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EXC 013 LaDarrel Bell

Excelsior Band Collection (EXC), Acc. 756

**Interviewed by Ryan Morini, Michael Campbell, and Willie Dinish on January 13, 2023
45 minute audio recording • 16 page transcript**

Abstract: In this recording, LaDarrel Bell is interviewed by Ryan Morini, Michael Campbell, and Willie Dinish in the Marx Library at the University of South Alabama about her experiences in the Excelsior Band. The interview begins with Ms. Bell discussing growing up in Mobile's Toulminville community, and the schools she attended throughout her life. She specifically mentions Dunbar Magnet School, and the influence of Lewis Coaxum and Carrie Mills on her development as a musician. Ms. Bell reflects on the ways that she feels teaching has made her a better musician. She also offers her reflections on girls and women in music, and on being the first woman known to become a member of Excelsior Band.

This interview is part of the Excelsior Band Collection, which was started in April 2022 to record the history of the Excelsior Brass Band. Founded in 1883 by Mr. John Pope, Excelsior Band has since remained in continuous active operation, having long been a fixture in Mardi Gras parades in Mobile. Over the years, Excelsior has included many of Mobile's most outstanding musicians amongst its ranks. The collection explores Excelsior members' experiences in the band, and some personal reflections on the role of music in their lives.

Preface: This is a transcript of an oral history recording archived at the McCall Library of the University of South Alabama. Readers are asked to bear in mind that they are reading a verbatim transcript of the spoken word, which has been minimally edited for readability.



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EXC 013 LaDarrel Bell
Interviewed January 13, 2023

This is a verbatim transcript of an oral history interview recording, composed and formatted in accordance with the McCall Library transcription style guide.

Verbatim transcription is a style of representing as closely as possible the exact wording and phrasing of the speakers on the recording, though false starts, repetitious phrases, and other minor edits have been made as needed only for the sake of clarity and readability. Readers of this transcript are strongly encouraged to listen to the recording.

Please note that if any text is **bolded** in the transcript, this indicates uncertainty of either spelling or accuracy of transcription regarding what was said. Italics indicate emphasis, or are applied to titles and similar proper nouns.

This interview was transcribed by:

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EXC 013

Interviewee: LaDarrel Bell

Interviewer: Ryan Morini; Michael Campbell; Willie Dinish III

Date: January 13th, 2023

M: So, this is Ryan Morini with the McCall Libraries at the University of South Alabama. Today is January 13th, 2023. It's our first interview of [20]23, actually, I guess. And I'm here with my colleagues—

C: Michael Campbell.

M: And—

D: Willie Dinish III.

M: And, we have the pleasure and honor of interviewing—

B: LaDarrel Bell.

M: Thank you for joining us today.

B: Thank you for having me.

M: So, if we could just start with when and where you were born?

B: I was born right here in Mobile, Alabama, in 1984 in Mobile Infirmary.

M: Okay. And where did you grow up?

B: I grew up in the Toulminville community. I attended Dunbar Magnet School. I graduated from Murphy High School. Went on to college and attended—at the time, it was Faulkner State Community College. Now it's Coastal Alabama. And after I did one year at Faulkner, I ended up transferring to Tennessee State University where I received a music scholarship. But I majored in Health Sciences. So, I graduated with my BS in Health Sciences. Years later, ended up going to—attended Troy University. Getting my masters in Public Administration.

M: Okay. Just writing that down so I don't have to ask about it again later.

B: Okay.

M: So, is your family from Mobile?

B: My mother is originally from Mobile. She was born in Mobile. My father was born in Woodbine, Georgia. They met in college. Had me and my brother, who's older, and then myself. Both have a music background. My father played trumpet in high school and college. He attended Camden High School in Saint Mary's, Georgia, and he went on to play trumpet at Grambling State University. My mother, she played at Blount High School. Played clarinet at Blount. But she went on to attend Alabama A&M University, but she received the ROTC scholarship rather than continuing the band. But she—surprisingly, I've come to find out over the years—knows how to play more instruments than just the clarinet. She kind of dabbles and dabbles. Sometimes she'll pick up my drumsticks and just play. Play along. And I'm like, "How do you know that?" [Laughter] But you know, I guess as musicians, and being around the band for a number of years, you tend to pick up different things and just pay attention. Even though it might not be your main instrument, you tend to pick up different lessons as you just pay attention to the directors when they might be teaching a different section, so. She paid attention a lot.

