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### Interview with William Russo, 1998

Columbia College Chicago

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## W I L L I A M   R U S S O

*OK, it's May the twelfth, 1998, and this is the interview with William Russo, who is the head of the Music Department and director of the Chicago Jazz Ensemble at Columbia College Chicago.*

**First of all, we'd like you to tell us when did you come to Columbia and could you tell us the story of your arrival here? What were the circumstances surrounding it?**

I came in 1965. My wife and two children and I were living in London and I had great success with a jazz orchestra there. Mike Alexandroff, whom I had known since 1953 when I taught a course, a single course, at the College, Mike just said, "Come to Columbia." And he said, "We'll pay you for doing what you've been doing on your own all these years in New York and London." So we came to Chicago in August of 1965, I think, and I was the first full-time teacher at the College. And I asked Mike for a five hundred-dollar advance and he said, "We don't have it." So, then later he said, "How much did I promise to pay you?" And I said, "X dollars." And he said, "Don't you want me to write that as some income, where I'll pay the tax?" I said, "Yes." He said, "Well, I'm going to have to pay you two-thirds of that your first year." If I didn't know Mike was funny and I didn't love him as much as I do, I think I would have gone crazy, but we had our contract and we didn't need it and we made up for it subsequently.

**Can you tell us about your relationship with Mike and how you**

**first met him, and maybe what brought you to teach that single course?**

I think either Don Gold or Studs Terkel was teaching a course about jazz. And he recommended me because either Studs or Don couldn't teach the course, so I took the course. I think it was the first course, General Music, or maybe it was it was both courses. And anyway, Mike came and watched one of my lectures and was thrilled to an extent that I think is totally inappropriate. I'm not very mad, I just think—I don't know what he saw in me at the time. But he was charmed with the idea of having a somewhat intellectual music person on the faculty, even though my politics aren't as devastatingly rude as his, they're pretty rude and in a less conventional sense. But I think we liked that about each other.

**Could you describe for us the atmosphere at Columbia or what Columbia was like in the mid '60s?**

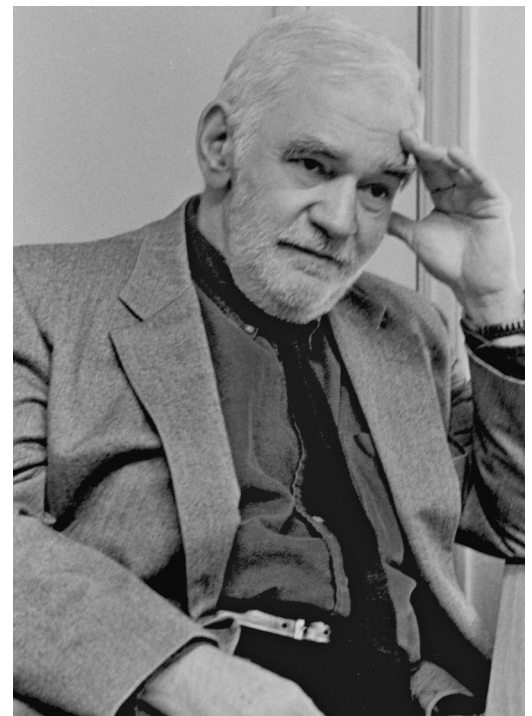
It's almost impossible to describe. It was one floor of a building in 203 North Wabash. It was very nice. And the staff was two or three people and there were several part-time teachers. But there was still a lot, in 1953, there was still a lot of returning soldiers, veterans, as far as people who had been at war, and it was being subsidized by the GI Bill of Rights, as I remember. Anyway, it was a very nice place and Mike was fabulous. And they had the people on the faculty then, very interesting and still are, you know, I had a very good time. Then I left, actually, I went to the University of Chicago to teach one course and then I went to New York and Mike and I've had the...

**Sorry, when you first taught a single course here was that in the '50s?**

'53, I believe '53. Maybe '54.

**And what about when you came back in '65 as a full-time faculty member?**

Well, I came back, I had more of a denomination, I think other than—I might have been called Composer in Residence, I can't remember. And I taught two or three courses, and the school was much different in 1965. There were a lot more working-class people in the school, and there were a lot more males in the school that—you have to bear in mind that the draft was in effect at that time, so students got a deferment from the draft. It may not have been in '65, but it was soon afterwards, but that's another story. Anyway, it was a blue-collar school, and more white, more Caucasian, than it became in the '60s.



