

EXC 012 Leroy Bosby
Excelsior Band Collection (EXC), Acc. 756
Interviewed by Ryan Morini and Michael Campbell on September 12, 2022
1 hour, 5 minute audio recording • 16 page transcript

Abstract: In this recording, Leroy Bosby is interviewed by Ryan Morini and Michael Campbell in the McCall Library at the University of South Alabama about his experiences in the Excelsior Band. The interview begins with Mr. Bosby describing how his family moved from Marion Junction, Alabama to Mobile. He shares that his grandfather was a healer and herbalist, and his mother worked as a beautician. Mr. Bosby describes growing up on Warren Street, and playing in the band at Dunbar Junior High School. He also reflects on the influence of band directors like Edward Terry Pope and E.B. Coleman on his musical development, and recording artists like Louis Armstrong, Dizzy Gillespie, and Charlie Parker. Mr. Bosby concludes the interview with reflections on the legacy of Excelsior Band and its significance to the city of Mobile.

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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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.

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EXC 012

Interviewee: Leroy Bosby

Interviewer: Michael Campbell and Ryan Morini

Date: September 12, 2022

M: This is Ryan Morini, with the McCall Library at the University of South Alabama. Today is September 12, 2022. Here with my colleague—

C: Michael Campbell.

M: And we have the pleasure of interviewing—

B: Leroy Bosby Jr.

M: Thank you for joining us today.

B: My pleasure.

M: Could we begin with when and where you were born?

B: I was born in Mobile, Alabama, January 14, 1953, at Blessed Martin De Porres Hospital. The second child of Leroy Steven Bosby Sr. and Anna Mary Tate-Bosby. My mother' family hails from Monroe County, Alabama, a little town called Finchburg. And my father's family hails from Fairhope, Alabama, right across the bay.

M: Okay. Do you know what brought them to Mobile?

B: Opportunity. Yeah. Like I said, my father's father was from Marion Junction, Alabama, and he was sort of a root doctor, a healer. He had remedies and herbs, and everything else for health ailments for people in the past. So. And he did some farming, too, but mainly his livelihood was herbal remedies, you know, for people that suffered all types of illnesses. And my dad was the youngest child, and he just wanted opportunity, better opportunity. He came to Mobile for opportunity, and was fortunate to be taken in by a family that afforded him the opportunity to become a outboard motor mechanic.

M: Oh, okay.

B: Yeah. So, he had a great livelihood and a great skill. And my mother was a mainly a housewife and beautician. But it was an opportunity during that time, you know.

M: Do you know where she got her training as a beautician, or how she learned?

B: She went to a local beauty school; I don't remember the name of it. It's been so many years ago, you know. But a cosmetology school.

M: Okay.

B: Uh-huh, so that was something that she wanted to do. It wasn't the main thing she wanted to do. But like I said, she came from Monroe County, here. And the thing about it was, coming from a rural community, they only went to school three months out of the year. But even when she decided she wanted to come to Mobile and live with her family members, she knew that her grades wouldn't be accepted because it was only partial. You know, three years [read: months] out of the year that they went to school. So, she was determined. And she was smart. And she took whatever setbacks she had to take, and she was 21 when she graduated from high school. But she was determined to get a high school diploma. As a matter of fact, she graduated from what is now Dunbar Magnet school.

M: Oh okay.

B: Yeah. But originally, back in the day, it was Dunbar High School. Yeah, I can't remember what year and what class she was in, but it was in the [19]20s. She was born in 1916, so—it had to be later than the [19]20s, it had to be the early [19]30s, I would guess. Then by the time she was 21. So, 21 plus 16 would've been what, 37? So, she would've graduated in 1937, you know. Mmhm.

M: And so, you mentioned the root doctoring. Did your family ever go back to Fairhope or over the bay to kind of gather stuff?

