by phone. The interviewees listed below are grouped according to where they were primarily in contact with Sonny Red. The Sonny Red quotes come from a lecture he gave on September 9, 1978, as part of a series called *Black Experience in the Arts* at the University of Connecticut. The Donald Byrd quotes come from a 2003 letter to Nicole Kyner.

Detroit

- Malvin McCray (saxophonist), 9.6.00 and 1.30.01
- James "Beans" Richardson (bassist), 12.01, Detroit, MI
- Charles Boles (pianist), 6.19.02

Detroit and New York

- Yusef Lateef (saxophonist), 3.1.98 and 6.26.02
- Barry Harris (pianist), 3.24.98
- Curtis Fuller (trombonist), 10.20.99, Daleville Hotel, New York
- Kiane Zawadi (Bernard McKinney) (euphoniumist), 11.15.99
- Tommy Flanagan (pianist), 11.20.99
- Phil Lasley (saxophonist), 5.21.00 and 5.23.00
- Frank Gant (drummer), 6.20.02
- Frank Foster (saxophonist), 7.11.02
- Charles McPherson (saxophonist), 7.17.02

⁴ *Down Beat*, vol. 35 no. 13 (June 27, 1968), 26

⁵ Colin Larkin, ed. *Virgin Encyclopedia of Jazz* (London: Virgin Books, 1999), 503

- Louis Hayes (drummer), 9.4.02

New York

- Jimmy Heath (saxophonist), 5.21.98
- Art Zimmerman (owner and producer, Zim Records), 3.8.99
- Dave Bailey (drummer, Jazzmobile director), 3.24.99
- Talib Kibwe (saxophonist), 9.2.99
- Johnnie Garry (Jazzmobile historian), 4.6.99
- James Spaulding (saxophonist), 10.20.99, Jazz Standard, New York
- Orrin Keepnews (record producer), 2.16.00
- Cedar Walton (pianist), 7.3.02

Family: Detroit and New York

- Nicole Kyner (daughter), 1.10.02
- James Kiner (brother), 6.12.02 and 6.16.02
- Roberta Marie Leach (sister), 6.16.02
- Elena Knox (ex-wife), 6.18.02
- Jaffiria Leach-Orr (niece), 4/15/03
- Sheila Kiner (niece), 9/14/05

Dodge City: From the Mississippi Delta to Detroit 1932-1957

Sylvester Kyner, later known as Sonny Red, was born December 17, 1932 in Belzoni, Mississippi to Lottie Lee McAfee-Kiner (1909-1989) and Jeff Kiner (?-1937). Sylvester had four siblings – Ira Lee (1928-1985), Roberta Marie (1929-), Rodell (1930-2003) and James (1934-2004) – but he was the only family member whose last name was spelled with a “y,” as verified on his birth certificate. The first four years of his life were spent with his family in Humphreys County, Mississippi. In the spring of 1936, lack of educational opportunities and poor living conditions compelled Lottie and her five children to board a Greyhound bus and flee north to Detroit, Michigan, where they moved in with Lottie’s sister Ira Lee Cox-Frederick (1902-1989) at 8630 Beaubien. Jeff Kiner followed his wife and family shortly afterwards, getting a job with the Levine Waste Paper Company, but he died a few months later at the age of 29. According to Red’s wife Elena Knox, Red believed that the cause of his father’s death was pneumonia resulting from poor working conditions on the docks. At some point in the late 1930s, the family moved to 9198 Goodwin, where Curtis Fuller lived upstairs with Oscar and Ella Johnson. Once settled in Detroit, life was still difficult for the Kiner family. Working several jobs while taking care of five children was very difficult for Lottie Lee McAfee-Kiner, but with hard work and extreme determination, she was able to successfully raise her family.

Sonny Red

I'm from the rural Mississippi. Like Congo Square in New Orleans and Mississippi is coming right up from the delta, so to speak. We had all the street singers, the guitar players and minstrel shows. I got music from the street, which is how most composers get it from. I moved to Detroit when I was four.

Roberta Marie Leach

We lived by a river, out in the country, when we lived in Mississippi, right across from Louisiana. I remember we had to take a boat to get to school, where there were crocodiles, snakes and crayfish. But my dad loved to hunt, he was a hunter, and he would take people out hunting. And my mother said, "Look, I got to get out of here!" At that time, we didn't even have any friends to play with. So we moved to Detroit in the spring of 1936. I remember that trip because I was holding Sylvester's hand while we crossed the street in Cincinnati. We had never seen a streetcar before, and we were almost killed. Oh, I'm glad we left.

Jeff Kiner came to Detroit about a month after my mother, and he got a job with the Levine Waste Paper Company. He was a couple of years older than my mother. We didn't know a lot about him, we didn't even know the kin people on his side. Anyway, he died of pneumonia.

My mother had asthma. My father would bring her washing and ironing, and when we came to Detroit, my mother worked for a Mr. and Mrs. Gibson in Grosse Pointe. They were artists, I know. My mother did her personal ironing and my aunt, Ira Lee Cox-Frederick, did the cooking.

James Kiner

All five of us were born in Mississippi. I was probably three when we came to Detroit. That was in 1936. I have few recollections of those days except the things that were told to me by my sister or my mother. We came to Detroit by Greyhound bus. It was a pretty rough trip with five kids, you know?

Nicole Kyner

My grandmother, my nana Lottie Lee, pretty much ran away from her husband, Jeff Kiner. She realized that her kids weren't going to get educated down in Mississippi. She'd only had a eighth-grade education. Lottie saved up enough pennies, she kept them in a flour sack, to move up with her sister, who lived up in Detroit. So, she got her kids on a bus and went as far north as they could go, which was Detroit, because she knew somebody. It was just a flight sort of thing. I always thought that was such a brave thing to do, to just get up and leave.

As I said, my nana left for Detroit without her husband. But he came back up to Detroit, especially when he heard, somehow heard, that she had a house. Lottie was doing well in Detroit because she was a domestic, a house cleaner. But there was some to-do about Jeff coming up since everything was going so well. There wasn't a lot of talk about Jeff Kiner.

James Kiner

[Sonny and I] had a neat relationship. As kids we used to fight all the time, because I couldn't fight with my older brothers! Sylvester was only about a year and some months older than me. But later on, and especially when I came into the service, we got along pretty well. I could talk to him about things, serious things, and he seemed to listen a lot.

I remember living on Goodwin; that's where we spent most of our time as kids. This would have been in the late 1930s or early 1940s. I have the most memories from Goodwin. Curtis Fuller

used to live over us on Goodwin. I think he was a foster child for a while. He lived with Oscar and Ella Johnson who lived over us for most of our young lives, when we were kids. I used to look out for them when my mother did day work. That's how I knew Curtis Fuller. In 1949 we moved up to 233 Leicester where my sister was pregnant with her daughter.

Curtis Fuller

I first met Sonny Red when we were kids in Detroit. We were about the same age. Sonny lived about a block or two from my brother, who was adopted. Sonny played with my brother. His brother Rodell and my brother, they were best friends. When my sister would come to the orphanage on Sundays to visit me, she would take me back to the old neighborhood. Sonny used to meet me in the backyard with his rust-colored knickers to play marbles. We'd be goofing around and he'd poke me in the eye or something. I always thought he was a bad little tough kid. Those freckles he had, that little look on his face, like he was a mean guy. I was afraid of him, you know? But we had this thing going on. As I grew up, and later on in life, we crossed paths again. We were always around each other. That's how I knew Sonny Red.

Frank Gant

I remember meeting Red when I was nine or ten years old, and I had a numbers route, I was picking up numbers. I was on the street around the corner from my house, and here's Red doing some hustling! I didn't know what he was doing, but he was hustling some kind of way. I ran into him and said, "Red, how you doing man," because I knew him from the neighborhood and his brothers, you know?

James Kiner

Mr. Boals was our stepfather, my mother's longtime boyfriend. He was around when we lived on Goodwin, so before 1949. He died in 1958, I believe. They had a common-law marriage, because back in those years if people stayed together for a length of time – I don't know the exact length, maybe 7 years – then they had a common-law marriage in Michigan. This law ended in 1957, I can remember that since I took some law classes.

Elena Knox

After Jeff Kiner passed, Lottie married Mr. [Elbon] Boals, who I never met because he died before I knew Sonny. Mr. Boals was somebody Sonny really cared about. I don't remember him saying anything negative about the years that Mr. Boals was their step-father. I mean Mr. Boals took on this whole gang of kids, you know? Mr. Boals stayed with his mother until he died. Nana was a strong, well-loved, I mean, just adored person, who everybody gathered around. She was the glue that kept it all together. She was wonderful to me and was just as splendid as she could be.

James Kiner

My mother did just about all that she could to keep the family afloat. She did day work, she worked in the factory a couple of years during the war and she worked in one of the black nightclubs in the city, Lee's Sensation. She just about did it all – scrubbing floors, washing

dishes. Ira, my oldest brother, always stayed in trouble. My mother spent a lot of her resources on him. I remember one time she worked three jobs just to keep him out of jail. He was getting into gang fights at that time. To tell you the truth, he was the oldest, but he was like the baby of the family. I think when my dad died, Ira was impacted the hardest. He would have been eight years old. He would have known my dad, you know?

Nicole Kyner

Everyone was close to Nana. She was the queen bee. I think they all knew how much they owed her, because she had done so much for them. The kids always had a place to come home to. My uncle James lived with her until he was 45 or so, and so did Marie for many years. I mean everybody stayed there, even my cousin Jaffiria, Marie's daughter, lived there. Nana was an extraordinarily gracious, generous and quiet woman. She was a tremendous person.

Sylvester attended Sherrard Elementary School beginning in 1938, and then Hutchins Middle School from 1944 to spring 1947. Music in the Kiner household was a common event. In 1949 the Kiner household moved to 233 Leicester Court near Goodwin.

Roberta Marie Leach

Oh, Sylvester loved music! I took piano lessons and started on the C melody sax in high school, and Sylvester picked it up from there. There's about six years' difference between the two of us.

Malvin McCray

Sonny grew up in a musical family. His mother had a piano in the house, where she played a lot of church and gospel music. She was a very nice and beautiful lady, Sonny had a beautiful family.

James Kiner

How Sylvester got into the type of music he got into, I couldn't tell you, but I can tell you this. We had an older brother, Ira, who was out there during the so-called jitterbug days. The first jazz records that we had in the house were brought there by him. Like, Count Basie would have been one of the guys that he would have brought in, but there were others. It wasn't a lot of music, but was probably good enough for it to have an effect on everybody.

Sylvester started playing at a very young age. He was probably in junior high, or maybe before that, as a matter of fact. My mother bought him a horn. Now we're talking about a very poor family. She found the bucks to buy the horn. I can recall her making him practice his C melody saxophone with a metronome, so she stuck with him on that. As a kid, Sylvester had a good soprano voice, when he used to sing in school. Early school, like K-6, and they used him on the stage singing in his soprano voice. Like *Ave Maria*, which now, thinking of him, it's kinda funny. But he did have a good little voice then.

Curtis Fuller

Sonny played very good piano. I don't know where he got the training, but I'm certain it wasn't all by ear. You don't hear all that! Red came from a musical environment, like another musical family in town, the McKinnys: Bernard McKinney, Ray McKinney and Harold McKinney. All those players, they came to be the best, you know?