**What—can you think back—were you teaching in London as well, or—was this your first—**  
Occasionally, privately.

**OK.**

Privately, not in a school.

**Could you tell us, in your own words, what you think the mission is at Columbia College, and perhaps how this institution has influenced your views on education, or changed them over the years?**

Well... I think the idea behind the school is that we'll take anybody in, and give her or him a chance, a shot, to do something. And I think at the beginning, especially, we were much less concerned about retention. So if the student didn't do well, the student was out. And the faculty was quite... stimulating, I mean, the people who were teaching these courses were heads of advertising agencies and people who produced and directed shows, and they were coming here almost as a hobby, to teach their one class a week. The idea behind the school, implicit, is justice. Racial justice, economic justice, social justice. I mean, that's never really incorporated into any class, and it's certainly not doctrine of the school, but there is a sensibility toward righteousness, which may not even be allowed these days, in an institution. But that was certainly there, present in all of us. And I think the students were—although at that time, the faculty probably was ahead of the students, or to the left of the students. Later in the '60s, the situation changed, where the students were to the left of most of the faculty, I believe. Anyway, the school was based on the assumption that the world could be made a better place, and that each student at the school should be given a

chance to find something. Not so much find something in herself, not the sort of self or exploratory for your emotions that was around at this time, but find something of quality that was universal and large-minded and important. I go further: I think these days, and tell students, that their aim should be to lead a good life or a civilized life and a virtuous life, and that if they want to become Michael Jacksons, they should examine that inclination, because the Michael Jacksons of the world often live tragic lives, and just to be a good professional is plenty hard. Maybe they should strive for that, and more importantly, should strive for some balance in their lives, and they should strive for good citizenship. I know that sounds really pious, but it happens to be the truth.

**And that philosophy, did you come to Columbia with that, or is that something that your experience—**

No, I came here, and I think I helped shape the school in this way. The other way in which—you asked a question about the methods of education—I think I was inadvertently way ahead of the school, or schools in general, because in 1968, I formed a rock and roll theater. And I had been down here to form the Jazz Ensemble, and I did, and we performed and we had good success, but it was a very tough time for jazz, because the black nationalist movement was very strong, and black instrumentalists wouldn't play with my orchestra. And to have a jazz orchestra without blacks in it was inconceivable to me. And I became bored with a lot of jazz. Also, I became bored with the fighting between blacks and whites, I became bored with the doctrinaire notions that prevailed, and then I also became bored with where jazz

was going. So, I formed the rock and roll theater, and the rock and roll theater was tenuously connected to the school. It was called the Free Theater, and the students in the—I mean, the members of the band were mostly Columbia College students, they came out of the class. And we would play at the bowling alley and little churches. And the singers came from everywhere, we had a chorus that we could teach the music to in half an hour. So we had huge groups of people, sometimes the audience would become part of the production, and the classrooms were a problem. Anyway, and we also had visuals. We were one of the first musical theater productions with visuals, which consisted of two film projectors, four slide projectors, and an overhead. You're too young to know what an overhead is, but it's a [bulb, it's a bulb with oil in it and it reflects these wonderful electric circuits], so that you threw your images on the wall. And then we had dancing also. There would be no choreographer; in fact, there was no director and there was no producer. I was indeed the director and the producer, but I didn't know those words at that time, so it wasn't until much later that I started referring to myself as the producer and executive producer, as a matter of fact, of these productions. And we had lines around the block. This was 1968, and it was partly because of the topic, which was the Civil War—it was called *The Civil War: A Rock Cantata*, and it was a cantata, it wasn't really a theater work. It's a story, it was based on Paul Horgan's book and four of his poems, with interstices, which were [largely] improvised, or totally improvised, or very improvised. And the four poems were sung by a

solo singer with whom I wrote this work, The Civil War. And the orchestra, the rock band, also included either a violin or a horn or a cello, and usually those people came from the audience also. And it was about the parallels between the Civil War in America and the Vietnam War. A very highly political sort of work which was designed to show that we were making a mistake in Vietnam. It was deeply anti-war, in its essence, and it embraced the culture of the late 1960s, a culture which I still cherish, by the way. And anyway, we had huge attention paid to us. We shared the space with Paul Sills and Second City—no, it wasn't called the Second City, it was called the Story Workshop at that time—and we would do ten and midnight shows on Saturday and Sunday, and we had lines around the block, I mean, literally. This theater seated 200, 300, and we didn't charge. It was called the Free Theater because people could walk in and pay nothing, and then as they went out, they were asked to put money into a hat. In some of these procedures, I was influenced by Sills, an extraordinary person, the inventor of Second City and Story Workshop. But this crazy little thing that we had... Mike is convinced that it made the school famous. He gives me totally unrealistic credit for this. At the same time, the Music Department did not grow, because I wasn't, at that point in my life, sufficiently an entrepreneur. But the school grew, and students from all over this department only came down to come to school when they did the rock cantatas, because it seemed to be very alive and vital, and we were very alive and vital. When Bert Gall graduated, it must have been 1969, could have been 1970, I got