B: Well, no. But my granddaddy' first wife died. And his wife' father gave him a whole lot of property over the bay. So, he did some farming. And I don't know where he got the rest of his herbs and stuff for his medications. But I was too young. I remember. He lived a long life, he lived to be 99. So, he was old when I was a little kid. And I can remember him, you know. But I have cousins that remember him going into his area, separate from the house, where he kept all his herbs and things like that. And one of my cousins had a mole, a big mole on her face. And he took a horsehair and tied it around the mole. And every day, he would tighten it, just a little bit. And a little bit more, little bit more, until he closed off that mole, closed off the blood flow to it. And it just actually fell off. And to this day, there's no scar on her face; you'd never know she had a mole just in between the size of a quarter and a half a dollar.

C: Wow.

B: You know what I'm saying? So, that was something. I don't know how he attained the knowledge that he had. But it was something that was probably passed down to him. But like I say, by the time I was a little lad, he was past that age of practicing. But he was—as far as I know, people talk about how well known he was known in the area; that people would come all over from Loxley, Summerdale, in that area over there just to see him for treatments.

M: What was his name again?

B: His name was James Bosby.

M: James Bosby.

B: Uh-huh, yeah. Mmhm, yeah. He was from Marion Junction, Alabama.

M: Okay.

C: You said nobody in the family knows where this knowledge kind of came from?

B: No, we don't know. But like I say, we do know that he came from Marion Junction, which is outside of Marion, Alabama. We don't know how he attained that knowledge, or who he attained it from. Yeah. But he was a fellow about your size, maybe not as tall as you. You know. But I mean, you never know. People make a way out of no way and do what they have to do. But he was blessed and gifted to be able to know the different types of herbs, and the applications, and the uses. I mean people, Black and white, it wasn't just—everybody came. He had a—you don't have to put this in your record, but he had a treat—. Don't put it on, but he—.

M: Here, I can—

[Break in recording]

M: All right, so we're going again. Okay. So, and where in Mobile did you grow up?

B: I grew up on Warren Street, a couple blocks off of Dauphin; actually, during that era—years before that, I guess—it would be considered in or near the red-light district of Mobile.

M: Okay.

B: Yeah. As a matter of fact, my family, the homestead we grew up in was family property that my mother eventually inherited from her mother, that I think was owned previously by her uncle, one of her mother's brothers. It was a interesting neighborhood to grow up in. Like I say, two blocks right off of Dauphin Street and four blocks off of Government Street. So, it was—and two blocks south of Dunbar. You know, so I mean, I was able to walk two blocks to junior high school, and my mother would drop us off at elementary school at Caldwell, which later became a part of Bishop State. From there, I went to high school at Central. But it was a nice neighborhood, because it was a bunch of kids in the neighborhood. And families, too, as well. So, I mean it was always somebody you could go outside and play with. Once you got to be a age where your parents would say, "Go outside and play." You know. But then, we had a big yard, too. And then we had pets; we had dogs, couple of dogs. It was always a family-orientated neighborhood, with churches, school. And like I said, we were blessed to have a car for my daddy, so we go across the bay for holidays, go down to the island, Mon Louis Island, to the beaches. I'd also go up to my mother's family place up in Monroeville. So I mean, it was something to do. I mean, it was never a bored moment. We didn't have what they have now, video games and, you know, things like that to distract us. So, we had to go outside and play. Physical activity: four square; you know, if you were lucky enough to have a football; or a bicycle, you could ride around to your friend's house in the neighborhood. Yeah. But it was a safe neighborhood, too. You don't see much of it now, but they had police patrols going through the neighborhoods. And after 10 o'clock in the evening, unless you were an adult, you had to be in the house before the sun went down. And people had to go to work. So, 10 o'clock you were in the bed. The only cars you heard on the street were people that were coming in late from work, or somebody coming in from the club. But other than that, the only cars on the street was the police, just making they neighborhood patrols.

C: When did you finish from Central?

B: I finished in the last class, in 1970.

M: Oh wow.

C: Wow.

B: Yeah.

C: I had quite a few family members that went to Central.

B: Oh okay.

C: Were you in the band?