Elena Knox

The house that Sonny grew up on Leicester Court was just darling. I remember visiting it and it was immaculately kept. It was a little old-fashioned house, a single family dwelling, and it was attached to another house that shared a common wall. Marie lived there, with Nana his mom, Marie's daughter Jaffiria, Sonny when he was there and sometimes Rodell when he was there too. His mother's sister, auntie, lived next door.

It's difficult to determine the source of Sylvester Kyner's nickname, "Sonny Red," but opinions point to "Sonny" being a common nickname for a boy growing up in the 1930s and 1940s, and "Red" referring to Sylvester's natural red hair. For an industrial arts shop project in high school, he used a router to etch the name "Sonny Red" into a finished board. Professionally his name would be in flux. On his 1957 Savoy recording, he is identified as "Sonny Redd." On a Paul Quinichette recording from the same year, he becomes "Red Kyner." On a Curtis Fuller recording from the same year, liner note writer Robert Levin refers to him as "Sonny Red Kyner." Ira Gitler's liner notes referred to him as "Sylvester Kyner Junior." For the Blue Note and Jazzland dates, he is once again "Sonny Red." The Blue Note session charts submitted to the Library of Congress in his handwriting are signed "Sylvester Kyner." His Social Security application uses the original family spelling, "Sylvester Kiner." The charts in his sketchbook from the late 1970s are signed "Sonny Redd," except for one entry with the single "d." A 1976 letter from the National Endowment for the Arts, the 1978 Jazzcraft date with Howard McGhee, and the benefit concert flyer from December 1979 all use "Sonny Redd."

Nicole Kyner

I think his family started calling him "Sonny," and the "Red" came from his hair, he had reddish hair. It was kind of henna red, but it was natural.

Charles McPherson

We used to call Sonny Red "Red." Physically, he was red. He had freckles and he had reddish hair, so I'm sure that had about ninety percent to do with everything.

Frank Gant

Well, he was red, his color, not really *red* hair, but he was light-skinned and had freckles.

James Kiner

I remember people always called Sylvester "Sonny Red" when we lived on Goodwin. He was a young guy, probably twelve years old, or even a little younger, when he got the nickname. I

don't know how it got started, but maybe in black culture we called guys "Sonny." Probably Sonny Stitt had the same type situation. Very few people that I can recall called my brother "Sylvester." Within the family we did, I certainly did. My family, my mother and my sister, would have called him Sylvester. It's not a great name, you know, 'cause you think about Sylvester the cat.

Donald Byrd

He disliked being called Sylvester.

Jimmy Heath

Sonny didn't like to be called Sylvester. We got in a fight over this once!

Barry Harris

I always called Sonny "Sonny Red." I never called him "Sylvester Kyner." He didn't like that.

Orrin Keepnews

The whole thing that nobody could quite understand about his name, and nickname and such was very confusing. I'm one of the people that had to deal with his legal name on contracts and such. He apparently never did a name change or anything, he was Sylvester Kyner, and it was kind of hard to tell how he was using Sonny Red. First of all, it was as if it was one name, almost. He didn't appreciate Sonny Red Kyner, he basically was self-described as Sonny Red as if that was all the name that he had. Didn't make any secret of his name, but I mean, in terms of use, it was that kind of thing that was all obviously perfectly clear to him, and obviously not perfectly clear to other people.

Elena Knox

Sonny referred to himself as "the baby boy" in a joking way, you know? He had that little boy look until he was up in his thirties.

In the early- to mid-1940s, Sonny Red took his first saxophone lessons from William Gardner on the C melody saxophone, an instrument originally given to his sister Marie. Eventually he would trade in the C melody for a Conn New Wonder alto saxophone. From the fall of 1947 to 1952, Red attended Detroit's Northern High School, dropping out temporarily for the 1950-1951 school year. At Northern he formed close musical relationships with Curtis Fuller, Kiane Zawadi, Donald Byrd, Barry Harris, Paul Chambers and Tommy Flanagan. Some of these relationships were formed in the concert band led by Orville Lawrence. Lawrence exposed his students to many different types of music, and encouraged them to try other instruments. Red also met and played with other teenagers in Detroit during informal jam/practice sessions at the homes of Barry Harris and Joe Brazil.

Roberta Marie Leach

We lived on Goodwin when William Gardner taught my brother saxophone. I gave Sylvester his first saxophone, a C melody saxophone. We got it from the pawnshop, and of course later on he traded it in for an alto.

James Kiner

My sister had music in school, and so did Sylvester. Plus, Sylvester studied with a good friend of the family that also played. His name was William Gardner, who lived probably a block away from us on the same street. He was just some guy who played alto for a while. He wound up being a drug addict in the end, and I know that this was during the 1940s. It didn't last long because of the drugs.

Sylvester practiced quite often at home. Sometimes he'd go in the backyard and practice in the summer, because it was too warm in the house.

Both Curtis Fuller and Sylvester were into music. I think Curtis was playing trombone at that time. Probably another guy my brother hung out with would have been Paul Chambers. He went to Northern for a while. I remember that 'cause Paul and I had a fight one time and I cut his finger. Now I look back and think, "Oh my God!" We were good friends and we were all hanging out. It's just one of those things that happens, I guess. And, there was a guy named Claire Roquemore too. But he wasn't around long, because he died. He was into drugs, very early.

Donald Byrd

[From a 2003 letter to Red's daughter Nicole Kyner –Ed.] Let me begin by saying I think of your father very often. He was one of my closest friends. We met at an Intermediate school named Hutchins in Detroit, Michigan in 1945. We had many of the same classes. We were in the concert band and the jazz orchestra. We played for the dances given at the school. This was the beginning of our long and continuous association musically and personally.

Sonny Red

I studied with a cat named Mr. Lawrence. He was the bandmaster. I always used to think he didn't know what was happening, but I used to hear the waltzes. Strauss, Tchaikovsky and Maurice Ravel, all the masters. But it stuck with me, you know? I heard Charlie Parker, Dizzy [Gillespie], Coleman Hawkins and Lester Young, and I knew that *they* heard the masters also. There's only one place to get music from, that's a master. I had the pleasure of playing with them all.

Elena Knox

The band teacher at Northern was well-loved by Sonny and the other fellas that were in the band. Mr. Lawrence was thought of with great fondness. He also gave them instruments when they had none.

Sonny Red

I went to school with Tommy Flanagan, the great piano player with Ella [Fitzgerald]. He was a schoolmate. I used to look over his shoulder all the time and watch him play. He was gifted then. He was perfect. He was mature. At 17 or 18, Tommy Flanagan was the same way, a beautiful musician.

Tommy Flanagan

I went to Northern High School with Sonny Red. I got to meet all those guys because I was playing clarinet in the band. We jammed together in the auditorium classes, usually at the end of them. We had a very loose music teacher named Orville Lawrence. We did play a few overtures and he also gave us opportunities to fool around with the other instruments. That was just a way for me to get out of another class and play in the band for a couple of hours in the auditorium. There was always a piano in that auditorium. I played clarinet through high school and then I quit right afterwards, you know, after the piano took over. It took over me early. The main thing was we had a teacher that was so loose he didn't take up that much time with us. He sat at the desk and mostly was writing, band arrangements for something. I think he played with some group. Anyway, when it came time to grade us, he used to have us sit out in the auditorium and he used to throw our report cards to us, he'd fling it out like a frisbee: "Flanagan," *vroom*, "Kyner," *vroom* – you know? Stoney Nightingale [*spelling unknown –Ed.*], the tenor player, he was in high school with us too.

Phil Lasley

Sonny came up on the north end of Detroit with a hell of a tenor saxophone player, Stoney Nightingale. They were from the same neighborhood and started out together. Malvin McCray is a part of that group. They were all older than I am.

Charles Boles

I first met Sonny Red when he had those knickers, you know. He and I were very good friends. That was sometime in the 40s. We went to grade school and high school together. We both went to Northern. Later on, we played together as teenagers. We played for mostly teenage gigs, high school-type things. And we used to go up to Barry Harris' house and play. That was the training ground, going to Barry Harris' house every day. In those days it was Barry Harris, Paul Chambers and [drummer] Claude Black. But Sonny and I played around Detroit, a few little gigs, and then he left for New York.

I was in the band in high school. I played bells, because I couldn't get into the band as a piano player. That band was a hell of a band. The first year there was Paul Chambers – he was just starting to play bass – and Sonny Red on alto. Tommy Flanagan was not in that band because he had graduated already. So we're talking sometime around 1948 or 1949. But Tommy came up there every day and sat in on the little jam session.

James Kiner

Sylvester quit high school for a while and went back. He was very smart, very good in school. But he had an attitude. The attitude-type thing was for we black kids, you know, dealing with the world at that time. We'd fight teachers most of the time, and you just develop these attitudes about it. Looking back it might have been silly, but at that time, it was appropriate. But my brother, he was pretty good at everything that he attempted to do. He was gifted at music.

Sylvester graduated high school in 1952. That was a conscious decision on his part when he was sixteen, seventeen: to go back to school and stick with music, because he didn't want to be hanging out gambling, running around and smoking recreational drugs. Maybe he had seen

somebody go down that way? I don't know. But he had to make a real decision that he wouldn't drop out of school. I talked to him about that. I never understood how easily he was able to do it, maybe it wasn't easy to make that decision. But he made it, and it worked out for him. My mother, she had one son going down that lane. Ira, my oldest brother, was involved in gambling, crooked gambling. Which is the way life goes, I guess. Actually, Sylvester was very good at that! Sylvester had excellent hands. He was excellent at pool, he could have been a pool shark. Good dice shooter. Good with cards. All of that kind of stuff he learned from my oldest brother Ira. That was the going thing at the north end of town at that time. Everybody wanted to be a pool shark, everybody wanted to be slick, and Sylvester somehow got away from that. He made that decision at about sixteen, that this wasn't what he wanted to do.

Roberta Marie Leach

Sylvester dropped out of high school for one year. He dropped out because he didn't agree with everything, you know, the rules. The principal wanted to give him a scholarship to go to law school, because he said Sylvester was such a strong, argumentative-type person. The assistant principal, Mr. Holt, came and talked to my mother, and Sylvester went back to school the next year, and he graduated.

Frank Foster

I remember a story about Sonny Red that doesn't even involve music. We were going down the street in Detroit one day in 1950, and the police frequently stopped young blacks on the street if they looked suspicious. And Sonny Red and I must have looked suspicious this day. I don't know why, because we weren't up to anything. The cops stopped us and padded us down. I had a jackknife in my possession, with a three-inch blade. They didn't find any drugs on us, or anything else. So the cop asked me, "Do you want this knife?" and I said, "Yes, I want it!" Then he proceeded to break the blade against a stone fence, and he handed it back to me.

Roberta Marie Leach

Sylvester had a paper route and worked for R. L. Polk & Company, which was some type of business. He also worked at one of the Dodge plants, but he would always go to sleep in the elevators, and other employees would protect him saying, "we don't know where he is." But after some time, they fired him.