M: Okay. Can I ask their names?

B: My mother is Sandra Bell. Her maiden name was McConnell. And my father is George. George Bell. Junior, yes.

M: Okay, and where did your mother grow up in Mobile? Do you know?

B: They grew up in Prichard. They grew up in Prichard. She was one of 11 siblings. Big household. My grandfather, Eugene McConnell, and my grandmother, Ida May McConnell. Tate was her maiden name. They just were family orientated. My grandfather would go to work, make sure all the kids were very well taken care of. Even though they lived in a four-bedroom house, they managed to, you know, get most of the kids through high school. One of my aunts, who didn't complete high school, she later went back and graduated from high school. I think she might've been in her 40s? But just about everybody completed their high school education. And a few did go on, attend college. Kudos to my grandparents for sticking with those kids.

M: And so, I mean, growing up in a family where both your parents were musicians, what are your earliest memories of music?

B: It definitely would have to be Mardi Gras. We attended Mardi Gras every year. There was not a year growing up in our household where my mom would not take us down to downtown Mobile for Mardi Gras parades. And of course, the Excelsior

Band would be there. But it wasn't until I attended Dunbar Magnet School in the 4th grade and I joined the band, that I really grew a liking to the Excelsior Band. Because I saw my band director, Lewis Coaxum, playing with the band. So, and he was more of a brass instrumentalist. Not more so percussion; he knew percussion, but he wanted me to further learn the craft of playing the drums. So, he actually referred me to take lessons with Leon Rhoden, who's the snare drummer with the Excelsior Band now. He was doing drum lessons with the City of Mobile Parks and Recreation Department special activities program at LeFlore High School at the time, and he did it for years. He did it for years. And I remember going in in the 4th grade, and not really knowing what to do. But he sat down, he was patient. It was more of a one-on-one session, so I could learn a lot faster. And one thing that he taught me was, it's not necessarily what you practice, it's how you practice. So, we went through the same regimen day in and day out, two days a week. I think it was like an hour and a half to two hours a day. And I did that for years. I ended being last chair in the 4th grade, because I didn't get my drum until maybe Christmastime. All the other kids had theirs when school started. So they had sticks, and all I had was sticks and pads. They had drums. I had no drum, because my mom wanted to see if I really wanted to play—you know, stick with the drums—because Mr. Coaxum told her that a lot of girls come in and play drums, but they never really stick with it. And so, he was like, "Just wait before you buy a drum." Well, I loved it. I mean, I just loved drums, so. She finally got me my first snare drum in [19]94, the Christmas of [19]94. And from then on, once I had the drum, I just thought I was hot stuff. And got with Mr. Leon, took some extra lessons, and I ended up being—by the end of that year, I was first chair against some fifth graders who had already been playing a year before me. And then after that, it was just—Carrie Mills came in to play in [19]95. And she was assistant band director next to Lewis Coaxum, and they ended up just kind of getting the band program going and running. We ended up going to—and sorry, because I talk about him; he's passed since. So. But they got that band up and running, and we attended—they sent numerous students to honor band, Mobile County Honor Band. We ended up going to UAB for honor band program when I was in the 7th grade, and the band itself participated in the All-State competition in, I think it was Tuscaloosa, Alabama. It was either Tuscaloosa or Birmingham. But we were, I believe, the first middle school band in the state of Alabama to get superior ratings for that. So, my hat goes off to Lewis and Carrie for just starting a lot of us off, because Dunbar had maybe had 180 to 200 kids in the band. Yeah, a high number of students were in the band at Dunbar. And they had to split up. I think he had, like, 6 or 7 different bands. Yeah, so they were working. [Laughter] They were working. Yeah, we were working with them, so. That's good.

M: So, what attracted you to percussion? And what kind of—what's been the most fulfilling thing about it, or what is it that kind of calls to you about it?