tired of the music that we'd been playing and decided to do rock and roll. We had the first rock and roll graduation in America. And the graduating class, led largely by Bert Gall, I think, the graduating class voted against it, because they didn't want their parents to see them in such shoddy surroundings. Of course the parents adored it, and it was very good. You saw the pictures of nakedness. So anyway, we had these very exciting rock and roll graduations.

**So you brought this cantata rock opera to the graduation, and that was the music?**

Well, elements of it.

**Elements of it, and that was kind of way out for the audience, which were the graduates and their families.**

Actually, in the theaters we played pretty loud, I'm sure, my hearing has been affected by it, but the graduations we played with a certain modification.

**What type of music had been played at all the previous graduations?**

Well, the first year I was here, I was—

**Not "Pomp and Circumstance."** —completely blindsided. No, we played a Handel march or something else, and it was just so horrible. I hired two young trumpet players who did workshops and they didn't get through the march that I had written for whatever it was, and then the second time was a little better, and then the third time we were—by that time we were doing percussion pieces with the local repertory ensemble that I had formed in conjunction with the jazz band, so we were doing things that I suppose you might call Third World-like, with lots of percussion

and stuff like that. You know, it was always a little different.

**And how long did the focus or did the rock and roll thing last? How many years?**

Mmm ... it seemed endless at the time, in the best sense. But it wasn't that long. I think by 1974 we had already begun to change. We had come up with maybe 20 different works, one based on the life of Socrates, Thomas Paine, and Che Guevara. That was called Liberation. Another one was on Joan of Arc, another one was on David, actually the first part of Samuel II. We did The Bacchae. There were two spin-off companies, by the way. One was in California, in San Francisco, it was a Free Theater in San Francisco, and another one in Baltimore. So it was like a franchise. I didn't make a penny on any of this, by the way, I'm proud to say.

**When did—just out of curiosity, Jesus Christ Superstar, which was always billed as a rock opera, when did that get produced? Was that more the late '70s?**

No, that was earlier. I'm really not sure of the exact date. There were two works that occurred at about the same time, and I don't remember whether I was influenced by them or whether I anticipated them. One was Jesus Christ Superstar, and the other was Hair. But I can't quite remember the years.

**I'd like to back up just one more time, if you could, and maybe we'll return to this anyway, but when you came here and you said that, you know, the black players were not going to play in your band, was that something that you knew was the atmosphere**



**here at the time, when you came from London? Or was that something that—**

Well, not at the beginning. And how did I know it? Because [they wouldn't offer to play]. One who is, by the way, teaching here now for us said that his friends felt it was inappropriate for him to play with the Chicago Jazz Ensemble, which had the same name then. But it didn't occur when I first came here, or I would have gotten on the plane and gone back, I think. No, it occurred as black nationalism grew, '67, '68.

**And was that something that was—did you have conversations or was there any kinds of attempts at negotiating, or was this a situation that you as an individual were not going to be able to change?**

No, I would have been happy to—it was not discussible at that point. I mean, the fervor of the moment was so strong, and understandably. I mean, if you take the position that I do, you can't blame any black person in America for doing anything. I mean, it doesn't mean that I will allow myself to be pilloried by a black person, but... Wynton Marsalis once said, "Don't expect me to kiss white ass." And I know how he feels, I feel the same way about black people. But nonetheless, before... so it was understandable, and it was painful. And it still has disastrous effects on jazz. Although it has some good effects, too, there's no doubt about it. I mean, the AACM, you know, the groups like the Ensemble Trupango and Roscoe Mitchell, and Lou Hall Abrams, did some things that were wonderfully theatrical, filled with color and even dance.

**And that grew out of—**

That came out of the black nationalist movement. And also, they

thought about putting content back into music, which is to say, they had titles that meant something, as opposed to "Scrappy Jackie" or "Walking Down the Street With You," trivialities like that, which made them and the audience take the music a little less seriously.