Nicole Kyner

My dad was very bright in high school, and at this point he was really focused on music. This continued to be his focus for the rest of his life, without question.

After graduating from high school in 1952, Sonny Red performed in many of the best jazz clubs in Detroit. He frequently gigged and sat in at Klein's Show Bar, The Crystal Show Bar, The Twenty Grand, The World Stage, The Rouge Lounge, The Blue Bird Inn and The Mirror Ballroom. Sonny also participated in frequent jam sessions at The West End Hotel, a popular after-hours spot for musicians. Besides working steadily with Barry Harris, Red had a few opportunities to sit in with Charlie Parker, Miles Davis, Yusef Lateef and Sonny Stitt. Other

early gigs included trombonist Frank Rosolino's combo in April-May 1954 at Klein's Show Bar, three days with Billie Holiday sometime during 1954, and Art Blakey's group during the fall of 1954 in Philadelphia.

Sonny Red

In 1949 we had a band with the great Barry Harris, the piano player and teacher. I stayed with his band until 1953. In 1954, I worked with Billie Holiday while she was in Detroit for three days. It was three of the most beautiful days I've ever spent in music. She would sing and would give me so much to strive for. Like trying to captivate that style of hers, you know, emulate that sound. I always like to believe that the voice is the first instrument, other than mother nature, then the horn. I always strived to make the horn sound like the voice. That's an art form. So, you have to be listening for the sound, later for the horn itself. Only to sing through the horn, and make the people feel it. That's what it's all about. I've spent my life trying to do this.

Barry Harris

I started a group with Claire Roquemore on trumpet and Sonny Red on alto in the late 1940s. Sonny was the hippest cat of the three of us! He used to practice all the time. Red used to love to play pool. In fact, he played more pool than saxophone.

Kiane Zawadi

Sonny and I came up with Barry Harris' septet sometime in the early to mid-1950's. We had Claire Roquemore on trumpet, Tate Houston on baritone sax, Sonny on alto and Barry Harris on piano. After Claire Roquemore left the band we had a guy named Teeter Ford on trumpet. That band played a few gigs around and rehearsed Barry's music. Barry is my mentor, and probably was Sonny Red's too. We use to hang out together. Red used to play pool. We would talk about general things like girls and stuff like that. Yeah, he had a lot of fun.

Frank Gant

I remember seeing Red, he was swinging, in Barry Harris' band. Playing bebop. William [Teeter] Ford was also in the band, on trumpet. I loved to play with Teeter! They were playing at the Craftsmen's Club, or one of the ballroom clubs. I went up to Red and said, "Red, man, listen to you, how did you get that good? You got to be an inspiration for me." I said, "If you can do it, I know I can do it."

James Kiner

Sylvester and Barry Harris were good friends, but they argued all the time. Musical type differences. What you're playing, what I'm playing. They were still excellent friends though.

Charles Boles

Sonny Red could be confrontational at times. But Barry Harris knew how to cool him out. Barry Harris could be confrontational too. Those guys argued all the time over the music. It was always over the music, the approach to the music. Barry was everybody's mentor, so everybody followed what he said. He had a system and he still teaches that system. Sonny Red and Charles

McPherson were Barry's students. All the musicians that came through that era were probably Barry's students.

Charles McPherson

Sonny Red would be a couple of years older than me. So when we were coming up in Detroit, when I first started playing and getting interested in jazz, Red was already playing really well. I remember hearing of him, and the first time I saw him was at some dance at the Ferry Center, a hall that people would rent out to give dances and dinners, or whatever. This was around 1953. Someone said, "There's Sonny Red." He was playing alto and sounded very much like Charlie Parker. And I was very much into Charlie Parker, especially then, and here was this young guy able to actually come somewhere near that.

I don't know how formally Sonny studied with Barry. Now, I studied with Barry. I studied in the real sense of the word. I'm over at his house every day for three or four hours, really taking instruction and learning. Sonny Red was closer to Barry's age and I don't know if the teacher-pupil was in place as much as say, me. But I'm sure by osmosis, or some kind of way, there was learning going on. And Barry was definitely more knowledgeable than Sonny Red, especially at that time. Barry was a real good piano player, and a little older as well.

Kiane Zawadi

Charlie Parker was playing a Monday matinee at the Crystal Lounge. I remember Bird let Sonny and I play a tune, while he took a break. While Bird was sitting in the audience, he was grinning at us. At that time, we knew that he wasn't displeased with our playing. We were so in awe of him.

Tommy Flanagan

Bird came to the Mirror Ballroom one day to play. At that time, Barry [Harris] and Sonny Red were old enough to sit in with Bird. I was always afraid to do that, but I did a couple of times. Bird had a quintet; he would do this just maybe once every couple of years, because he had a son in Detroit. Red got to be kinda close with Sonny Stitt when he was in Detroit. They both liked to play a lot, like all those horn players, like Coltrane never stopped playing. Red also had a close association with Donald Byrd, they're about the same age.

I was playing with Billy Mitchell's band at the Blue Bird Inn, when Miles was in residence there for about two or three months [*probably late 1953 to early 1954 –Ed.*]. The band was Thad Jones, Billy Mitchell, Elvin Jones and James Richardson. Several young guys used to come by to sit in, and Sonny Red was one of them, along with a trumpet player, Claire Roquemore.

Curtis Fuller

Miles came to Detroit to live. He was there and Sonny Red was standing in with him. Miles met a girl and moved there. Her name was Jean Spencer [*spelling unconfirmed –Ed.*]. She was the daughter of a guy in a dance and singing group. That group was very popular at that time and Mr. Spencer was the young bright guy in the band. His daughter and Miles took up. She was singing, she had a very good voice. But Sonny was with them, you know, in that crowd. Sonny

went and met him [Miles] when Bird came to Detroit, and he fooled around in Detroit for a while. Wardell Gray was in Detroit, and Yusef was a big figure around Detroit and Sonny was in with all those guys, you know.

Frank Gant

When Miles was over on the west side, there was a club called the Blue Bird Inn. Now that was the real test of being accepted in Detroit. You had to do the Blue Bird. And once you did that, you're cool. You would be ready to move on out, if necessary. I played the Blue Bird with Yusef [Lateef] and Barry [Harris].

I remember seeing Red a few times down at Joe Brazil's. I first started to play drums by going down to Joe Brazil's. The way I got there was Doug Watkins, the bass player, pulled me over there since Doug and I went to the same high school. Anyway, he was telling me to go sit in and I told him that I wasn't ready yet. But he told me to come on by there anyway. So I went there and sat in with Barry on piano, Joe Brazil [on alto saxophone], Donald Byrd and Doug Watkins on bass. They played a tempo, extremely fast, and somehow or another, I kept that tempo and that's what opened the door for me. They said that the next time they were going to give me a call, and they did.

Tommy Flanagan

Joe Brazil was important on the scene and a good friend of Coltrane's. That was perfect for Trane. This was a place, just free to him, to play as long as he wanted to.

Kiane Zawadi

I remember one session that we did at Joe Brazil's place. We did a lot of jam sessions down there. Sonny was there and sometimes Barry. Ko-Ko [Kenneth "Cokie" Winfrey], the tenor player, used to live down at Joe's place, so he'd always be there for the sessions. That was around 1955 or 1956. I lived right down the street, so I was there a lot.

Tommy Flanagan

Frank Foster was instrumental in influencing Red to open up to more chord progressions. Actually, Sonny learned that just by playing. That's how he picked it up.

James Kiner

There was somebody else that my brother played with, Frank Foster. Frank used to come by the house and they'd go over stuff together. They did a lot of practicing and writing. I don't know where Frank came from, but he might have been doing something over at Wayne State.

Frank Foster

When I went to Detroit, I met Sonny Red. He was one of the first people I met. Sonny Red and I were good friends, but every now and then something would happen where he would stop speaking to me for a few weeks. I don't know why he would stop speaking to me, but after a few weeks and after he'd gotten over what it was he was pissed off about, he'd start speaking to me again. They learned a lot from me, so the story goes. Sonny Red knew the basics, but I was

giving him some deeper information, some frills. Sonny and I used to get together and talk about the music and go to the jam sessions. We also played a couple gigs together at Klein's [Show Bar] where we got paid, but we mostly played jam sessions. Red played a little tenor when I knew him in Detroit, but he mostly played alto. I heard a recording where he was playing flute [in the 1970s], but I never heard or witnessed him playing any flute live. We never hung out while he lived in New York.

Curtis Fuller

My first night back from the service [*probably 1954-55 –Ed.*] was at the Music Hall with Sonny Stitt, and Sonny Red was there at the concert. After the concert, we all went over to Rouge Lounge and jammed. Sonny Red and Sonny Stitt went after it. At this time, Sonny Red was one of the guys who was really into playing bebop. I always liked and admired him because of that. I mean he was Charlie Parker personified. Sonny Red was right in there. All the guys around town drew on each other musically. There was Lamonte Hamilton and [Kenneth] “Cokie” Winfrey. All those guys were like Charlie Parker's disciples.

Red's best friend at that time was Bernard McKinney, who is Kiane Zawadi. He was a trombone player, but now he's playing mostly euphonium. They had their own band. I wasn't even into music at that time. I was trying to play classical violin, but Red was playing alto and I didn't want to get into that.

Kiane Zawadi

Red once invited me to come up and work with Blakey in Philly. He said, “come by there if you can get up here from Detroit and make this matinee,” so I came up and played a matinee with him. After that he wasn't involved [with Blakey].

Curtis Fuller

Well I took Frank Rosolino's place at the Bowl-o-drome. It was his group at the Bowl-o-drome. It was a bowling alley with a jazz room. Sonny Red was playing with him at that time.

James Kiner

There were a couple of times where they did sort of a non-bar type gig. We called it “The World Stage.” My brother played there. I remember he played there with a vibes player, a local guy. It was a nice setting for people. The audience sat in sort of a “C” formation with the rows set up, what you call arena-type seats.

Tommy Flanagan

Red played at The World Stage Theater, all the musicians were there, because there was no age limit. It was just an open theatre.

Phil Lasley

I first met Sonny Red when he was playing with Abe Woodley at the West End in Detroit. As a kid, I used to go out there and just listen, you know, bug the older musicians.

Frank Gant

Sonny and I did a lot of gigs together. He was with Barry Harris' band. He was in there before me. I was playing at Klein's Show Bar with Yusef [Lateef], and Sonny sat in a few times. I remember one time specifically, I got him the gig, 'cause Yusef was out of town. Yusef came to New York to do some recording, and he left me in Detroit and I filled in with Sonny Red. That was sometime during the late 1950's.

James Kiner

Most of the stuff my brother was doing at this time was at the Blue Bird or Klein's. Klein's was Yusef's permanent job in Detroit. So any time my brother would have played over there, it would have been with Yusef. That was after my brother got out of the sanitarium, sometime around 1956 or 1957. Yusef's band used a lot of written music. I think Yusef required that everybody did some kind of reading, because a lot of the music that Yusef was playing, he wrote. He arranged it. My brother didn't play with Yusef all the time, because Sylvester was a little difficult to get along with. But he played at all the places he could. It was one of those unfortunate things where I didn't get to hear him all the time because once I came into the service, I was working and going to college at night.