B: The sound and the look. I don't know if you guys remember that: years ago, Sears used to put out a Christmas catalog. And my mom used to give us the catalog, say, "Hey, pick out what you guys want for Christmas." So. And when I was actually in kindergarten, she gave me the Sears catalog, and she let me look through it. And I saw this pretty red drum set. [Laughter] It was just a little drum set. Saw this huge, nice red drum set and it just—instantly, I fell in love with it. I was like, "That's what I want!" And then, she ended up getting it that Christmas. Didn't know what to do with it; I just kind of beat it up. As a kid, you just don't know what to do. You got sticks, and you know, you just beating and banging. So. [Laughter] But I actually still have one of the pieces from that drum. I just hadn't had the heart to throw it away, so. But yeah, that was the first time I really just said, "Yeah, I want to be a drummer."

M: And in terms of kind of influences, I guess: what drumming were you hearing, after you started trying to learn the drums, that sort of—that maybe you modeled yourself after, that kind of inspired what you were trying to learn what to do?

B: One definitely being the Excelsior Band; Mardi Gras-style. Me going to Dunbar, we didn't have sports teams at the time. And of course, no sports teams, no marching band. But you know, we kind of just enjoyed just hearing that form of music. And then, Lewis Coaxum introduced us to jazz band in the 7th grade. And just jazz became an integral part of us learning our music. So. And it was just a different style of music. It was challenging, and it was different from things that we kind of heard on the radio, as opposed like to R&B and the hip hop; jazz was just totally different, and it made you think a little different. It challenged you. You had to count music a little different. And in that terms, when it came to playing concert music or classical music, we could understand it a little bit better through that jazz. Like, I can say everybody in jazz band generally did very well, doing like honor bands and all-state contests, all-state bands. It just took us to another level. Which is why I really enjoy playing with the Excelsior Band, because the music is totally different from what, you know, the normal—the normal music that we hear on the radio. It's not radio music. And I think that's why people enjoy it so much, because it is different. Yeah.

M: It—oh, sorry.

C: It would be [inaudible 11:40] Mr. Coaxum and Carrie.

B: Mmmh.

C: And your parents were extremely important during your musical upbringing.

B: Yes.

C: Were there any other mentors or influences?

B: So, throughout high school, Stan Chapman, he was the band director at Murphy High School. Definitely a major influence, because not only did he do marching band and concert band, he also had us doing jazz band. And with that, we would be able to have opportunities to get out and do different performances. He also introduced me to the Mobile Theater Guild. I got an opportunity to play for a few plays that were at the Theater Guild when it was up and running, and Mr. Stan just gave me different opportunities to get out. I played with him and Randy Davis at some—I hate to say it now—some bar over in Baldwin County. [Laughter] They didn't have a drummer, and I just like, "Hey, I'll fill in. I won't drink anything." You know? [Laughter] It was like, "Stay away from the bar." But it was really nice, and Stan was a really good guy. Taught us a lot. He looked out for me and my brother. So, definitely influential. And not only that, there was a music program that Mobile County used to partner with the drug education council years back, called "Music and Me." And there were different directors from Mobile County. Sandy Irwin, Mr. Page; there's just different—different directors. Lee Baron, from B.C. Rain High School. What's the name from Citronelle? I can't think of his name. But just different directors from Mobile County. So, with that program, it wasn't just you learning from your director, you're learning from different directors. So, you get different perspectives on music and teaching, and it gave us an opportunity to actually step down and teach younger kids. So, when we were in high school, we taught middle school kids and elementary school kids; had an opportunity to learn how to teach and switch that learning role to a teaching role, so that we can pass it down. Right. Yep, yep, so. And then on to college, numerous music professors: Edward L. Graves at Tennessee State; Reginald McDonald, who's now the head band director, executive director of bands at Tennessee State; James D. Sexton; numerous percussionist instructors; Johnny Lee Lane. Just great guys that have, you know, taught us every little trick that they know—something different. Because you know, music is continuous learning, and there's no end to it. Only time you going stop learning is once your spirit is gone. It's just continuously learning. And I've got the opportunity to teach younger kids now. I have a youth band, Magnolia Breeze Youth Ensemble, that I've put together with a few band parents. It's a