**So you said that, you know, '74 saw the times changing, but did you start to miss jazz once you had been with the rock and roll for a while? Or what was the transition at that point?**

Hmmm... You know what happened, really, is that I got so interested in theater and the voice that to this day, nothing satisfies me like voice and theater.

**So the bringing together of all those elements?**

Well, but the music was not particularly jazz or rock and roll, although I'd written three or four operas that you could call jazz operas, and four or five that you could call rock and roll operas. But most of what the music [has been isn't either], it's just been modern American music, non-denominational. But the idea of the singer, especially the singer telling a story, just struck me with a power that I haven't recovered from, and probably won't. I rather like it.

**And you don't want to recover from it.**  
No.

**Um, could you tell us—give us some more illustrations of some of the highlights or main events in your tenure here at Columbia?**  
Well, the growth of the school was amazing to watch. And then the next big thing was the accreditation, which must be 20 years ago now.

**I think that was '74, if I'm not mistaken.**

Oh, 25 years, 25, 24 years. Which filled some of us with a little trepidation, I must confess, because it occurred to Harry Bouras, a very important early figure here at the College, and others, that this might mean we were moving into an era of Ph.D.s and bureaucracy, and, indeed, we have. Whether we're able to overcome this or not remains to be seen. I think we can, we will. But anyway, that was the second thing, and [I'm trying to think] of the third most important thing... I suppose the change in the student body. In the '70s, there was—in Music and Theater, there were maybe 45, 48 percent black people, and that has been shrinking ever since that time. So that's a big change, and a sad change.

**So as the school has grown, not only—the percentages have dropped off even though the school is growing.**

Yeah. The percentages have gone down; in fact, I think even the number of black students has gone down.

**Yeah. And how do you account for that, or what—why do you see that as a turning point, or a watershed event?**

I don't know what—we thought at the time it had to do with less money being available, tuition going up, the black community not knowing the ins and outs of scholarship procedures, as well as the white community—the fact that there were other schools around that were opening their doors in similar ways. I mean, we were the first open admissions college around, but then I think later, community colleges and other schools like Harold Washington College were fairly permissive in allowing people to enter. So that probably has an effect.

**Can you make some generalizations about how or if the student population has changed since 1965 to '98, beyond simply that there's so many more?**

Well, the students in 1965 were... [endearing], and working class in a different way than working class is nowadays. I'm gonna give you an idea. Since 1965—Francis Coppola and Frank Sinatra have had on Italian-Americans, not such a good effect, between you and me. I happen to like Sinatra enormously, and I like Coppola's movies also, [but it came to] Italian-Americans, especially Italian-American working class, people had a funny sense of "Ooh, well, there's the lure of [Italian words]." You can see it in *The Godfather* and in Sinatra as well. So there's a certain degree of innocence which 1965 Italian-Americans didn't have, there weren't that many of them going to college, would have had, he or she—he, probably, is less likely to have. Can I transform this into an observation about other people? Maybe so. Starsky and Hutch and other things that were influencing working class people all those years. I just happen to be aware of the Italian-American situation because, although I am Italian-American, I never particularly identified with—I was brought up in a much more cosmopolitan way. And this Sunday I went to an Italian-American church (*laughs*). As I have told some of my friends, I had to leave my parish, because I didn't like the music.

**Was the music better?**  
[Really bad.]

**Did it bring back memories, or was it a new experience?**

Oh, it brought back memories of my grandfather and my grandma, of course. But there's too much

Frank Sinatra and Francis Ford Coppola—I mean, the Corleone family.

**So what types of things in popular culture do you think are influencing students today that maybe you or Columbia might be trying to—not combat, but are in competition with?**

Mmm ... well, oy vey. I mean, some things, I—like there are some films, I wouldn't know where to place them, but the basic message that young people are getting is not a good message. It's narcissistic and cynical and small and selfish and ... [my sister who I started] talking like this said to me "Billy, you're just getting older. It's how older people always talk." I said, "I don't think so, because I was very idealistic when I was 22." And you look back at the pals we had... you know, I think young people have really got a problem in belief in themselves. I mean, most young people these days are very uncertain, very insecure, very cynical. And the reason I know this best is that I've been teaching a course here, the Music Workshop. It's pioneering music, it's called now. And during the course of that class, we would discuss—I would have them listen to a string quartet and a woodwind quartet and a brass quintet and very classical guitar, things that most students have never experienced before. And in addition, we would do exercises. But there were some other lectures interspersed with these classes, one of which consisted of a lecture about Duke Ellington. Well, that was never a problem. Another, Paris in the '20s. Well, that was always nice, because of the parallels between Dada and certain kinds of rock and roll were obvious, and students got that right away. But the other lectures, which had to do—a couple of the other lectures