Malvin McCray

Red and I played at the Bizerte Bar. That's where they had sessions every Monday night. On the weekends, Friday and Saturday night, we used to play at the West End, after everybody got off their gigs. We would play until daybreak. Yusef had that gig. Red used to come out there all the time and play.

Yusef Lateef

We were all in the same atmosphere there in Detroit, so we rubbed shoulders. Sonny Red worked with me some at Klein's somewhere around 1957. Miles Davis, Red and I also played some concerts; one of them was in Toledo, Ohio, I remember that. It was a rhythm section and three horns.

By the summer of 1955 Red was diagnosed with tuberculosis, and was admitted to the Northville sanitarium in Detroit for a period of 18 months. In September 1955, a benefit concert was given for Red at the Blue Bird Inn. Lung problems would interfere with his playing career for the rest of his life.

Nicole Kyner

When my dad was younger he caught tuberculosis and was hospitalized for about two years. My dad smoked a lot, they all did, but he did quit smoking ten years before he got the lung cancer.

Roberta Marie Leach

Being in the sanitarium was hard on Sylvester. He always said that I had given the tuberculosis to him, because I had healed scar tissue in my lungs. But I was never hospitalized, so I don't know where he got it from.

James Kiner

When I got out of the service in 1955, I found out my brother had tuberculosis. I assumed he got it because he was playing around. By then he was playing at some of the local places and they say that he probably got it there. I didn't even know he was ill until I came out of the service.

Curtis Fuller

Yeah, Sonny always had lung problems. He didn't know it, but he had tuberculosis that would later develop into cancer. When I was younger, I had to take a test because of my close association with him. When we were kids we would share Coca-Colas and eat off the same hot dog. They were treating him as an outpatient. That was the beginning of treating people as outpatients. My father, I understand, died with [lung cancer]. I never knew my father, he died when my mother was carrying. So I was sensitive to that.

Elena Knox

Sonny was very young when he got sick, and was still living at his mom's house. He was told after he came out of the sanitarium that he'd never play music again. That was a tough thing to hear, because music was his life.

Sonny's musical style made an impression on those who worked with and heard him. His approach to the saxophone was firmly rooted in the basics: emphasis on the blues, strong rhythmical concepts, lyrical playing and a command sound on the horn. These strong fundamental beliefs, and his unique way of making the bebop vocabulary his own, gained respect from his peers and mentors.

Sonny Red

I listened to Louis Armstrong, Charlie Parker, all the jazz artists. And the singers, especially. The blues singers. I loved all of them. And Charlie Parker was later in my life, but I listened to the singers first. I'd go to church and they would sing the spirituals and I would come home and try to play that on the piano, although it's not my instrument. I would try and get that feeling from it. Some singers bring tears to your eyes. Because you feel it, because they are giving you something. That's the only way tears can come to your eyes.

The blues is an institution in itself, which is derivative of the old spirituals, I think. The blues is a way of life, it's the bridge in which jazz crosses. The blues supports it. All the compositions I've written, and I've written quite a few of them, have been blues, or blues-influenced at any rate.

James Kiner

Charlie Parker was my brother's hero. My brother was also close to Sonny Stitt because Stitt played like Charlie Parker. My friends and probably Sylvester's friends too, we used to try to find Bird's records. We found Jay McShann with Charlie Parker on it. But my brother also understood that he had to *stop* playing like Bird, because nobody can play better than the creator. Many musicians' careers have been hurt by that. I think Sylvester also saw some things in Coltrane; I can hear it in his music, some of his later music.

Louis Hayes

Sonny was a little older than I am. He was a very special person in Detroit, before I became a special person. He was a Charlie Parker person that really loved Charlie Parker and people loved Sonny in Detroit.

Charles Boles

He was a bebopper, you know? I guess a lot like Sonny Stitt and Charlie Parker, in the style of bebop.

Tommy Flanagan

Sonny was really advanced for his age. Even in high school, he was someone to listen to. He picked up on Bird very early. Sonny was one of the first guys, young alto players, to really have a sound. He sounded like someone different than, you know, Johnny Hodges. Sonny was quite original in his own right. He had his own sound and his own ideas. His way of playing was very personal. I know he loved all kinds of music and was pretty well-versed in the classics too.

Curtis Fuller

Out of all the young guys, Red really grasped Charlie Parker. He inherited that. Sonny Stitt and all of them approached jazz like that. But Sonny Red could tell them the inside stuff, you played this note against that chord kind of thing. He could make some of the big boys like Miles Davis stand back with what he knew. I always had a lot of respect for him, because he knew what he was talking about. Red could always tell if a guy didn't know his changes, or tunes. He could tell you while he stood there. Red made you cognizant of everything going on. That made me listen to everybody. He opened that door for me. Sonny had super training, he and Barry Harris. Sonny also played very good classical piano.

Cedar Walton

Red always used to bolster his ability to play the blues, in a real comical, positive way, but he could play the blues now! He was bluesy, and was someone who was into developing a style in the jazz idiom. I don't think his sound necessarily got fully developed because he passed away too soon. He was probably just coming into his own.

Frank Foster

Sonny Red's style was somewhat derivative from Charlie Parker, and yet it had elements of his own creativity in there. I think he practiced runs, licks and ideas, but I don't think he did too much legit-type exercise practicing. His philosophical attitude toward the music was unique, because he'd say things that made sense, without making sense, you know? He would say things like, "I think I'm playing as much as anybody out there, for what I'm playing!"

Orrin Keepnews

Sonny belonged to a period when the influence of Parker was all-pervasive. To my ear I think that he, like a number of other alto players from his time, suffered from exactly that, you know?

He didn't get out from under enough, so I don't really carry any strong feelings of characterizing his playing.

Yusef Lateef

Sonny played his own self, and that's what I admired about him. He didn't emulate anyone else. *Anything* he played was appealing to me. I think he understood that the tradition was to play like yourself and he pursued that path.

Charles McPherson

Red was an interesting player. He was one of the alto players that certainly came from Charlie Parker, but was able to be a little bit different, to take that language, and actually have a way of forging a style of your own. That's really the way everybody learns how to play. But he definitely had a little something. So, even though he came from Bird, like everybody else, he had his own little way of doing things and his sound, which manifested itself on some records. He definitely was under-recorded, and never given his just due, because of this.

Frank Gant

Red loved music, man! He would tell me to don't forget the keyboard. I think that's where he would spend a lot of his time, because he was starting to write. Red put the blues into his playing and he could swing! He was a swinger!

Malvin McCray

Red was a student of the music. In fact, I owe my latest success to him. Red showed me some key things about the piano and how to approach the saxophone via the piano. I could look at the piano and see what he was doing and how it related to the saxophone. Red also showed me about breathing on the saxophone, and how to hold the horn. He told me to grip the mouthpiece further up in order to open up my sound. Red was the kind of guy that could play any horn. Suggestions, you know, it's those small things that make a huge difference. That really opened up the doors for me. Red was such a great guy. He was my main man for me, he's a guy that I truly loved and was a good dear friend. Nobody who was ever that knowledgeable spent that kind of time with me.

Phil Lasley

Red's concept was just swing and play pretty. He never did get into the technical aspects. He was basically a blues guy. I play *Teef* a lot and am probably one of the few guys around here [Detroit] that still plays his compositions.

Curtis Fuller

Red was a good saxophone player, but he never had the speed. He never got up and went. And that was the scene in those days, like Pepper Adams. They were beasts, you know. I got that background, you know. I was in that crowd, Joe Henderson and all those guys. When I first got with Trane, I remember when I first saw those changes I was running the seventh chords all the time, instead of getting more inventive like Pepper or somebody. I was just spelling that thing, because he's got these chord changes written here. But Sonny was more fluid with adapting a

liner line, so I took note. I guess you have to listen to Parker too, because that's where Parker was coming from.

Kiane Zawadi

I liked Sonny's sound and his concept. Sonny sounded like a cross between Bird and Sonny Stitt, if you could say that. He liked Parker, but he might have liked Stitt a little bit better. Sonny sounded more like Sonny Stitt for sound and licks, but he had his own creative approach to soloing too. With some of these other cats, I can't ID them, but with Sonny Red, I can. He had natural, creative ability. He was more self-taught anyway, you know? I remember he'd like to play "Stay as Sweet as You Are" and "Stars Fell Down on Alabama."

Curtis Fuller

Sonny had a sound! With all the information that he had, he still maintained the lyrical thing. That embedded itself in me. I was out there playing fast licks all the time and Sonny Red brought me down, he more than anyone, to be more lyrical, and to feel the music. He was a study in lyrical playing. A lyricist. He used to like Nat Cole, he used to like singers. There was one favorite ballad that I used to love to hear him play, "Stay as Sweet as You Are." Through him I learned all those things.

Elena Knox

Sonny introduced me to Leadbelly. He was also crazy about Charlie Parker. We had a lot of those records in the house. Sonny also really liked Billie Holiday. We used to listen to her records a lot. That was one of the most romantic periods, listening to Billie Holiday records.

James Kiner

My brother's best music was the ballads that he would play. To me, I would have been satisfied if he would've played ballads forever. At one time I probably suggested to him that he should play more ballads. Even the flute things [ballads] that he did were nice.

Elena Knox

Sonny practiced everyday. I can't think there was one day that he didn't practice. There would not have been one day that he didn't pick up his horn and play. He practiced lots of scales and riffs too. Lots of scales and scale work. He wrote stuff out on the piano.

Charles McPherson

I don't think Sonny Red played with his [top] teeth [on the mouthpiece]. He played with a double cushion [embouchure], like an oboe player. I can tell when a cat plays with a double cushion, it's something about how the articulation happens. There's something about how the tip of the tongue [hits the reed]. It's a slightly softer sound, because instead of teeth on the hard surface of the mouthpiece, you have lips on the hard surface, so the sound is dampened a little bit more. Now, Bird almost sounded like he played with a double embouchure. But I don't think he did, because every time I ask guys that were old enough to know this, they said Bird played with his teeth. But he almost sounds like he played with a double cushion to me. See, Johnny Hodges played with one too. A lot of lead alto players did that. You can bend the note, you have more control when you play with a double cushion.

Phil Lasley

These were the horns that Red played on: he started on one of those old Conn 10M's [*Lasley probably means either a 6M or a Conn "Chu Berry" alto; the 10M is a tenor saxophone -AS*]. That's what he was using when he first went to New York, in the 50s. He played on that with the Jazz Messengers and those early recordings with Curtis Fuller. Red then got the Selmer with the Blue Note recordings, and shortly afterwards he got the [King] Super 20 for those Jazzland records. Like a lot of guys, they really had wished they had kept the first one. The older horns have the sound, they have such beautiful sounds.

Jimmy Heath

Sonny was a great composer who wrote a lot of compositions. One of my favorite songs of his is *Bluesville*. Sonny had his own concept. He was a very rhythmical player and he swung hard.

Louis Hayes

I recorded *Teef* twice. It's on my first record date with Yusef [Lateef], Nat Adderley, Sam Jones and Barry Harris on Vee-Jay [*"Louis Hayes Featuring Yusef Lateef & Nat Adderley," recorded April 26, 1960*]. Then I recorded it again in the late 90s with David Hazeltine. Now that's very important that I recorded his tunes two times. That's history.