program on the Mobile Parks and Recreation Department, and we just collaborated and did a program together for kids who have disabilities. So, we just pass this music down, and give them an opportunity to learn. I've got kids in high school now, their 10th year having Magnolia Breeze, and just to see the kids go on to be drum majors in their high school bands or section leaders in the high school bands, or just continuing to be in the band, period. As one of the Mardi Gras organizationers, Janice Anderson; she's usually downtown coordinating all the bands, and got her little clipboard, and telling everybody what to do. But I think one of the greatest things she said was, "We're putting the kids in the streets for the right reasons." So, I kind of quote her on that a lot. So. And then, they get the opportunity to see different bands. They get to see the Excelsior Band, some of the other brass bands. And, you know, I just hope that they can use that to continue to allow them to grow as an individual. And, you know, give back to the community as well. Time, talents, and treasures. So. Yeah.

M: Did you have something?

D: Yeah, I have something.

M: Okay.

B: **That's okay.**

D: So, I just wanted to go back to Dunbar for just a moment, because that's kind of a special opportunity to talk about that school. That's an important school here in the city.

B: Yes sir.

D: So, I just wanted to find out about your favorite, your best memory or two about Dunbar and why it's such a special place for you. Because that basically launched everything for you, so.

B: Okay, it's funny, because the first song that we actually learned was "Mickey Mouse March." [Laughter] And I have to say, that was my favorite memory of Dunbar. Because usually when you're starting out, they teach you—you start out into the fundamental books, the method books, teaching different fundamentals. So. You play a little tidbit songs: "Mary had a Little Lamb," or "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star"; little things to start out. But "Mickey Mouse March" was our first song that—sheet music—that Lewis gave us. And it was challenging. I had to go home

and work on it. [Laughter] It was some quarter notes and eighth notes. Once we got it and we were able to play it, it was just a lasting memory. And that was something—you know, a kiddie song, but we loved it. I mean, I loved it. I loved it. It was a great song, you know, for beginners to start out with. Yeah, I think that was my greatest memory. And I can think back to us being able to have the opportunity—our first Christmas concert was at Fort Whiting. So, you know, there were some places that music has taken us. We've been able to perform at Fort Whiting, we performed at the Civic Center; and this was at Dunbar. Got on to going to jazz band; our bass guitarist, his mother worked at WKRG, and she even gave us a opportunity to do like a professional video at WKRG for the jazz band. And so, it was kind of like we got these opportunities just being in the band. And that was a different exposure. It was just great. It was just great. Yep.

C: Music's really been a positive presence in your life.

B: It has been, it has been. Definitely helps keeping me occupied, keeping me out of trouble. Keeping me focused, you know, academically. And you know, even with work, music is just—you might be having a bad day, got to put earphones in, listen to music. Get me out of that bad mood. And you know, keeping me with some positive vibes. So. Yeah, definitely influential. Definitely influential.

M: Well and, so what are kind of your earlier memories? You said in elementary school, you started to kind of notice Excelsior Band.

B: Mhmm.

M: What do you remember about the band at that time? What are you seeing, what are you—?

B: Of course, the drums. You know, Mardi Gras, it's nicknamed "Boom Boom"—[Laughter]—because of the drums. So, definitely the drums. But not even that; it was the togetherness, the precision. The professional appearance. When you see those guys walking down the street with the ties, and the coats, and the hats: they're sharp. I mean, they just look good, they look in uniform. They look like they mean business. And they just sound good. The sound definitely different. You got hundreds of bands in Mobile, but that Excelsior sound is definitely the Mardi Gras Mobile sound. So. I can be blind, and if I can hear them guys coming down the street? Like, I know it's them. It's kind of like I used to tell people about—like, Tennessee State University; you got different HBCUs. And it's nothing against the other HBCU, it's just I know the sound of my HBCU. And so, with Excelsior, you

can have different bands playing the same song; when they play, you know it's them. Because it's just a certain sound: a certain twang on that trombone, a certain fiddle with the sax valves, a little special trumpet lick. Mr. Leon's special little roll-off, and his little personal cadence he's come up with. And you just know. You know it's Excelsior when you hear them. And when you see them, yep. Sometimes they don't have to play a lick; when you just see them in the suits, you know it's them. Yep.