had to do with a Greek sensibility and the relationship of Renaissance art to Greek art, and then the connection between all these things, and... a moral point of view as expressed by [philosophers]. Certainly not by the church, and I don't mean to say that by any means, but the idea of righting wrong and the idea of making the world a better world is so hard to talk to students about, because somehow they got the idea that Einstein, [when he] was talking about relativity, was talking about moral or ethical relativity; of course, he wasn't at all, he was a totally moral, ethical person. But students are so unclear about up and down, good and bad, whatever it means to you. I mean, I don't mean to say that [they are unintelligent], but students have difficulty, for example, with the notion that manufacturers who are polluting the atmosphere—and this is where students are clearer than anyplace—are hurting the world in general. In other words, students have become so cynical that they have become... conned easily. I mean, if you don't believe anything, you'll believe in anything. Mark Twain, at the end of his life, embraced weird religions after having had made fun of all—of everything. And that's a concern, it's a concern for us all, because—I mean, I'll give you an example. Once, Bobbi Wilson was teaching a class, and trying to explain to her students that if they came across an inoperative word like "wha" on a high note, they might want to deal with it a little differently. And there is, in the second eight bars of "Over the Rainbow," a "wha" on a high note. It's hard to sing, hard to make sense of. And one of the students—he started to wrestle with her, because he couldn't agree

with her, he couldn't agree with any observation anybody would make. And we tried to say, "Listen, this is what a professional person of high caliber is saying, this is her sense and it might be worthwhile listening to. There might even be vocational consequences from your knowing this, I mean, it's not just a question of an aesthetic precision judgement. And it's certainly not arbitrary." "Well, we have a lot of trouble with what she was saying." Too bad, because it's important to give some sense of balance. I'm often misunderstood on this topic, because I don't know how to explain it very well.

**Well, I think, as I tell my students when they do creative grammar, I said, "e.e. cummings didn't use those, you know, reject capitals when he first—you know, initially. They learn the rules, then they break them. So you have to learn the rules."** That's a nice pun, though. Initially. He didn't use initials initially.

*(Laughs)*

Actually, I found out that he didn't write completely in lower case. It was his publishers who wanted him to do that.

**Well, what—when you think about these issues or these concerns that you have about the students, and even over time, how do you introduce—even if you say that you don't have the book on it, or you don't necessarily feel that you know all the answers, but how do you introduce the discussion of values, of ethics, of morals, into a music class? Or courses—**

I'm glad you asked that question. First of all, my degree's in English, not in music, which means I'm not

totally [faithful]. I shouldn't even be sitting here. But a lot of the people on the faculty in music know a lot about other things. [Trevor McGarrity], for example, is well read in French literature and poetry and painting. [H.E. Backus], who's the Executive Director, you may know as one of the founders of Steppenwolf. So I try and choose faculty that has a point of view that's broader than that of a musician, which tends to be a very small horizon, often. And all the teachers are encouraged to discuss things having to do with the relationship between music and art, music and literature, music and society. So that's built-in, and then in addition, there are some courses in which we... like this course exploring art and music in which there's a segment set aside to discuss politics.

**And is that—with that one course, but also, in the faculty that you hire and choose, is there an expectation that they will explore, as you said, these wider areas and tie them in?**

It's a problem. Yes. It's a problem, though, because there's an issue here of censorship, and freedom of expression, which one has to be careful about. On the other hand, the amount of suppression of free expression in America is always so enormous in a different way, that this almost seems irrelevant.

**Can you expand on what you feel the relationship is between music and society?**

Well... yes, I can... Plato's book, too, *The Republic*, suggests that a child is formed by what he or she listens to and the nature of the art around, and suggests that the child listens to music that is well-structured and organized and flowing and generous, it's like you incorporate some of that. The argument

that he counters in that book, [I read it] many years ago, is that children should be taught disharmony, because when they walk down the street, they might not recognize it. His retort to that is that anybody can recognize lack of harmony, it's fairly obvious to see. He feels that the nature of the music affects the child, and I'm not crazy about young children hearing a jazz band, it's a little too intense, too adult for them, and there are other things that are too adult also. I worry about children's ears; I mean, I've given my ears over to rock and roll, and I sat in front of five wonderful, very loud trumpet players for four or five years. But there's something to be said for protecting the child physically, and, what is the effect? I don't exactly know what the effect is. I'll give you a clearer example. If young people see movies which have a shred of hope in them, that makes the institutions, on occasion, good, like *Apollo 13*, it's all right; they might feel different about their world than if they see movies in which it's shown that [in the pursuit] of happiness, everybody's no good. Incidentally, I should tell you that you rarely, if ever, see a movie in which a religious person is shown in a good light. The exception may have been that movie that the Catholic Church itself put out about the bishop from El Salvador.