Central Park: New York 1957-1978

In early 1957 in Detroit, Red played with Art Blakey and in local concerts with Barry Harris, Elvin Jones and Yusef Lateef. But like many other musicians from Detroit and other U.S. cities during the late 1950s, Red moved to New York in April 1957, following his childhood friend Curtis Fuller. Fuller and Red took New York by storm the second week of May 1957, making three different records for Prestige in four days. Four months later, a fourth date featuring Tommy Flanagan was recorded for Savoy. In August 1957 Red moved back to Detroit, but returned in November to make his first recording as leader: "Two Altos," also on Savoy. "Two Altos" featured Red's Detroit buddies Pepper Adams, Doug Watkins and Elvin Jones. Red continued to shift between Detroit, New York and other touring locations, before finally settling in New York in 1960. In late 1959, while playing at the Show Place in New York's Greenwich Village, he gained the attention of Blue Note Records' Alfred Lion.

Sonny Red

I came to New York in 1957. Me and Curtis Fuller made some records together with Red Garland and Paul Chambers. He went to school with me too, Paul Chambers. Paul used to practice all day long. And we see that he's come and gone, but he was a beautiful musician.

New York is the melting pot. It's like Paris was in the 1920s when all of the great artists lived there. Most of the great artists in this country are in New York. But while you're going through the suffering, which is part of it, you acquire the feeling. You also see other artists that give you that stimulation. You see the playwrights, singers and the dancers. We're all in the same

community, a oneness, so to speak. Being in New York, where all the guys are, has its advantages, I think. I know it's got a lot of people, but you must be around all those artists to get that stimulation from them. It's very important.

John Coltrane used to live two streets from me on 58th. We used to all go around to his house and see all the guys around there. And this cat would just sit up there and play two hours on one solo! Well to be able to do that, you must really have the variations together. He knew enough about the music, not his horn, but the music. Because music is never going to change.

Bluesville is a blues of mine that I wrote in 1959. I wrote it on the subway from 103rd Street to 50th Street on the way to the record date. Wynton Kelly, Sam Jones and Roy Brooks were on that.

James Kiner

Everybody was leaving Detroit at that time: Curtis Fuller, Donald Byrd. Donald and I were in the Air Force at the same time. My brother decided one day that New York was the place to go. It's one of those things. If you're going to make it, you're going to have to make it in New York, as far as music is concerned. Not that everybody went to New York, but there was a big movement of musicians from these cities to New York. That's where the clubs were at the time, and it had always been that way. That's the place where all the musicians wanted to go.

Malvin McCray

Red was dedicated to New York. His mother and sister were here in Detroit. He could have had a place to stay. They would have looked out for him, but he was just the kind of cat who wanted to be on his own in New York. Even though it meant living that type of life. He chose that rather than coming back to Detroit.

Curtis Fuller

I came to New York with Yusef Lateef to record, and Sonny Red followed me. Sonny called me from Detroit and we talked. I told him, "If you want to come to New York, I've got some record dates I could use you on." I had just gotten a new apartment on 101st Street, upstairs over Tommy Flanagan. Sonny spent about a year with Louis Hayes and Doug Watkins in our apartment. We had our own little community there.

Louis Hayes

My main time knowing Sonny Red was here in New York, when we lived together on 101st Street. It was Curtis Fuller, Red Kynner and myself. Doug Watkins was there also. Tommy Flanagan lived below us, that was his first apartment. We had a room where we had these little beds, and there were about four of them in this one room, which was a very unique situation. It was a very busy apartment.

I remember the first date. It was Curtis Fuller's first recording. We just dealt with the people that were right there. The music, naturally, was marvelous, always. We were just youngsters and I was just beginning to get my life together, to grow to a certain level.

We used to cover every museum in New York, Doug Watkins, myself and Red. During that time Red wasn't well, he had tuberculosis. I know he had an energy problem, because, naturally when you go to a museum you have to walk all over the place, and I remember Red having a problem with the walking. When it was Curtis and Red, I would kind of disappear on them. I would leave Red with Curtis, because I would make it so Curtis had to buy him ice cream and go through that stuff all day. Curtis would take care of him, and I'd disappear, but we'd see each other in the evening. Curtis was the cook, technically.

Barry Harris

Sonny moved to New York in 1957. I moved there in 1955. I knew a *little bit* more than the other guys. Maybe that's why I was considered their teacher or mentor.

Elena Knox

Sonny and Barry, at least in the early 1960s when they were hanging out, were really contemporaries. I don't think there was a mentor-student relationship at all.

Cedar Walton

Red and I met somewhere here in New York in the early 1960s, because I got here in 1959, and a year later I was in the army. Sonny was in from Detroit he was a very likeable and very positive cat. At that time, he was hanging out with the Detroit guys like Doug Watkins, Curtis Fuller and Louis Hayes, people like that.

Charles McPherson

Red went to New York a couple years before I did. I went in 1959 or 1960, and Red had already somewhat established himself. Because when I went to New York, he was already known and had made a couple records with people. Through the years I would seem him since both of us were living in New York, occasionally hearing him play.

Frank Gant

Red left Detroit before I did. I came in 1960 with the Yusef Lateef band. So Red was already here and was recommending my name to different guys, like Sonny Rollins. Sonny Rollins was looking for a drummer and Red told him to get me, so Sonny called me up, but it didn't happen.

Charles Boles

New York was tough, man. But you had guys like Tommy Flanagan and who went there and made it, and Kenny Burrell, too. It all depended on what instrument you played and how outgoing you were. There's a difference being an alto player and a piano player. But Sonny was not destitute in New York. I mean, he was there and he did very well.

James Kiner

When Sylvester went to New York I think one of the first things that he learned is that every young guy out there was trying to play Bird, and a lot of them were doing it better than he was. I'm thinking of the alto player that played at Birdland with Art Blakey, Lou Donaldson. These guys were playing very good Charlie Parker. So there was a different level of competition, if

you're going to play Charlie Parker. And it takes an effort *not* to play it. I think in the end, this is what he learned. It's what really sustained him, because if he'd continued to try and play like Bird, he'd just have to leave and drop out.

Charles McPherson

Red was kind of friendly with Lou Donaldson. Him and Lou Donaldson were actually kind of tight. Which is kind of strange, because Lou Donaldson doesn't like anybody, especially saxophone players [laughs]! He really doesn't have a whole lot to say about any saxophone player and he's really hard on alto players, in terms of his standards. Lou is a very – especially young Lou Donaldson – good alto player. He doesn't do anything wrong. He's in tune, plays the horn well, he's fluent and what he does, he does really well. So when people are less than any of that, then you'll have something to say about it. But he liked Red, not only personally, but I think he liked Red's playing. So, I was always kind of amazed that Red would be his friend.

Yusef Lateef

I gave Red my first flute. It was a Lautley. Two-piece flute. This was after we arrived in New York. It was in the 1960s. He was very serious about music and practiced a lot.

Jimmy Heath

I met Sonny Red in New York in the early 1960s. We were good friends, we were very close. At that time we were both learning how to play the flute. We talked about music all the time, not too much about the saxophone. Later on we played together in the Donald Byrd Sextet at Birdland in the summer of 1963. The band was [Albert] Tootie Heath, Herbie Hancock and Spanky De Brest. Herbie eventually left the band to go play with Miles and then Barry Harris came into the group. We also did some recording with that band.

Malvin McCray

Harold Vick and Sonny befriended one another when they were over in New York. Red didn't have a place to stay, and Harold Vick opened up his house to him. Harold had a small room and he let Red have that room. He also gave him a saxophone. They were real good friends. In fact, that's how I met Harold Vick, through Sonny Red.

Frank Gant

I used to check on Red quite often, when he was here in New York. He was my buddy, you know, my main friend. During that time he didn't work very often. Not many guys would give him gigs, as well as he could play. He was a standout! One time I got a gig in Syracuse, New York. It was in the wintertime and it was very cold. I called Red and said "I've got this gig – it's an organ gig. Do you want to go as the horn player?" I drove up there, and I got the organ player, who was a blind guy, Raymond Jackson, the only organ player that I could find at that time. So we go to Syracuse, and it's eighteen below zero and twenty feet of snow up there. We checked into the motel, which was right outside of the city, but the club seemed to have the overtones of a joint for the mob. I think it was a mob joint. So the gig was going along for about three days — we had the engagement for two weeks. So Red on the intermission was doing the John Coltrane thing, practicing on the intermission. So the manager came over to me that night

and said, "Frank, now you're all right, the organ player is okay, but that saxophone player, he's got to go." So I had to go into my bag, and I said, "Look, I don't even need to qualify this man, my saxophone player." I said, "The man's got hit records, like that tune 'Stay As Sweet As You Are' on Blue Note records." That was his claim to fame. "And he's also written some other hip tunes. This man is unquestionable. Look, let me do my gig. We got one more week. You won't have any problems out of me because I don't tell you how to run your joint, I don't tell you how to sell your liquor. That's not my problem. The band is with me." So we did it, and I made sure I got the money, paid the band their money, before I got mine. Red didn't know anything about that. I didn't run that down to him. After that, me and Sonny came back to New York.

In 1958 or 1959, Red's first daughter Nadia was born in Detroit. She could not be reached for this oral history.

Sonny Red and Elena Knox were married in February 1960. Tommy Flanagan signed the marriage license. Two years later, on June 4, 1962, their daughter Nicole Kyner was born. Red's publishing company, established in the 1960s, was named "Nadianicole" after his two daughters.

James Kiner

I never really met Nadia, I don't think. I know that the mother was Hungarian, I can't recall the mother, although I might have seen her once.

Elena Knox

Sonny and I got married in February 1960. I was eighteen years old and kind of immature at the time. Sonny was ten years older than me. When I met him, he was already "Sonny Red." We met at Birdland on a Monday night. Sonny's band was playing, and he was using Jules Curtis, the drummer, in the band. Jules Curtis was a friend of mine, and I had gone to see him. That's when we were introduced to each other. About a year later, we got married in an apartment on West 105th Street in Manhattan, where we were living. We had a pastor come in to officiate the wedding and both Yusef Lateef and Tommy Flanagan were there.

Barry Harris used to come by the house on a pretty regular basis. Sonny had gotten a piano, which was in the living room, so Barry was frequently there. Sonny was also playing with Freddie Hubbard, Blue Mitchell, Horace Parlan and Lee Morgan during this time. During the day, Sonny would spend a lot of time in that 52nd and Broadway area with his friends. That's what they would do every day. That was like his job, he'd go to 52nd Street. They talked about music, where the jobs were, and touched base with each other. It was part of the lifestyle. I think the people who were on Sonny's records would all get together and do stuff, in the daytime and at night. You know, go to each other's gigs, and that kind of stuff.

A year-and-a-half later, Nikki was born. We were married for about two years. After that, we had a separation and I secured an official divorce a couple of years later. One of the main issues why we got divorced was he could be a controlling person. As I got a little older, I wished not to

be so controlled and knew that this was not going to work. Oddly enough, he became much more mellow in later years. But at this time, he was probably at his peak of his "opinionated" stage.