M: Did you think—did you have any idea of that time that you wanted to be a part of that band, or—?

B: Never.

M: Okay.

B: Because I never saw any females in the band, you know. Did want to; maybe one day I considered it. But no females in the band. Never knew why, never asked why. But, when I first got the opportunity, I never thought about it until maybe a few years ago; like, "Hey. I'm the only female." [Laughter] You know. And drummer. So, you know. But yeah, I just—I don't know. It's an honor and a privilege to just be asked to perform with them, even if it was just one performance in a lifetime. It's still a honor, still a honor.

M: How did that happen? How did you actually get involved with the band?

B: Leon called me one day. He had fallen ill, I believe; or either they had two—can't really remember. I knew he had gotten ill one year and he couldn't perform a lot. And then, sometimes they have multiple gigs. And so, I don't know if it was the year he had fallen ill or he had multiple gigs, but they had asked me to fill in for a parade. He kind of sat down with me, we went over the songs, and then on it was just—I did a few parades that year. And after that, Hosea was like, "Hey, want to play, you're free to play." I'm like, "Yeah! Yeah! I'll never—try not to turn it down!" [Laughter] Yeah, if I don't have anything, if work or family's not got me tied down, I'm there. My family, they understand. They're like, "We'll take care of this for you. So, you can go ahead." So, yeah. Leon has been a big, big push in my life. Not just musically: in mentorship, mentorship. He's been a great mentor. He's even helped me with, you know, giving me some advice with dealing with some of the kids I work with now, in trying to teach them. And again, it all goes back to not what you're teaching, it's how you're teaching. So. Yep.

M: Are there any insights he's provided that you want to share in terms of how you approach teaching, I guess?

B: Take it slow.

M: Okay.

B: Patience. Everybody starts out the same, you know. I started out, didn't know how to hold sticks, you know. Even the kids now, they holding them backwards, or—. [Laughter] You know, they hold them how they think they should be holding them, but you know. Like he said, "Start out slow. We all start out the same." But everybody—you going to get it. That's all he keeps saying: "Stay focused. You going to get it. It's going to come." But everything he does, he does it really, really slow starting out, and then we kind of progressing. You know, you can speed up your hands, learning whatever cadence or song that you want to play. So, just take it slow first. It has worked. It's a foolproof plan. It works. I'm definitely a believer in, there's evidence that it works. Because I've been able to teach a number of kids just as he has, so. So. He should've been a professor in college, really. [Laughter] See, he's got it down to a science. He really does. He really does.

M: It sounds like it.

B: Yeah.

M: I mean, do you think you've grown as a musician by teaching?

B: Definitely, most definitely. I've been able to learn as I teach. Because in some forms, things that may not work for maybe one student, I've learned how to adapt—especially working with kids with disabilities. I've had to learn to adapt the way we speak to and the way we communicate with them. Some may not understand certain words or certain techniques. So, you do have to adapt to the individual, and not just say, "Hey, you got to do it this way all the time." But like I said, the way Leon teaches, he pretty much sings the parts. So, they're rudiments. So, you have a rudiment called a double stroke roll. And the double stroke roll, you play two strokes with your right hand, two strokes with your left hand. And, the way he's taught us and taught me—and I say "us" because my teaching them is him teaching them also. So, the way he's taught us is, he would say, "Mom-ma, Daddy." And it works. It works. That's how I teach the kids, and they all pretty much pick that up. So, we pretty much sing the parts to them, for the ones that aren't capable of understanding the written music? We sing it out. so. They learn it, they

pick it up. And you can't tell the kids from who has a disability or who doesn't, because they're all pretty much learning the same thing. It's just a different way. Taking a different approach. Yep. Yep.

C: So, what's been, I guess, some of your favorite memories with the Excelsior Band?