B: Oh yeah, I was in the band. That's how I got invited to join Excelsior. I first started music in junior high school at Dunbar. The band director's name there was Edward Terry Pope, which was probably related to Mr. Pope who started the Excelsior Band. I'm sure he was one of his relatives from Down the Bay. He was a Navy veteran, as well. He attended Alabama State University. His primary instrument was the clarinet. As a matter of fact, the year before I got to Dunbar was the last year that the band—Dunbar Junior High School band—that was the last year that they marched. They were the only band in Mobile to march in Mardi Gras parades. They were the feeder school on the north side of Mobile for Central, for the musicians. And he was very instrumental in my formative music years; he was the first one that taught me how to form my armature, how to read music rhythmically, and also how to count. And pitch; use your ear as a sense of pitch. So I mean, you know, it was critical to learn the basic foundations. To be able to read, visualize, and hear a sound before you actually play it; that way, you don't overplay it or underplay the note. You're right on center pitch of the note. Mmhm. So, I was just fortunate enough to have him for my first music teacher. We had a nice little band. And he was able to—I remember a range, one of the popular tunes of the day for us; I can't remember now the artist name—"Downtown" was the name of the song, though. And he was just showing us that he had the talent to be able to hear a song on the radio, and sit down and write it out for each instrument. And then when you play it, it sounded just like the song you heard on the radio. He was a good music teacher. And he helped a lot of musicians learn everything—the basic fundamentals of music, where they could go on and audition for Central's band, you know. So, that was from seventh grade through the ninth grade, junior high school. Seventh, eighth, and ninth grade. And from that point, when we went to Central, everybody knew that if you went through either Dunbar or else Booker T.; Booker T. had Mr. Ward, was their band director. If you came through either one of those schools, they knew that you had the necessary basic fundamentals to be able to be a basic, good musician, if not a real good, exceptional musician. So

anyway, when I got to Central, Mr. Coleman was the band master; E.B. Coleman. He's legendary even to this day, as far as people that went to Central. And like I say, if some of your family members went, I'm sure they know about E.B. Coleman.

C: Yeah.

B: Yeah. You know.

C: Well, I went to Murphy, so we actually played arrangements by him.

B: Okay, right. Yeah. What instrument did you play?

C: Saxophone.

B: Okay, okay. Great, great, great. Yeah, E.B was—actually, he was a genius. When I was telling you about Mr. Pope and his arrangements of music; E.B could write a piece of music—. Well, you played some of his arrangements. So, you know that if you knew the original or heard the original, and then you played his arrangement, it sounded as good as the original—or, if not better. Yeah, he just had a gift of being able to hear. And he came from a very great musical family outside of Hampton, Virginia. So, it was something that he loved to do, and he was blessed and talented enough to be able to do it. And inspired other people to follow in his path. But he was instrumental in my journey here. He asked me and another one of my band members—a guy by the name of Cleon Freeman from the Freeman family in Mobile; a musical family, the Freemans—to join, talk to the leaders of the Excelsior Band. Mr. Robert Petty and Mr. Hubert Stanfield was the leaders at that time, in 1968. We were both juniors in high school. And we went and talked to Mr. Stanfield and Mr. Petty one evening before they had a Mardi Gras parade that we didn't participate in—you know, at the school—we didn't march in, but we went and talked to them. And they say, "Well, we'd like for y'all to try out for the band." You know, gave us the invitation to try out for the Excelsior Band. And we did. And it was a great honor and a privilege for a couple of teenagers to be asked to march with the Excelsior. Because I mean, as a little kid—like I said, the area we grew up in just two blocks off of Dauphin Street, we used to go to the parade. Well, my mom would take us to the parade. It was always an exciting thrill when we knew that the Excelsior was getting ready to come down the street. I mean, it was a great sense of pride and representation for the community. And then knowing that they had a storied history of participating in Mardi Gras for all the years they had. It was a thing of honor and pride just to see them marching and playing the instruments, and marching in step. Uh-huh. So, it was—well, that was the great part, but the