**Oh, right.**

Raul Julia played the part of Romero. The man was synonymous with social consciousness. And there are a few others. But it's a fudgy issue. It would be easier to say, I think, that the—in today's culture, that you perform gay and then you perform Catholic.



**(Laughs)** So you tie it into music, that music also can express hope, it can express these—

At the very least, in words. I mean, if the song talks about—whatever, the possibility of making a better world, I mean, countless Bob Dylan, Beatles, and Paul Simon songs did that, then it'll have an effect on people. I mean, there are those who argue that the Vietnam War was given up because of the music that American people were hearing in the late '60s. But even music without words, in certain terms, means—my biggest argument for and against music is that the advertising people spend millions of dollars figuring out exactly what chord is being played, who's playing it, when it's played, what the situation is, and where it occurs to influence us to change our minds. So there must be something going on. You could say that all advertising is ridiculous, that it has no effect, but I can't believe that they would be spending the money then.

**And all the nostalgia that we see in today's ads, of all of that music from the '70s and '80s that they're using as the back-drop.**

Yeah, right.

**It's really something.**

**(Laughs)** It is.

**Really something. Any students that stand out in your mind that you remember, again, in, you know, your experience at Columbia?**

Well, Albert Williams, you might know Bill Williams, he's the theater critic for the Reader. He was a music student, he was my brightest student at one time, he was—I can't remember what word we used for it, but he was my

protégé, certainly, and he wrote a rock opera based on some poetry by Brecht. He did wonderful work, and he's gone on to write for the Reader and teach classes here, in the Theater Department, and also to occasionally write for the New York Times. Another is Kate Buddeke, who was a member of the Free Theater, as was Bill Williams. As a matter of fact, they both went to New York. We brought two of our three theater shows to New York, off-Broadway and once on-Broadway. Kate Buddeke was in one of those performances, and she won a Jeff Award two years ago, for the thing she did with— at the Goodman, with Dennehy—

**Oh, Dennehy, I saw that. Um... anyway.**

That's Kate Buddeke.

**He was good.**

He was great. She was a singing student, and then—actually, she was in New York for the long-term revival at Lincoln Center. She played a non-singing role, she played the young lady who wouldn't sing. Who else did we have? Um, Antje Gehrken is a woman of quite superb intelligence who came here and couldn't read a note of music. She played guitar, and she had studied journalism at Northwestern. And she got a degree here, and then she was admitted into the graduate program in composition at Roosevelt University, and then she came back here and taught for two or three years, and now she does a lot of work, theater music work, including some considerable amount of work with Sheldon Patinkin. Um... there's been a student we had, in the '70s, who... this extraordinarily beautiful 18 year old woman, 1972, '73, and an airhead, we all thought, [but might

just have been bilked]. Anyway, I—despite some of the stories that go around about the Music Department here at the College, and the fact that I love beautiful women, I have managed, myself, to avoid any... experiences with students. And this woman was so beautiful and so flirtatious that one day she asked me if I would... tell her about my trombone playing, and I said, "Why?" and she said, "Well, I'd like to hear you play," and I said, "I don't play anymore," and she said, "Don't you have a trombone?" I said, "Yes," and she said, "Will you play a little bit for me?" And I said... "You're flirting with me, you have to stop that, I'm your teacher." Um, and she did, she didn't talk to me for three years, and then she called me subsequently and I can't tell you too much of the story 'cause I don't want to reveal her and revile her and get myself in legal trouble, but she called me years later to take me out to lunch and tell me that she'd become a—let's say a doctor, of considerable fame, in a Southern city, and that she owed it all to me. Of course, I thought she was gonna say because I told her not to flirt *(laughs)*, she said she owed it all to me because I believed in her as a performer, and I was the only person in her life that ever encouraged her, which, of course, is a very good argument against screwing around with your students.

**Well, that too, right.**

Right. Anyway, that's a nice story. And you can step forward anytime you want and reveal yourself.