B: All of them. [Laughter] I can't just pick out just one. But I can say that, just having the opportunities when we perform; meeting the different people that are at these different events. Whether it's the Mardi Gras parades; stopping, talking to the police officers; talking to the individuals in the crowd; the float drivers. I mean, doing different little events throughout the city, at some of the hotels. The Mardi Gras Carnival Museum. Just being able to talk to different people. And one thing they all have in common: they like the music. So, I don't know. It's not one specific date or performance or event that stands out. They're all just equally important and meaningful.

M: What's been—I mean, have there been any challenges in terms of—were you challenged as a musician once you joined Excelsior Band, or were you kind of prepared for it already?

B: Of course. Of course. It's always a challenge whenever you step out to perform instrumental music. You don't know if the instrument might break. You don't know if, you know, the crowd might not—may not—you know, you might have some people that might not be interested in what you're playing. And you have to really entertain them. You know, we're there for entertainment. We want people to be happy and joyful. And sometimes, you just don't know—you know, we expect, "Oh, this crowd just don't love us just because who we are." Nah, you have to put out those positive vibes. and send it out through those instruments to, you know, gain every person in that room. You want to reach them. And it's not—you don't want anybody leaving out that room, not enjoying themselves. Especially while the music's going on. The music stop, everyone's like, "Oh!" But you know. You can tell the mood in the room. So, like, if we stop in between songs and we're taking a break, and it's kind of just casual; and then we start playing again, you see the people up moving around, or they're just tapping they toes. Even if they're sitting with the arms folded, they tapping the toe. You're reaching them. You're reaching them and so, they're listening. It's a feeling. Music is definitely a feeling. Not just a sound, it's a feeling. Yep.

- C: Has there been any—I guess, this might be in my head—any women, female, musicians that have seen you and then expressed some interest, or been influenced by seeing you with the Excelsior Band?
- B: Yes, yes. I've had a few students that—female students—who have come into our youth band to play drums because they've seen me, or their parents say, "Hey, you need to reach out to this lady. Looks like she can teach you or get you started, or give you some advice on how to get better." So, yes. I've had some students that have been influenced by my participation. Yeah. Yeah. And I'll say also, Sheila E. has definitely been—and I failed to mention her, but—definitely was an influence in me getting started and wanting to play, also. Because at the time, it wasn't a lot of—she was the only female drummer that I knew of. And then, actually, "Glamorous Life" was the first song that I learned how to play on piano. So. You know, it was just—you have those models that you kind of want to mimic and be like. I'm just blessed to be in a position where I can be that positive model for other young ladies. And hopefully, we'll get more females in the band. Whether it's playing drums or any instrument; any instrument. Because there are some great musicians—female musicians—in Mobile. It's just kind of—like me, I stayed at home for the most part. After I graduated from Tennessee State in 2009, I moved back to Mobile, and I didn't link up with Mr. Rhoden, Leon Rhoden, until 2012. So, for three years I was just in the house, not really playing. Hadn't touched a drum set, drums, or nothing. Just maybe pick up sticks every blue moon. But not really performing, so. I'm sure there are a lot of females that are in that same position who just hadn't gotten the call to come out, you know. But hopefully one day, we can get a few more in. Yep.
- M: I mean, are you noticing any changes? Are you seeing more girls interested in learning drums?
- B: Yes. Definitely. I see a lot more in high schools now than I did when I was in high school. There were a few. I did actually march with a few girls in high school at Murphy. We used tunnel bass drums at Murphy. And so, the first three drummers, we were all female. And then one year, we had three females that played cymbals. So, you know, it's becoming trendy. And I used to have a little phrase. I used to say—guys would always say, "Oh, I got beat by a girl on the drums!" And I'd be like, "I'm not a girl. I'm a drummer. Come on!" [Laughter] But yeah, it warms my heart to see more females are stepping in and not being discouraged to do something just because of, you know, your gender or your sex. Do what makes you happy in life. Drums make me happy. Anything makes me happy, I'm going pretty much do it. [Laughter] Yeah. Yeah.

M: And, to backtrack a little, but you mentioned—like, you know the sound of Tennessee State when you hear it.

B: Yes.

M: What do you carry with you from playing at Tennessee State? Like what—?