best part about it—I won't say the best part about it, but it was a privilege. Like I said, Mr. Ponquinette was the drummer. He was the oldest guy in the band at that time. And I can't remember his first name. But Mr. Ponquinette could play that drum with so many different rhythms. And I mean, marching. He could play any rhythm that he wanted to play, and then he could change it up to something that you couldn't dream of hearing. It was like he could make that drum talk, you know. And people who heard him and knew that he was playing with that band for so long, they really gave him a lot of respect. But it was just a thing of—his drumming was so unique that if you couldn't see that band, but you could hear the drum, you knew it was Excelsior coming down the street. Yeah. It was something that you'd never forget. Mhm. But like I said, Cleon and I, we were excited and happy to join the Excelsior Band. And I remember one parade we played in, and Central was playing in the same parade, and they must've been ahead of us. And when we came up to the ending of the parade, everybody saw Cleon and myself, and they said, "Oh, there's Leroy, there's Cleon! Look, they in Excelsior Band!" [Laughter] So, it was kind of unbelievable for them to say, "Oh, here some of our classmates playing with Excelsior. And they should be playing with us, but look: they playing with Excelsior!" [Laughter] So, that was one of the first highlights. And then the other highlight was, after the parade, then we got paid for playing, you know. And we would've played for free. It was just that much of a honor, and more so a thrill, to play with the legendary Excelsior Band. And it wasn't really any rehearsal; it was just, you get in the band, and they know you have enough talent to play, to learn the tunes by ear without having to read the music from manuscript paper. So, after one or two times, you hear the tune and you can play it by heart. You pick up the sound, you pick up the rhythm. And I mean, most of them were standards anyway; not that we ever played the standards, but we'd heard them before. You know, Louis Armstrong, "Hello Dolly"; "Bill Bailey Won't You Please Come Home"; "When the Saints Go Marching In"; "Margie." Those type of tunes, you know. So. They were classical in themselves. And I mean, that's still what the band plays today. Same traditional standards. Mhm. So I mean, it was just one of those things. But it was great and it still is great. And if it wasn't for arthritis, I'd still be trying to march today. Because I do miss it. I mean, it's an honor, and it was carried on before we were invited to do it, and it'll be carried on long after we finish. They still bringing young people in that have the talent and the desire to keep the tradition alive.

M: So, one thing: what was the tryout like?

B: Well like I said, it wasn't really a audition. Because Mr. Coleman knew that we were capable of playing. You know, he knew our level of musicianship, that we had the

basic foundation to be able to pick up on the tunes, and learn them, and play them with confidence. So, I mean, it's like once you get your foot in the door and everybody know that you can play, they accept you in the brotherhood. Mmhm.

M: And you're just in.

B: Oh yeah. Yeah. Like I say, it's a honor and a privilege. But they not going ask anybody to play that don't have the basic fundamentals or the talents to be able to perform.

M: Can I ask: Mr. Pope, how would you describe him as a person? Like, what was he like to interact with?

B: Mr. Pope. Edward Terry Pope, the Dunbar Junior High School band director. He was soft-spoken, courteous; like I said, he was a military veteran, a Navy veteran. He was very formal; soft-spoken, formal, and articulate. I never heard him raise his voice. Very precise in his instructions. And he was instrumental in talking to my mother at PTA meetings. My daddy bought me a secondhand used horn; he didn't want to invest in a new horn, not knowing if I was going to take the horn serious and play or not. But the horn had a lot of leaks. I think he might've got the horn from a pawn shop. Just to say, "Okay, well I'mma see if you going play this. If you play this, then I might decide to get you something else." Because some of my classmates, they had brand new instruments. And my horn had a whole lot of leaks. And the valves would stick sometimes. So, Mr. Pope had talked to my mom at a PTA meeting, and told her if I had a better instrument I could probably do better. So, she came home and told my father, and he talked to a salesman at M&S Music Store. And the salesman came to the house and brought a new trumpet. And my dad decided he would go ahead and buy, invest in that for me. So, once he did that, it was off to the races. Having a great instrument to work with makes all the difference in the world. It's half the battle. But Mr. Pope—like I said, his main instrument was the clarinet. But as a band director he could play all the instruments. Knew all the fingering, and could relay to the students how to count. And I still use his method of counting today. You know, with a quarter note, one; a half, in between a quarter note; a quarter note and an eighth note, one-e, one-e-and; triplet, one-e-and-a; and 16th notes, one-e-and-a; you know. So I mean, he broke it down to the lowest rudimentary explanation, where a kid could understand it. He could read your level of development and how you were comprehending. So that he would try to give you a piece of music to play that you could play. Yeah. He had different levels of teaching beginners, intermediate, and advanced students, in the seventh, eighth, and ninth grade. By the time you finished the seventh grade,

you know, you were ready to join the junior high school band. If not before. But he moved you forward by the level that you comprehended his teachings. He was a good teacher. Like I said, very mild-mannered. Very respectful. And good at communication, and communicating with kids and parents. Yeah. So like I said, you know, just to know that he was related somewhere down the line to the original Mr. Pope who started the Excelsior Band. It was an honor to have him as my first music teacher. Yeah, mmhm.