**(Laughs)** Uh, what do you think—you've talked about some of the challenges that Columbia has had to face. Any more that you'd like to add? Or challenges you see,



**perhaps, on the horizon? For the school?**

Well, I believe, and I'm not exactly secretive about this, either, I believe that this school has to avoid the temptation to try and become like an ordinary college. And we are not resisting as gloriously as we should be, we're becoming more bureaucratic, as all schools are these days, and we are changing our viewpoint toward education, and we are becoming more concerned with... feelings. Not in the '60s sense, but in the sense of whether such and such makes you feel good, I don't mean good—high, but good—all right, as opposed to content. And that worries me a lot, that some of the spirit that we had in the '60s and '70s, very difficult to maintain, and it has to be maintained. I'll give you one example of this. I sat on the General Studies committee for two years, and one of the conclusions of that committee was that, among other things, we should have a course in ethics, which we fought very hard to get through, because a lot of people said, "Well, you can't teach ethics," but you can, you can teach a lot of things. It finally has gone through, but I gather that it's in the form of students keeping journals, so they know better what it is that made them do such and such a thing, which seems to be quite obvious [that people shouldn't be doing in those areas.] I would like the school to assert a new horizon. And it sounds like I'm arguing for [them], I'm arguing for the new. I think that if Columbia College said, "Listen, this is a place where you're gonna have to work very hard, and you're not gonna get a lot of... global stuff, except for the content of the courses, and you're gonna be judged severely, and the grading threshold will be kept down, and

it's a school that has a belief in something." And I think, in a funny way, I think it would pay off, because, you know, Mike Alexandroff knew how—all the time that he acted as President, he knew that integrity pays off. And it did. I mean, the school is what it is today because of his integrity. He was also a very prudent person; I mean, he could make quite devastatingly audacious decisions, and then if he saw that it was not gonna work out, he'd pull out in time. But in the old days it was possible because it was possible—probably because we were smaller—it was possible to go into Mike's office and say, "I'd like to do this," and he'd say yes or no. Which was quite charming, I don't think it's totally out of the question, even today. I try to operate like that as much as I can. Anyway, what I'm arguing for, I suppose, is not the old school, because the old school had a lot of things I didn't like about it, I thought it was too... sixty-ish, in the pejorative sense. It was just a little too... whatever. But I'd like to argue for a new sort of school, in which excellence is maintained and called for and demanded, and in which lots of scholarships are available to students.

**So it sounds like a re-definition, or a re-define itself in the '90s. Do you see art and its relationship to society as changing, or the role changing from the '60s to the '90s? I mean...**

I think there are fewer people like Bruce Springsteen around, who think that if you talk about something ecological, for example, you can change people. There's less of that going on. There's still—the environment seems to be, despite what I said earlier, it seems to be still [fostering] some degree of belief and integrity and ideas.

Um... [I don't want to go any further than that.]

**Has art, in a way, sold out? I mean, do you think it could be more active, more challenging? You know, I don't want to just say the old cliché "less commercial." I mean, do you think that its role has been diminished out of... giving up?**

Well, one of the problems is that art has been not commercial enough. I mean, music, for example, and jazz is starting to make the same mistake that classical music has made. Classical music is dying, and one of the reasons it's dying is that nobody wants to go to a concert hall and hear Elliott Carter. Elliott Carter is brilliant, and I find him very interesting, but nobody in my family, none of my families, could tolerate listening to music. It's too difficult. It's not designed to be enjoyed, it's designed as a plaything, and in jazz, some of the same mistakes are starting to happen. I was hoping that jazz could save music for the 20th century or the 21st century, but jazz also has a lot of stuff in it that—is bought into by the newspapers, by the writers, by the critics, by the gallery owners, which is not really enjoyed by people. And nobody seems to want to say this. I mean, of course there are charming things among [Bulas] and Elliott Carter and Picasso and [Segal] and countless other people that I could name. Like the Art Ensemble of Chicago. But maybe we just need a new Fats Waller to come along and give us some tunes, or a new... Paul McCartney. So the danger is not so much from the commercializing, it doesn't seem to me; [although that's the root of the problem], it comes from the fact that the artist has lost his relationship with his audience.

**And where will those new audiences come from?**

I don't know, they might be lost. I think they can be regained, though. The movies are very important, I thought Warren Beatty's movie was a good sign. About rap? It's about a United States senator.

**I haven't seen it. He decides to tell the truth or something, right?**

He decides to tell the truth because he's put a hit out on himself, because he wants to get out of the life and collect the insurance and stuff. Then he realizes he can say whatever he wants to say, and part of what he wants to say he says in rap.