Sonny had absolutely no faith in Martin Luther King and that kind of movement. He thought there wasn't a chance that brotherhood was going to win. Sonny didn't have any optimism about brotherhood being workable. We had horrible arguments over this. He was completely cynical about America, because in his life and in the lives of his brothers, sister, his father and his mother, he had seen and experienced the most horrible kinds of treatment. I remember a story that his brother Rodell told me when he was in the service, it was a story that just horrified me. One of the breaking points for me was a time when I wanted to go on a march and he told me that I couldn't.

Nicole Kyner

My mom and dad met in New York when my dad was playing at Birdland. That was somewhere around 1960. My mom was ten years younger than my dad, and they got married against her parents' wishes. About two years later, they had me.

My mom left my dad when I was two. She left him very abruptly. I didn't see him again until I was thirteen. My mom always used to tell me that "you'll see him when you're eighteen because the circumstances under which I left him were less than favorable." She didn't want to deal with him, because my dad had a terrible temper. I mean, a terrible, horrible temper. Not a lay-your-hands-on-you kind of temper, not like that, he was a small man. I don't think he was going to do anything like that!

James Kiner

I thought that there was a time when Elena tried to go to school in New York. Go to college. She brought back Sylvester an application and stuff like that. College was practically free back in New York. She wanted him to study music. He told her, "If it can't bring me any money, it can't bring me nothing." I guess it was one of his bad days. Elena and Sylvester broke up probably because of his attitude more than anything. He had a very bad disposition with people. Like I mentioned the school thing. And I doubt that she would have been doing anything that wasn't in his benefit.

During the 1960s and early 1970s, Red was at his finest as a recording artist and sideman. His work with Jimmy Heath, Donald Byrd, Kenny Dorham, Blue Mitchell, Barry Harris, Bobby Timmons and many others helped establish him as one of the best saxophonists in New York. By remaining firmly in the bebop idiom, and living in New York, life was financially difficult for Sonny Red. Ira Gitler summed up Red's steadfast commitment to the music and the New York scene in his liner notes for Red's Out of the Blue session: "He returned to New York in June [1959] this time more determined than ever to stay. 'Even if I have to eat the bricks' was the way Red put it." Even while enduring these hard times and paying his dues, Red still kept his humor and quick wit.

James Kiner

My brother would send us his records. I recall the first one with Paul Quinichette. That was his first one. Up to a point, I had all of his stuff. I used to be one of my brother's critics, you know? By this I mean when I was talking to my family, or to his wife, Elena.

Sonny Red

I worked with Donald Byrd for four years during the 1960s. We went to school together. We're from the same neighborhood in Detroit. I worked with Barry Harris, Milt Jackson – the Reverend Milt Jackson, he's from Detroit – and Philly Joe Jones. Freddie Hubbard was with Philly Joe's band in 1961. The great Freddie Hubbard, shall I say. All those cats had one thing in common, they would always practice. All day long.

Me and Jimmy Heath used to write music together. In fact, I met Jimmy Heath in Donald Byrd's band in 1963. It was Jimmy Heath, Donald Byrd, Herbie Hancock, Eddie Khan and [Albert] Tootie Heath. That's what the original band was in 1963, so I was around all of these composers and I saw how they put music together. Assembled it, you know? I was just so amazed, and I got a lot from that. I also worked with the late Kenny Dorham, too. He was a brilliant musician and composer. He could really put music together.

Cedar Walton

Yeah, I remember being on the bandstand with Red, Donald [Byrd] and Kenny [Dorham], sure. He was a very positive cat and hard worker. Red was a very proud man and loved his music. He studied considerably and worked hard at his craft, on his own, privately. I could tell that when he played and also how he talked.

Tommy Flanagan

Red lived about two or three doors from me on Riverside Drive. He had a girl, Nicole, that was about the age of my youngest daughter. I used to see her and her mother Elena.

James Kiner

It was sort of interesting where my brother lived on Riverside Drive. He lived three or four floors up and the windows were open in the summer where you could hear the concert singers practicing at night.

Louis Hayes

Red and myself used to just hang out in the park in the summertime. He lived on Riverside Drive and we'd go over to the park and sit in the grass and talk. You know, talk about ladies. Music and ladies!

Kiane Zawadi

[Red and I] played in New York at the Village Gate, I remember. He was doing the Monday thing, which was a quartet. But he decided, he said “man, I want to use you” and he left out the piano.

Phil Lasley

Years ago when I was a kid, when I first went to New York, Red was like a big brother to me. He got me gigs and introduced me to people. There was a group led by Gloria Coleman. She had a girl named Pola Roberts from Pittsburgh on drums and Leo Wright on saxophone. When Leo Wright was on the road, Sonny would take his place, and when Sonny couldn't make it, I would take his place. Red introduced me to Cannonball and Cannonball called me for a few jobs. And I also took Sonny's place with Philly Joe [Jones] with Elmo Hope and Larry Ridley in the band. Red turned me on to a lot, he was *very* nice to me.

Curtis Fuller

Jimmy Heath would hire Sonny and we'd do a lot of concerts down to Baltimore or Washington. Thanks to me, I told Jimmy that we should get Sonny Red because he knew all the songs we were trying to play.

James Kiner

My brother's first twelve-inch demonstration record was made at 138 Duffield, in Detroit, as a matter of fact [*probably between 1960 and 1964 –Ed.*]. He sounds really good and he was playing more like Bird then of course, so it's basically a Charlie Parker-type thing. It's a trio date with Herman Wright on bass and Roy Brooks on drums. They play *Cutie, Jumpin' at the Woodside, Stairway to the Stairs* and *Soleing*. It's a hard-type wax-type record. Those were records that they made back then so you could get a job, or see if you could make a record.

Barry Harris

Sonny was very happy with the Jazzland dates. They were great sessions. We just came in and did them.

Orrin Keepnews

There aren't things, or colorful incidences that stand out from the [Red] dates. They were pretty workmanlike, and they were pretty pulled-together dates. They didn't have outrageous things happening. A lot of the Riverside dates will have pretty successful people, or distinguished people playing as sidemen on other people's dates, and very often at their own suggestion rather than mine, but sometimes mine. There was kind of a comraderie there. We sometimes refer to it as the repertory company, or in the case of one Sam Jones album, the title was the "Soul Society." And that was the basic idea. That there were a lot of these people that felt at home in our surroundings, and on my dates. It was a pretty good clean atmosphere, but a cooperative atmosphere. Even people who might be expected to behave with a certain amount of flakiness, like Elvin Jones. Elvin was very notorious for screwing up on peoples dates, in his early days. They used to say there wasn't anything wrong with Elvin, except he couldn't count to one. I mean, that's a date [*A Story Tale*] that I don't have a Elvin Jones story to tell you from that date. And that's kind of a story in itself, you know? I do feel that I'm just making an empirical recollection here. That you might of expected there to be funny stories about his dates, but there weren't. I mean he was pretty much "take care of business" and people's response to him was that way. I think a lot of people on his dates were conscious of, "I'm here cause I like this guy,

and I wanna help things go for him, so why screw around?" In general this says to me, that the most intriguing thing you can get out of this is, here are these rather unusual lineups and I don't have funny stories to tell about it.

Tommy Flanagan

I remember the session *A Story Tale* that we did with Clifford Jordan. Sonny and Clifford had a nice rapport with each other. They were fond of each other's playing. Both were from the same region, Chicago and Detroit. They had that Chicago-Detroit connection.

Orrin Keepnews

There was a totally aborted session we did and it didn't work, it didn't click. The tapes weren't even kept on it. Cannonball [Adderley] had the idea of doing a date that he would not be on, but it would be one of the things that he would produce, involving four altos. Sonny Red was one of them, Frank Strozier was one, a legendary guy from Philadelphia, [Clarence] "C" Sharpe. And I don't remember who the hell the other one was, but there were four such people. I'm quite sure of C Sharpe, because it was the only encounter I ever had with him. We're talking probably early 60s. These were four guys on the scene that Cannonball thought deserved more attention than they were getting, and Sonny Red was one of them. I don't even remember exactly the rhythm section, but I know that it had Wynton Kelly and I think that it had A.T. [Arthur Taylor]. So the date didn't work for various reasons. It was not anybody's fault, it's something that will happen sometimes. My point is not anything other than Sonny Red was somebody to that degree at least Cannonball approved of. So that's not a bad thing!

Charles McPherson

I was on a Riverside session with four alto players, maybe sometime around early 1961. Cannonball had something to do with it. I can't remember everybody on the date, but I remember that it had Sonny Red. It was a bunch of alto players and they didn't release it. I remember that the music was a bit tricky and I remember that I didn't feel comfortable. I was very young at the time. I might have been like 19 or 20 years old. That might have been one of the first record dates that I did. I didn't have a clue about the recording part of it or anything. Something just didn't gel right. It was just a bunch of really young guys. I think it was probably a bunch of little things in a pretty stressful situation. This wasn't Cannonball recording, you know, a full-blown, grown guy that's been playing for years. It was a bunch of guys that hadn't been playing that long.

Phil Lasley

There was an all-alto situation with me and C Sharpe, Sonny Red, and Frank Strozier. I think it was Sam Jones, Wynton Kelly and Jimmy Cobb, that was the rhythm section. You know, there was a lot of funny shit that went down. Originally I was supposed to be taking C Sharpe's place, they couldn't find him. I remember Yusef wrote most of the music, and it was some real different type of music. And a lot of confusion, a lot of confusion! But C Sharpe comes in at the last minute. It was a weird date man, it was really strange. And I had just been in New York for about two months, so I was shakin' in my boots.

Orrin Keepnews

Sonny's records sold terribly. He was part of that vast body of people who did not establish an audience. They probably sell more when they're reissued now. We didn't sell more than a few thousand copies on any of those things. On the other hand, just about everybody was working for scale. The dates were done with relative efficiency. I did at least one of Sonny's things at Bell Sounds, but basically we worked at Plaza for the most part, and we had an arrangement there where we guaranteed them a certain amount of work. Guaranteed them a dollar figure. And basically we worked in terms of working against that figure. I didn't have to be really worrying about my hours, you know from a studio standpoint. Usually I ended up paying musicians a little bit more than scale, so that nobody was really going to give me a hard time with the three-hour increments, and whatnot. So I worked to take the pressure off of those things. So those were efficient dates. Not expensive dates and they kind of went faster that way.

Charles McPherson

I did a couple of those Charlie Parker memorial tributes with all alto players at the Club Ruby, an event that happened for a couple of years or maybe a little longer. Red was involved as well as C Sharpe. We probably paired or squared off at one time. Then maybe the last set we would all come up and play.

Sonny Red

I love music. I think you have to love it, to be able to do it. Because there are a lot of things you go through like economics, which enter into all artist's lives, of all periods. But I think if you really stick by your guns, and you really believe, you can make someone else believe. If you really believe that you have the gift of music, and you love it, well then, keep right at it and don't let nobody turn you away from it. Stick right by your guns and everything will work out all right, that's what I think.

James Kiner

Sylvester was concerned about the music business, from a business viewpoint, like who got jobs and who didn't get jobs. This was controlled fully by the union. They made the decision whether you play or not play, which has an impact on your livelihood. He was aware of this and didn't like it, of course.