M: Well, it sounds like that was your first formal instruction in playing music. When did music first become important to you in your life? I mean, what's—?

B: Music always was important to me in my life, even before I could play an instrument. Going back to my family—and church. And church as well. Even as a little kid singing in the children's church choir for Easter programs and Christmas programs, and then participating with the adults in regular church services. Even though you can't read music, you're listening to it at home on the radio, and in the car; and then if you had what we used to call a record player back in the day, a phonograph, you always exposed to music. So, it's always the subliminal effects of music in your life. If it's no more than just patting your feet, clapping your hands along with the beat of the music that you're hearing. And you don't know how to count. You don't know what notes are being played, but you know it's different pitches, and different rhythms. And you can pick out different instruments. So I mean, music is like an innate gift that we all appreciate. At some point we may not have the fundamental talents, or advanced talents, to understand it; but we all love it. Music is a universal language. So, even from the earliest age, and the first baby lullabies you hear, it's something that everybody can relate to, whether it's happy or sad. I mean, I can remember having toy instruments as a kid: toy drums, toy trombone, toy piano. But I mean, actually having the talent that some kids have being a genius, a musical genius? No. I had to be taught the basics to be able to perform on a level that I was able to perform on as a student. Like I said, having great teachers make all the difference, too. And a desire to want to learn. I think every musician that achieves any level of competency as a musician, it's always that extra desire to discover. Well, you played the sax.

C: That was a long time ago.

B: Yeah, but I mean, you had to practice to be a fair player. And then, I know some players that were talented, to put in the work and learn a lot of technical studies. Kept doing it over and over and over and over and over and over, a little bit faster,

little bit faster. And then doing variations. You know, so it's all a level of how far you want to take it. Yeah.

M: And how did you end up playing the horn specifically? Was that your decision, or was that kind of a decision handed to you?

B: It was my decision. I could remember as a kid hearing Louis Armstrong on trumpet. I can remember seeing him on TV on Ed Sullivan, you know, seeing trumpet players; Ted Mack. And I mean, the trumpet always stood out to me in my mind as playing the melody. Playing the melody of any song, or most of the songs you heard. Or playing the lead part in musical songs or selections. It just add an authoritative sound, to me. And it was a melodious, like I said, too. You know, sweet. And I was lucky; not knowing any better, it was just one of those things where I was blessed to have the talent to be able to form my armature, and hear, and count, and read music, and play at the same time. So I mean, it's more than one phase of being a musician or playing music. It's not like walking and chewing bubble gum at the same time. [Laughter] Yeah, it's a little bit more complicated. But then you get to the level—you know, you get to the level that your creativity is a gift. Because it supersedes what you've learned, and it comes from the heart and it comes from the soul. And a lot of people say it comes from the divine inspiration. So, it's more than everything that you'll see written on a piece of paper. It's like a beautiful dream: if you close your eyes and you're dreaming, and it's a beautiful dream, and it's everything that you think you want in your mind at that time. And then you wake up and say, "Oh, that wasn't real. It was a dream." But it was so realistic and pleasing to your mental sensory. It might be so good that you wake up and said, "Aw man, why'd I have to wake up? That was such a dream! That was a great dream." Then you got to face reality, you know? [Laughter] Life is like that. But music is freeing like that. I mean, it's beautiful. And then sometimes, the greatest thing for a musician to do is be satisfied with what they play. That's the next level. I mean, because it's like anything else: you're never satisfied with what you're doing, you're always striving for the next level. And to have a set where you play your instrument and everybody in the band is on the same wavelength. It's like being on another dimension all together. It's surreal. And you can say, "Oh man, what a set. What a set." And that's something that you'll never forget. If you could catch it on a recording, it would be beautiful. But sometimes you can catch it on recording, sometimes you can't. In my opinion, that's one of the highlights of life and being a musician, and having a good gig. And having a good set of music.