Oh.

That sounds interesting.

Um... so, in a way, what you just said is, that there's nothing wrong with, to a certain extent, giving the people what they want to hear, if you want to insure future audiences. And in Chicago, certainly the CSO is facing—is in that dilemma, it seems.

It certainly is. And they just turned us down.

**They did?**

We offered a proposal to them, Mike Alexandroff and I offered a proposal to them that consisted of the Chicago Jazz Ensemble, the Kalinda Ensemble was one Caribbean group under the aegis of the Black Music Research, and the Black Music Repertory Ensemble. I mean, these are three organizations for the price of one. And we were offering a very good deal, which would have blown them—

**To associate with the CSO?**

Yeah, and still be at Columbia, and part of the budget would be assumed by Columbia, too. And it

would have been a wonderful way to reach out to audiences and broaden their base, because they are... not exactly clueless, they have a clue, but I don't know whether they have the right clue. For example, two years ago, they played a work by a trumpet player/composer named [Alan], and his last name I can't remember, a gospel work, and it [was in the basis], two black people, two black gospel singers, and a black jazz quintet in the middle, and of course, everybody who went, hated it. I mean, they might have cheered, but they're not gonna come back again, it's a very difficult—is that the right word? Not a very—it's a very opportunistic work. Who's gonna hear this? Years from now, people are gonna hear this, but...

**Why did they turn you down? Do you know?**

Why?

Yeah.

Well, their answer was that I was not Wynton Marsalis, and I said, "Yes, you're absolutely right, I'm not Wynton Marsalis, and he's a very famous person, and a wonderful person who's changed the nature of American music, but there are some things that I can do that he can't do, and some ideas that I have, you know, that are beyond anything he's yet dreamed of." I think it was a money, a dollars and cents decision. Mike and I, afterwards, spoke like teenagers who'd been turned down by the big boys. It was similar to feeling like a teenager.

**And they still have their problems putting people in the seats.**

They do pretty well with jazz, although they might be milking the cow dry, because they're using the same jazz artists that everybody else is using, and they're not

enlarging the audience. Our feeling was that if an audience heard the Duke Ellington Carnegie Hall concert, they might get interested in some of the pieces that were played, they might want to hear them in different circumstances, or they might learn about Cab Calloway's pieces, it would be a [developing and spinning volume], an ever-increasing way of teaching, and developing an audience.

**So what is the future here at Columbia for the Chicago Jazz Ensemble?**

Well, at the moment, it's good. We're not going to associate with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, we might be frozen out for a while, as a matter of fact. For our impertinence, or whatever it was. I'm not sure exactly—

**Does that feel good, though?**

Yes. And the impertinence of the Chicago Tribune, which a year ago recommended that the Chicago Jazz Ensemble be repertory [art students] in conjunction with Columbia College and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. And so the real villain might be the Chicago Tribune, but the Chicago Tribune also wanted to be the real savior, because they thought they could help us. So we'll see what happens. Our jazz program needs a lot of help in getting students here, because we don't have enough jazz students here. We have the best jazz faculty in the Midwest, maybe in America, with people like Orbert Davis and Bobbi Wilson, but we've been cramped for quarters, now we're getting a new building, and we just haven't enough scholarship money, [music-wise], and I hope that changes. But we do get a nice new building right next door.

**Great. And with your upcoming position, whenever that goes through, will you be expected to be out raising money, or... will that part of your job that-**

You know, I don't think chairs do that much money raising, but I want to start raising money for scholarships. It's all right, I can handle that. I don't mind that kind of stuff if I have some more day-to-day support. I mean, I have a wonderful staff, a total of maybe 11 people, but there's not enough of us. We need more, more people to do the stuff that we have to so. Writing letters and stuff in the department, going to the recitals and the concerts in the school. So I'm sanguine. Stan Kenton was famous for a joke about him, "Where is jazz going, Stan?" And Stan said, "Well, tomorrow they're [playing the brass behind me]." So when a question is asked like that, I think of the potential pomposity that I'm trying to avoid.

**And you're going next door, that's where jazz is going.**

Jazz is going next door. East. On Michigan Avenue. My mother would be proud, I'll have a view of the lake from my—

**Is that the Sherwood Music Academy?**

Not anymore.

**I mean, that building. When is the projection of going in to there?**

We're going to start slipping, sliding, oozing into there in late summer.

**All right, well, that about wraps it up.**