Elena Knox

Jack Kerouac called Sonny up on the telephone. They were doing this jazz and poetry thing in San Francisco at the time. This was probably 1961 to 1962, and I answered the phone. Jack wanted Sonny to come out there and play, and Sonny was not that interested. He just wasn't that interested in that beat poetry jazz kind of thing. Sonny had a vision of what he wanted, and it was a pretty rigid, I won't say narrow, it was just very well-defined.

Olatunji, the drummer from Africa, had an African jazz thing, and he asked Sonny to come and play with him. But in order to do that, Sonny had to wear a dashiki kind of shirt. Sonny refused.

He just said no, which was really weird, because later on, he started wearing them. I remember that very well, because we were so stone cold broke. I was just in shock.

I remember Miles Davis wanted Sonny to play with the group. Miles wanted Sonny to play tenor as a member of his band, but Sonny refused, because he wanted to play alto. I remember that was sometime between 1962 and 1963, because that was the time it was the hardest for us. Nikki had already been born, and it was really hard to keep it all together. I couldn't believe he wouldn't take the business. That was huge.

Nicole Kyner

My dad was incredibly hardcore about playing. I remember my mom once told me that at one point Miles Davis wanted my dad to play in his quintet. He wouldn't play in Miles' group because my dad didn't want to play tenor saxophone. Miles wanted him to play tenor, and my dad wouldn't do it! My mom said that he did this when they had about ten dollars in the bank. She was just beside herself, and I think that's when she noticed that this marriage was not going to work.

James Kiner

One time I went to New York, Sylvester was married then, but he was sick, he had pneumonia. I remember coming home from work, at that time I was working out in Ann Arbor, and my mother was crying. She told me that Sylvester was sick. My mother was threatening to go up herself, so I said "look, I'll drive up, and you can go with me." So we rushed off and it was raining. The neat thing about it was that his mother-in-law, Elena's mother, had a doctor there. A Jewish doctor, I think, making a home call. That should have changed his attitude, his thinking [about race], but I doubt if it did. My brother and I stayed up there for a while to make sure he wasn't going to die or anything. We stayed overnight and drove on back to Detroit the next day.

Phil Lasley

Sonny was a nice guy, but sometimes very difficult to talk to. Red used to challenge Joe Henderson [at jam sessions] and Joe never got along with Red because of that. I think it was more or less a musical thing, 'cause Red was a very competitive cat.

Curtis Fuller

Red just had that look man like he wanted to fight everybody. I'll tell you something, if he had calmed down... Guys wouldn't give him dates and things, Hank Mobley, none of those guys. He knew that much music that he would challenge everybody, and that turns people off. We would get irritated, because Sonny couldn't help himself, he would challenge everybody. Pepper, anybody, that bothered me about him. He couldn't stand Archie Shepp!

Orrin Keepnews

Sonny was this very pleasant guy, but you got a slight feeling of flakiness about him, he didn't really seem to have both feet on the ground. He did seem to be, you know, a somewhat vague

young man, and didn't have an evil bone in his body. He was *very* well-liked and very good-hearted.

Talib Kibwe

Sonny was a very upbeat person. He would always say, "What's up?" or "What's going on?" Sonny was always positive.

Frank Foster

I have a funny story about Sonny Red. It involves Rahsaan Roland Kirk. The story goes like this: Sonny Red had a gig in uptown Harlem, probably at the Shalimar, where Grant Green would play. This was in the early 1960s. Rahsaan Roland Kirk came in after finishing his gig downtown, and Sonny said, "Let me invite my friend Rahsaan Roland Kirk to sit in." So Rahsaan came up on tenor, and he did his circular breathing thing. He did something that just wowed the audience. The audience didn't want Rahsaan to stop, and Sonny Red got angry and packed up his horn and went home, and then Rahsaan finished the gig [laughs]!

Phil Lasley

Frankie Dunlop used to be a comic female impersonator and he used to do impersonations of Sonny Red that cracked everybody up.

Malvin McCray

When we met, we weren't even playing music, we were in the pool room, shooting pool. Red was a comedian. It was always a laugh with him, you know? Especially when you were out with other cats around, it was always a laugh. But Red was a stern cat. He didn't worry nobody for nothing. Red would be in real tough, bad shape man, but he didn't lean on nobody. He'd tough it out. Red was a true human being. There was nothing he rattled me about. Nothing at all, that I remember, because there were a number of musicians that *did* rattle me. Red and I kicked it around, you know. I remember all of us getting together at Count Basie's when I was living in New York. We'd all sit around and we just laughed at Sonny's stories.

James Kiner

My brother had a sense of humor, but quite often it was sort of a sharp sense of humor.

Tommy Flanagan

Sonny was very humorous. He could always see humor in other people. I remember he had just bought a brand new topcoat, and it was getting chilly outside. He came into the club, showing it off, and he said, "If you don't have a topcoat on now, you don't have one!" There's another time when a kid approached Sonny on the street and asked him, "Shine, Mister?" And Sonny replied, "Get away from me boy! I need a new pair of shoes!"

Jimmy Heath

Sonny was a very funny guy. He had a great sense of humor, which you can tell in his playing. You know, Sonny wrote *Mustang* in order to get a car. He had hoped that the tune would bring in enough money so he could buy one.

Cedar Walton

You couldn't help but like Red with his positive outlook. We played at least one if not two gigs with Bags [Milt Jackson] in New York. I remember him moving to New Jersey, and working seldom to almost none. So it's not a happy story, that I recall. But I wasn't on his case daily. He wasn't somebody that I'd call everyday, anything like that.

Yusef Lateef

I remember a sad story that happened in the late 1960s. Sonny was supposed to play a gig in upstate New York, but the club owner couldn't honor the contract. Sonny got stood up. He had only bought a one-way ticket to upstate, hoping that the gig would pay for his ride back to New York. Well, Sonny wound up getting a ride back to New York in an animal truck. Sonny paid a lot of dues and he was such a fine musician. Red was a warm human being. In the late 1960s or early 1970s, Sonny moved from New York to Hackensack, New Jersey where he stayed at the YMCA.

Louis Hayes

Red, he was so funny! He was a very unique, wonderful human being, who wasn't that well. Naturally, I just would have wanted and loved for him to be able to be here longer. He had a special personality. He loved people, and people loved him. He was a hip guy! A personality person. A one-of-a-kind guy.

Donald Byrd

[Red] was a genius. This is what people say today, but I knew this a long time ago. Red was a creative, honest, and thoughtful musician and person. He was very comical and had a fantastic sense of humor. He was a pleasure and very enjoyable to be around. My sister and many of my family knew Red well. They all loved him.

During the early 1970s Sonny Red was very involved with the Jazzmobile program in New York. His teaching methods at Jazzmobile were very similar to the way he approached composition and playing: emphasis on sound, playing with feeling, the blues, and the importance of scales and theory. In 1976 Red received a \$4000 grant from the National Endowment for the Arts to complete the composition and orchestration of a three-part jazz suite, entitled Cien Fuegos. One completed part exists from the suite: Song Samba, written for 17 instruments.

Sonny Red

I had a flute class that I was teaching for Jazzmobile for about three years. And I would always stress to the students that the sound comes first. I can't say that enough, because a lot of people

forget about it. You're thinking about the music, the chord changes, but music starts before that. And I think it's in the sound first.

Jimmy Heath

Sonny and I taught classes together at Jazzmobile. We lectured in the schools and gave workshops on Saturdays. We also played in the streets.

Dave Bailey

Sonny taught flute, saxophone, harmony, and theory and directed the ensembles at Jazzmobile. Sonny was playing tenor saxophone at this time. He never played alto with Jazzmobile.

Frank Gant

I think Harold Vick had something to do with Red playing more tenor. Vick being the tenor player, told him that maybe he could get more gigs if he was playing the tenor. He might have been instrumental in helping Red get a tenor.

Malvin McCray

Bags [Milt Jackson] loved Red. Milt Jackson would always call him for those Jazzmobile gigs. So Sonny and I went together to New York for one gig. When we got there, Red didn't have a place to stay, but he had a car. We would go on the Jersey side across from the George Washington Bridge. Red would park under the overpass, where there wasn't much traffic, and that's where he'd sleep. Safely. And in that time, he made it. He didn't even have a place to stay.

Dave Bailey

Sonny had a practical approach to the saxophone. First he taught his students to learn how to play the blues, then to learn all of their scales. Sonny was a very down-home player. Sonny was an excellent teacher. His students loved him. Sonny was able to establish a great deal of respect from his students.

Talib Kibwe

I was a student at Jazzmobile from 1971 to 1972. Sonny Red was teaching the beginning flute classes. I never saw him with a saxophone. Sonny was the section leader at the big band rehearsals, while Jimmy Heath was the conductor. Sonny would sit off to the side and listen to the saxophone section. He would very casually give pointers to us during the sectionals. Sonny had great ears. He could catch mistakes, even through the fast runs. He'd say "Hey, you missed the B-flat during that run." He also was very aware of tuning issues. Sonny was a good teacher and his students always played really well. He always had killer students from his classes.

James Kiner

I have a tape of my brother teaching. He's apparently teaching a group of students, a band or something. The kids were not too hot, you know, but they were learning. Sylvester had a

student in Detroit one time, as a matter of fact, a white guy. The guy used to come by for lessons over on Leicester.

I was listening to this one [tape] of Sylvester. He's got this woman who's trying to sing. She was singing *Song Samba*, which I had never heard before, and didn't even know there were words to it. Anyway, he's chording [on piano] and one time he hit it so fast, she says, "Look, you're going too fast, I'm gonna fall off the sofa." But she stuck with it and he lowered the tempo. Now *Central Park*, there are words to that too.

Kiane Zawadi

I remember getting Red a gig with Dizzy Gillespie's big band on a New Year's Eve date at Buddy Rich's place. I was in the band and this was sometime in the early 1970s.

Elena Knox

Sonny had a strong interest in Afro-Cuban music. He had the beginnings of a suite that he said he was writing, and he wanted very much to go to Cuba. He told me this a few years before he died. His interest in Afro-Cuban music was a very serious, deep interest. My feeling always was that Sonny just did not live long enough to develop the musical ideas that he would have had, had he lived longer. And then he got sick and that put a premature end to it.

Jimmy Heath

Sonny and I premiered something I wrote called *The Afro-American Suite of Evolution* in Winnipeg, Canada. We also toured Canada together.

Talib Kibwe

I was a test rat for Jimmy Heath's *Afro-American Suite of Evolution*. It was first performed at Town Hall in Winnipeg, Canada. The students performed it in 1976.

Elena Knox

There was this big jazz concert at Carnegie Hall, probably in 1976, that Nikki and I went to. It was a big group where Jimmy Heath was the leader. Both Jimmy and Sonny were playing in the band.

Frank Gant

Howard McGhee hired Sonny a lot, whenever he could, because he had a big band and sometimes he'd get Red in the band to play alto. Me and Red also went to Atlantic City on a gig one time. Red got an organ trio gig, sometime in the 1970s. We played in a place called Grace's Little Belmont, across the street from The Harlem Club, where they have those shows with showgirls and all that. Anyway, we went to Atlantic City and we had Duke Pearson on organ, because you know, he was a pianist. So we get to the gig, and Duke sat down at the organ, and he didn't even know how to turn it on! The waitress had to come over and said, "I think you turn it on like this." But he [Red] would call me whenever he could, and we'd do a gig together. I loved Sonny Red, that was my man!