C: I wonder how what you just said speaks to the difference between recordings and live music, as far as capturing that collective elevation.

B: It happens. It happens, it happens, it happens, it happens. And it happens rarely. I was listening to satellite radio yesterday—not yesterday, day before yesterday. Friday, on the way here. You know, this time of year is the time of year that they have jazz festivals all over the place. Pensacola just had one a couple of weeks ago. Mobile used to have one when we were growing up, where all kind of jazz bands from around the country would come to the theatre and perform, from all over the country. And the difference between—the rarity of differences between live performances and recorded performances are so few and far between. Because music now is so commercial. And everybody can record on a cell phone—you know, digitally. So, the level of musicianship, too, is at a new peak. You know, because of all of the training, all the exposure, all the conservatories, and all the resources available on the digital platform across all mediums. Live performances of any type of music, to me, is the best because it's spontaneous. You can't edit it. You can record it, but you can't go back and edit it. And digitized or recorded music is some of the greatest music there is, too. If you go back and look at the Philharmonic Jazz recording of Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker at Massey Hall; all of those are classic recordings, and they're timeless. And people still listen to them. Because they were so innovative at the time, they were ahead of they time. You know. So, I mean, you can make a comparison between the two, and then you can try and draw a line and separate the two. But there's appreciation for both sides, live and recorded. But the thing that producers and record companies today and in the past are guilty of, are trying to make perfect records. And when you try to do that, you lose the essence of the spontaneity, and you try to make the musician into a perfect machine. And we human. [Laughter] And humans make mistakes. You know, and some mistakes are perfect mistakes and obvious mistakes, and some mistakes are mistakes that nobody'll ever know unless you admit to it. I mean, that's a subjective question on both sides. [Laughter] That's kind of like an Ella Fitzgerald commercial: is it life, or is it Memorex? Yeah. You know. So, I mean there's ying or yang. But like I said, live is always—live is something, if you were there, you can say "I was there." But if it's recorded and you have a copy of the recording, you can say, "I was there and it was live." And it'll always be the same; you'll have a memory of the live performance mentally, but then if it was recorded and you were there, you can always go back and listen to that recording. You know, for posterity. I mean that's just my opinion. Doesn't matter, period, you know? It's what's your preference; what's your preference? You know. Live is always a better preference, but if you can't be there live, then a recording is the next best thing.

M: How would you say you grew—or, would you say you grew as a musician when you joined the Excelsior Band?

B: Oh, I grew exponentially. Just because the years' experience of the members that were in the Excelsior Band. The majority of the members in Excelsior Band were professionals; if they weren't professional musicians, they had performed on the collegiate level, or else they were talented enough to be accepted into the band as competent and exceptional musicians. And I don't mean just good, I mean exceptional. When I say "exceptional," I mean they were on the level of being solo virtuoso. They had command of the instrument. They could play any song, any type of song, any genre of song, as if they owned the song. You know, because they were just that proficient on the instrument. I mean, they can play naturally in the group, but if they had to be the lead soloist, they could do that just as well. Yeah. So, the level of musicians in the band, listening to them play—especially in different situations. Because for the most part, most of the musicians that were in the band, like I said, were either—they were all professionals on one level or another. If they wasn't band directors, they had other outside professional careers; postmen, teachers, or whatever. But it was just them being able, not just to have a outside profession that was either related or not related to being a musician, but on a professional level they could play the instrument. Because they had the proficiency, the technical proficiency, to be a professional as a musician. So just knowing that, and hearing them playing on so many different type of songs, so many different ways, so many different levels; you know, I mean, it was just: "I need to practice." That's what you say to yourself; "I need to learn. I need to learn more. I need to practice this." And then you could talk to them, and they were willing to teach you, you know, different approaches, different theories, and tell you what you needed to work on to become better.

M: Were there any particular mentors in Excelsior Band for you, or was it kind of just everyone in the band?

B: It was everyone in the band. Everyone in the band. Nobody made fun of you, looked down on you; it was always encouraging. If you had any questions, they were willing to coach you along, be a mentor.