B: More than anything? To think. To think. It was written on our front of our band room: the director put up just the word “Think.” Make you think about anything before you put it into action; 9 times out of 10, you know, it’ll turn out the way you want it to. So. And then our motto at school was, “Think, work, serve.” So, get through school, we’re thinking; now we get out into the work field, we working and we’re serving. So. Definitely have to learn, like the education process. And even just dealing with the music, you’ve got to learn it first. Then you got to put in the practice time, and put in that work, and then we go out and perform; that’s our service, you know, to the community.

M: So, to get back to Excelsior Band specifically, what’s distinctive about the Excelsior Band—the sound? What makes it distinctive?

B: To me, I feel like it’s not just—with any other songs, there’s not just one part. Like, you don’t just hear a unison part. There’s so much going on in all those different songs! [Laughter] You know, “When the Saints go Marching In”: everybody’s playing something different. And it’s kind of like your brain hears all of it and it’s trying to process it. Like, you know it’s “Saints,” but then you might hear the saxophone doing something a little different; you might hear the trombone doing something a little different. And it definitely does something to your brain. I can’t really explain it. It’s a good feeling, though. It’s a good feeling. But, it’s something that—I know, like, in music and science, they’re trying to correlate music to why it affects our brain. There are some studies out there that are trying to figure that out. But it definitely does something. And even like individuals with Alzheimer’s and dementia that have memory disorders; like, it definitely does something. I saw a video a while back. A lady had Alzheimer’s and somebody came in singing to her—like, she hadn’t spoken, she couldn’t remember anything. But when the lady started singing a song she knew from her childhood, she would sing along with her, or she was tapping her hand with her trying to hum it. So. Just, like I said, all those different parts in those songs—it just does something. And it gives you a good feeling. A good feeling. And you don’t think about anything at the moment but being in that good space, and that good time. And those good feelings, yep.

M: And, I mean, you—well, you’re a member of a band that’s now 140 years old. What does that feel like? I mean—. [Laughter]

B: It’s weird. It’s very weird. And I say “weird” in the sense that bands don’t last that long. It’s—. [Laughter] I mean, very, very rare that you would hear a band last that long. But, I’m just—like I said, I’m honored to be a part of it. Of course, somewhere down the line—and I’m glad you guys are doing this preservation of this part of the band. Keeping the history. But you know, years down the line, we’ll still be together. I mean, 100 years when we’re gone, you know, band will still be here. Just because the music definitely doesn’t die. As long as you got people that pick up a instrument—and as I say, passing it down—it’ll still, the band will still be here. The Excelsior Band will definitely still be here. And that’s why Hosea’s on a push to reach younger people to bringing them in. If you’ll see Aaron playing with the band, and he’s been great. I’ve seen him come up as a young man, and—just outstanding. I’ve heard how he’s just matured as a musician on that horn. And he’s soloing like I’ve never heard anybody solo before—at his age. I’ve told him, “Dude, you need to be at Carnegie Hall in some of those youth programs, because you got it. You got it.” And, Mobile is full of a lot of talented young people. You know, we just got to keep them encouraged, and push them and expose them. But just the history of the Excelsior Band is—it’s mind-blowing to just know that we’re part of this Mobile history, this Mobile history. You know, you see them down at the Convention Center painted on the wall; you see them in the Mobile Museum downtown; in the Carnival Museum, and you know. It’s just history. They’re painted on the murals downtown on some of the buildings. And it’s just, you know—even though, you know, it may not be my particular picture that’s painted, it’s us. It’s a group. So, we’re all represented. There’s no individualism, it’s the group itself. It’s the group itself. So, it’s just wonderful. And then I see some of the—like, when I went to the museum, I saw some of the old black and white photos of the band when it was maybe like—looked like it was 30 or 40 members in the band. [Laughter] But, you know, and I’m just like, “That’s us. That’s me.” You know, “That’s us.” So, it’s a good feeling to be a part of history. It’s a good feeling. Yep. Or herstory. [Laughter]

M: And you touched on the future of the band: what do you hope for the future of the band?