Elena Knox

I totally and deliberately lost touch with Sonny for a period of time. It had to do with the custody of Nikki and our differences. But when I wanted to find Sonny, so that Nikki could get back in touch with her dad, I'd call Barry Harris. Or I'd go see him at a club. It was just natural that Barry or Tommy [Flanagan] would be the people to get in touch with. We were living in a small little town called Fleischmanns in the Catskills, in upstate New York. At this point, sometime around 1975, Nikki really wanted to meet her dad, and I thought it was okay. So I went down to the city and went to a club where Barry was playing. At the break, I reintroduced myself to Barry. I told him that I really wanted to get in touch with Sonny and I gave him my number. I told Barry that Sonny's daughter wanted to see her dad. So he gave my number to Sonny, and Sonny called me and then we put it all together. Sonny at that point was living on 103rd and Central Park West. About a week or two later, we all got together. I drove Nikki back down to the city so that they could meet. After that, they had a relationship that was independent of me until he died.

There was a time when Sonny moved up to Woodstock, New York. He wasn't there very long, but he played in a jazz club up there, and I think he was also going to give lessons. I think his moving there had to do with living in the country and being near streams. I remember sitting there in Woodstock with him, near a stream, and that's when he told me he had become a Buddhist. This was just shortly after he and Nikki hooked up again, and Nikki and I were still living up in Fleischmanns, sometime around 1976. He was still opinionated at this time, but not as angry as he had been in the past. His words were, "I've mellowed."

Nicole Kyner

I think my dad could be a confrontational person. When he was younger my mom found him sort of impossible to deal with. But my mom did meet him again when I was thirteen. The only reason that happened was because I was just relentless in wanting to meet my father. I didn't want to wait until I was eighteen. One night I had a terrible nightmare. I woke up crying, and my mom came in and I remember saying something about my dad, like he's going to die, or something like that. That freaked my mom out. So after that, we went out to find him, which was very easy to do because he was playing around the city. My mom found him, and she took me over there and he was absolutely gracious. He was very grateful to her. He just said, "Thanks so much for bringing her back." Then we drove to Detroit and met his wonderful family. I felt like the luckiest girl in the world! When I first met my dad, he was living on the West Side, at Central Park West. My mom and I moved to upstate New York and then he moved up to Woodstock, New York because he wanted to be closer to me, and still be within striking distance to the city. This was sometime between 1973 and 1975. I remember thinking this is not a great place for my dad to be living. It's so far from the city where he makes his money. But he was very adamant that he wanted to be near me.

I remember one time my dad and I went to Belle Isle [Ontario]. When we came back from Canada, the police do these random checks of cars, it's totally random, and they selected our car,

and my dad hit the roof! He said you're doing this because I'm a black man. I had a big afro at the time, because it was in the mid-seventies, and they wanted to look in my hair. My dad was livid that they wanted to feel my hair. But he threw such a shit-fit that he made it much worse. I was like, "my dad's going to get us thrown in jail!" That was very consistent with who he was. If he thought there was an injustice, he was going to scream about it. He wasn't going to finesse it, he was going to scream at the top of his lungs about it.

Tears: Detroit 1978-1981

Sonny's declining health in the mid- to late 1970s brought him back to live with his mother at 233 Leicester in Detroit, though he frequently managed to return to New York for concerts. On December 9, 1979, a benefit concert was given for Red in Detroit, and the musicians and friends in attendance revealed how many people he had touched as a son, father, brother, musician and friend. Performers included Marcus Belgrave, Claude Black, Alan Barnes, Roy Brooks, Malvin McCray, Wendell Harrison, Harold McKinney, Sam Sanders, Donald Towns, Harold Vick, Lamonte Hamilton, and Yusef Lateef, with Paul Leonard as master of ceremonies.

Sonny Red

The music of America, jazz music, that's the only music America has, as an art form. I think it originated in the churches and the street, like the New Orleans street bands. In fact, I'm trying to get a piece together now called *New Orleans Sketches*. Starting with the street band aspect of it, you know, walking bands with the big bass drum going *boom, boom, boom*.

Elena Knox

I had moved to New Jersey and Sonny was living in New York when he found out that he had cancer. I remember him coming to the house to tell me that he was going to go back to Detroit. The doctor had told him that the cancer was very advanced and that it was in his lymph nodes. Sonny told me that they couldn't operate. It was like he knew he was going to die, and he was going home to die. So he went home to his mom's house and that's where he stayed until he went into the hospital.

James Kiner

My brother moved back to Detroit in 1978. At that time I was single and living in an apartment downtown in Lafayette Park off the river. My brother stopped by a couple of times at the apartment. When Sylvester came home, he talked to my mother, I remember that. I think I was there when he came in. She was sad and weeping, trying not to cry, and she said he had cancer. I only saw him a few times, since I wasn't living at home. Usually when I would drop by the house, Sylvester would be in the bedroom laying down. And I'm pretty sure my sister told me that he was still writing music! He was writing a piece for [jazz ensemble] at the time called *Amaneciga (Sunrise)*. He didn't get the copyright apparently, because I have the copyright form here that was never filled out. My brother said he tried to get somebody to record it. A rock band wanted to record it [laughs]. But hey, you know, it's better than nothing happening to it.

Malvin McCray

When Red had cancer he came back to Detroit and stayed here for a while. His mother took care of him in his last days. Red was real close to his mother. When Red came back to Detroit he wasn't in the union. He was real sick and didn't have any money. I took him down to the union so he could join the union and get the \$1000 insurance policy, so they'd have money to bury him. That was key, because he didn't last long after that.

Kiane Zawadi

In the 1970s Red played with the Howard McGhee and Clifford Jordan big bands. One of the last gigs I remember him doing was at the Tin Palace. The old Tin Palace on the Bowery Inn around 4th street. That was in the mid-1970s. I think he passed soon after that.

Art Zimmerman

I was hanging out with Howard McGhee at his apartment on 69th Street in New York in the early 1980s. I met Sonny during this time, and he was very friendly to me. Sonny was playing tenor saxophone on the library gigs with Howard McGhee. During the summer of 1981, I saw Sonny with Howard at The Plaza bandshell in Lincoln Center. The band was Howard McGhee, Charlie Rouse, Lisle Atkinson, Jules Curtis and Jim Robertson.

Charles Boles

I remember Sonny Red being ill at the very end, sometime around 1980. He had just come back from New York. He and I hung out a little bit. I remember he came by my house, because I was teaching at Oakland University, and he really wanted a position at the university. We tried to hook him up with that, but it never happened.

Dave Bailey

Sonny Red's last gig was with Jazzmobile in 1981. We took a tour upstate to Buffalo and Syracuse.

Curtis Fuller

Sonny's last gig was in New York with Jazzmobile. He was in Detroit at that time, and the doctors let him out of the hospital to go to New York to do the gig. Sonny wanted me there for the concert, so I took time off from Basie's Band. I went up there to play with him and he would start the song and get through the melody, but then he'd say, "Take a solo, I can't play anymore." They loved him, yeah, they loved him. I didn't realize the severity of his disease until it happened to me.

Frank Foster

I remember my last telephone conversation with Sonny Red, in which he said, "Don't give up on me, I'm coming back out [to New York]." And I said, "I hope so, man!" Shortly after that, he passed away.

Cedar Walton

Red was very sick at the end. I was playing in Detroit and he was in the hospital. I avoided going, I didn't want to go, but I knew I *had* to go, and I went. And he cheered *me* up! Man, he was in diapers and it was just a sad sight, just all skin and bones, but man, he cheered me up. That's the kind of guy he was. He was something else!

Nicole Kyner

The benefit for my dad in Detroit was very nice. There were a lot of people there. I was seventeen when the benefit happened, and at that time, I was trying to deal with the realization that my father was going to die. In 1980, when I was eighteen years old, I moved to Berkeley, California. My dad had already been diagnosed with his cancer by this point and he had gone back home to Detroit.

James Kiner

They tried to do a couple of things for my brother. Miss Finney lived in an apartment next door to our house, she was a nurse. She used to come by and help him out a lot, when he was really getting bad. After that he went up to the University of Michigan hospital where they did some tests and radiation treatments. I understand he lost a lot of weight. He went into a local rest home and my sister was with him when he died.

Roberta Marie Leach

They played his music all during the time [after he died]. At the funeral and on the radio too.

Nicole Kyner

My cousin Jaffiria, who was living in Detroit at the time, would call me and say that he was not doing well and I'd better come back. I remember one time Jaffiria called me and she said that my dad looked like he was in really bad shape, and he hadn't been able to move in a week. So I would fly to Detroit to see my dad. One of the times I flew back, I remember this so clearly, when I got off the airplane, my dad was standing there! First of all, he looked like a skeleton. It was so horrifying to see him like that, but the fact that he was standing there was just an amazing thing. I had one of those luggage bags with me, and he insisted on taking it. He was such a proud man. He carried it to the car, and he had this amazing turnaround. He stayed around for another year, and all that time I kept telling him that I'm going to leave school to stay with him, but he wouldn't let me do it. So finally in the end, I got the call that he had died, and then I came out to Detroit for his funeral.

Sonny Red died around 4:00am on March 20, 1981, at the Ambassador Nursing Home in Detroit. His funeral took place at RT Wilson Funeral Home in Detroit, at 527 Owen Street, and his body was cremated. On April 1, 1995, Nicole's first child, Jackson Sylvester Barnett, was born. Her second child, Juliette Marie Ward, was born October 1, 2001.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I'd like to give special thanks to everyone who participated in the oral history portion of this book: Curtis Fuller, Barry Harris, Kiane Zawadi, Tommy Flanagan, Yusef Lateef, Malvin McCray, Frank Gant, Charles Boles, James "Beans" Richardson, Orrin Keepnews, Cedar Walton, Frank Foster, Billy Higgins, Jimmy Heath, James Spaulding, Louis Hayes, Joe Henderson, Charles McPherson, Phil Lasley, Dave Bailey, Johnnie Garry, Talib Kibwe, Art Zimmerman, Donald Byrd, Elena Knox, Jaffiria Leach-Orr, James Kiner, Roberta Marie Leach, and Nicole Kyner for her endless advice, support and confidence in me. The incredible stories I had the opportunity to hear have helped me assemble the history of a man who was a remarkable human being and wonderful musician. Perhaps, as we mark the 24th anniversary of his death, may he start to receive the recognition due him.

Additional thanks go out to Lars Bjorn, Jim Gallert, Kim Heron, Michael Cuscuna, David Clements, Don and Maureen Sickler at Second Floor Music, The University of Wisconsin-Madison library system, Mrs. Britain at Northern High School, Sam Perryman at the Library of Congress, Ryan Truesdell for his help sizing the music, Mike Fitzgerald for editing the discography, Henry Martin for proofreading the charts, Evan Spring for editing the text and music, Mark Miller, my dear wife Wendy Ward and my two sons Jan-Erik Svanoe and Julian Svanoe.

A.S.
Madison, WI
July, 2005/2020