M: So, what was the most challenging aspect of joining Excelsior Band? Was it just improving your musicianship?

B: Challenging? I don't think there was any, really, challenges. Because you were in the environment of learning something that you loved. I mean, the only challenge

would be to learn a new song. And like I was saying, most of the songs we played were standards. In the entirety of the band, I can only remember one occasion where Mr. Coleman wrote out maybe eight bars of two songs. And one of the songs was “Will the Circle be Broken,” and the other song was Kool and the Gang, “Celebrate.” You know. That was for a New Year’s performance downtown one year, I can’t remember which year. But it was back in the late [19]80s or the early—yeah, the late [19]80s or the early [19]90s. And you know, “Will the Circle be Broken”; everybody know that was a church song, but maybe they didn’t know what key. So I mean, we did that. And I’d already knew “Let’s Celebrate” from a group I was practicing with in New Orleans. But you know, it’s just the only occasion where I can recall any music being written out. And I mean, we learned that in like 10 minutes, you know? And we played it going from—what’s that? On the side of Cathedral Square, going to the riverfront. You know for a New Year’s Eve celebration. But like I said, the only challenges—I would consider—would be learning a new song, or a song that we hadn’t played in a long time. Because like I say, once you get in the band, it’s pretty much a standard repertoire. Every now and then Hosea would come up with a different tune that we would learn; “Let’s Break Bread Together.” I’m trying to think of another one. “Tequilla,” I think they started doing that after I retired with my hip arthritis. But you know, pretty much—it’s like I said, it’s like a standard tradition with standard songs. So, it’s nothing that’s beyond anybody who’s in the band, even the youngest neophyte; it’s not going to be an operatic or concerto piece. [Laughter] It’s going to be pretty simple. Yeah, uh-huh. It’s going to be pretty simple. But I mean, that’s the challenge with anybody learning a song that they hadn’t heard before. I mean, pretty much you hear basically everything at some point as a musician, or at least as a learning musician; at some point in time, you’re going to be exposed to a song that you hadn’t heard it before. Like I said, it’s just being comfortable, and being able to hear; hear a song, and if you don’t know what key it is, determine what key it’s in and listen to it by ear. That would be the biggest challenge. But there’s nothing that would make you want to take your instrument and not pick it up again, you know. If anything, you go home and get in the woodshed and say, “I’mma learn this.” Because once you hear something—. It’s just like a commercial: it may not be the catchiest phrase, but once you hear something, you got that aural image in your brain. And you can just about basically hum it. If you can hum it, it’s just a matter of figuring out what key it’s in, and going back and forth to finesse it.

M: That’s true. Do you have a favorite memory from Excelsior Band? Or, it can be more than one if anything—.

- B: A favorite, favorite, favorite, favorite memory from Excelsior. [Laughter] Oh yeah. My first favorite and best favorite memory would be the first time I marched and my mother saw me march in Excelsior Band. Yeah, that was a moment of great pride, and a humbling moment at the same time. Like I say, you look back on things and you don't realize the significance at that time. But years later, you look back and it touches your heart to a level that—it's more sentimental than it is memorable. Just, it chokes you up. Yeah. So, that would be my greatest memory of marching with Excelsior Band. I'm sure there are many more, I know there are many more, but that one takes the cake and would be on top. The ice cream on top of everything, for me.
- M: You've talked a little about kind of reflecting over time, but what does it mean to you to have been part of—to be part of—a band, I mean, that's 140 years old? That's a *long* time.
- B: It's humbling. And like I said, going back to being a little kid and my recollections of being aware, after being I guess told by my mother about Excelsior. And then seeing them. And then having that self-awareness of what the Excelsior Band meant to the community. Just to know that they was coming down the street inspired a sense of excitement and anticipation, to see these Black men walking, marching in step. Standing upright playing their instruments. And the crowd clapping, everybody hollering, "Excelsior! Excelsior! Excelsior!" It gives you a great sense of pride, a great sense of community, a great sense of tradition that's lasted the hard times, the tough times. A lot of people don't know the history of Excelsior and Joe Cain, their relationship. Like I said, the band was founded to celebrate the birth of Mr. John Pope's first son. And from there, it became not just a community band, but a city institution within itself. Joe Cain, once he was instrumental in resurrecting the celebration of Mardi Gras, the first band that marched with him was the Excelsior Band—and the only band. So, that's why on Joe Cain Sunday, the only band that marches is Excelsior. You know. And this was after the Civil War, and we all know what the Civil War was about. You know. So, I mean it was a sense of pride for the Excelsior to be asked to march, and to continue that tradition as part of Mobile Mardi Gras. You never lose a sense of what you're representing. When you put on the uniform to perform with the band, it's always with a sense of pride. But it's also a sense of duty and honor. Because you're representing a tradition, like I said, that's been going on since 1883. And you think about Mr. Pope who started it; all the musicians that were part of it established a legacy that you're a part of carrying on. It's with a full sense of awareness that you get to do something that means so much to so many people. And then, you get to perform on your instrument and give somebody else a sense of joy, happiness;