B: I hope it continues to grow. I really hope it continues to grow. Seeing that the numbers were so big back then, I hope that it will grow. It will continue to grow back to where it was. And you know, just the musicians keeping a love for it and

not letting things discourage them from practicing or picking up a horn. You know, they say, "Oh, I'm too old for this." No, you're not! [Laughter] Because Theodore Arthur, I think he's the eldest member of the band, as far as age-wise. And I mean, he's still kicking and going. I play in a blues band with him. And, you know, he's got definitely more energy than me. [Laughter] He's like, "Come on, we going practice." And I'm like, "Theodore, I just need a break." He's like, "Come on!" You know, "Take your little break and come on." [Laughter] He doesn't miss a practice. Unless, you know, he has a performance or—he doesn't miss a practice. And he just have endless energy—[Laughter]—on reserve. But he loves what he do. Like he says, "It's not about the money, it's about the music." You know. And he's taught—even with his blues band, he's taught me different music that I never really—I would probably hear in movies or something, but never really knew the music. Like "St. James Infirmary"; before I played in his blues band, probably have heard it, but never really knew the music. Until, you know, kind of sit down and play it, and dissect it, and break it all down and piece it all together. Listening to Bobby Bland, Ray Charles' music, Little Junior Parker—I mean, some old blues. And that's the thing about the Excelsior Band: that music will never die. They'll carry it on. Hosea has tons of songs that, you know, he's calling. He's like, "Hey, let's play this!" Little impromptu songs, or things he can remember the band playing, or either he has sheet music for. And he's like, "Hey, we need to play this right here. Let's try this." Because I didn't know there was a Mobile Bay song until maybe a few years ago. We did a brown bag in Bienville, and he was like, "Okay, let's kind of work through this." And then he started fingering, and playing it a little bit, and then he knew the lyrics to the song and everything. And it was like, this is wild. So. But again, just passing all of that down. And you know, having a responsible party and keep up with it, and just—because sometimes we'll forget here. But if it's written down, you'll definitely—the music, if it's written down, there's a guarantee you can continue to pass it down. You know. So, yeah.

M: Well, I think—I mean, I think you've covered most of the questions we have on the sheet.

B: Okay.

M: Do you all have any other—?

D: I did have a question. And that is: as the first woman in the Excelsior Band—that we know of.

B: Yes sir.

- D: Of course, you've shared with us tons of your experience. So, it's no mistake that you are in this band, and that your contributions are greatly to be reckoned with. But I'd like for you, if you have a minute, a moment to say what you would like for other women musicians to know about the opportunity in the Excelsior Band, and of course how you feel you've related to the community.
- B: If I could speak to any female that does have an interest—you know, just the slightest interest—let them know that they should be encouraged to just step out on faith and participate. Of course, you have to know the music, you have to have the skills to perform. But even if you don't have the skill, doesn't mean that you won't ever have it; you just have to develop it. So, it takes practice, it takes time, it takes—you know, you have to be dedicated to your craft, so that you can step out and perform. Because it is a professional band. And there's nothing mediocre or amateurish about it. It's definitely professional, from start to finish. And I do encourage them to, if they have the opportunity to? Please, like, come and step out. There's no—to me, at this point, there's no discrimination in it. We've had individuals to play with us, who—and I know people say, "Oh, it's just a mostly African American band." Which you do see. But we've had gentlemen of different ethnicities, different cultures, to play with the band. So, why not have more females in the band? You know, just sticking with it; stepping out on faith, stepping up and coming in. Make yourself be known. You know. That's the thing. Like I said, the three years I didn't play at all, if it wasn't for Leon, nobody probably would've known that I really played, because I wasn't out and I wasn't talking to anybody. So, you know, communication is key. If you see them out at a performance, say, "Hey, I play this." And reach out to Hosea or whoever's in the band and just say, "Hey, I might have an interest in playing and performing." Because you never know what opportunity you missed by not speaking up, speaking out, and showcasing your talents.
- M: Is there anything we haven't asked about or haven't talked about that you want to put on the recording?
- B: No. I think you guys pretty much touched on everything I thought about prior to coming in, so—. And more. So. [Laughter]
- M: Well, fair enough. Well, thank you very much.
- B: Thank you.

M: This was a wonderful interview.

B: Thank you guys. I appreciate it. Thank you so much. Enjoyed speaking with you all. Thank you—

[End of recording]

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