bring back memories to them. And it's pleasurable to see them smile. I mean, you could be marching down the street and somebody in the crowd'll say—and you'll be looking serious, you know, thinking about whatever you're thinking about—regardless, somebody look at you and say, "Hey man, smile!" And you can't do any—you have to smile. [Laughter] I mean, because it makes you like an ambassador for the city of Mobile, just being a member of the band. So, it's miles and miles beyond just being a musician in a band, playing a instrument. And then, you don't never know what little kid is out there looking at you the same way I was a little kid looking at Excelsior. You know, inspiring them one day: "Oh man, I'mma play a instrument. I want to play in Excelsior Band." So, you just have to be aware, as a role model. Because I mean, somebody inspired you to play the saxophone. Yeah. Somebody. Whether it was something you heard, a piece of music you heard or something. We all have inspirations. And I'm just glad y'all doing this oral history to document some of this. Like I said, I wish I'd've been aware back in 1968; man I'd have everybody name I'd ever marched with, and every parade I ever marched in. And every song we ever played. [Laughter] Because it's a lot of songs that have fallen by the wayside that was in the repertoire, that we don't play as often or we used to play that we don't play. But I mean, that's like the evolution of everything. Mhm.

M: Well, and on that note, what do you hope for the future of the band?

B: My hope for the future of the band is for it to go on for another 140 years and beyond that, into a timeless history. I mean, it's lasted this far not by accident, but by continuity and musicianship. The inspiration that it has brought younger musicians to want to become a part of the band. The legacy that it has established, and the pride that the community, and the city, and the state, and people from all around the world that come to Mobile for Mardi Gras, carry back with them from seeing the band perform. I hope that legacy lives into perpetuity. So I mean, it's lasted thus far, and I pray that it last, like I said, another 140, [1]50 years. I hope it lasts until 3881. [Laughter] You know? Of course, we won't be here, but we never know. And y'all documenting this, it makes all the difference in the world, for young kids that don't know the history and the legacy. Hopefully, it helps somebody. And hopefully, young musicians and young kids will see that somebody started something so long ago and it's still thriving. So, if nothing else, I hope it open they eyes up to—the longevity of one situation can be the blueprint of longevity of any situation. Yeah.

M: Well, I think that covers the questions we had on the sheet. Unless there's anything—

C: No, I think that kind of covers it.

B: Oh, good.

M: Was there anything else you wanted to add as a kind of closing thought?

B: Or caveat? No. I mean, y'all have done a good job in your questions, and I hope I answered everything thoroughly.

M: Oh yeah.

B: To the best of my ability. So I mean, I appreciate the opportunity to have had the conversation with you. And if it's anything I can do in the future, you know—and I hope y'all publish this sometime next year, or do audio publishing or something on it. A audio file for the 140th anniversary.

M: We got to figure something out for that, yeah.

B: Oh yeah, it would be nice. You know, especially for the family. So that's about it as far as I can go. And I mean, I appreciate it, like I said. I want to thank you so much for the opportunity.

M: Well, thank *you* very much. It's been an honor, and it's been a pleasure to sit here with you today. So, I guess I'll stop the recording.

B: Okay, great.

[End of recording]

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