

Interviewee: MERRILL GILLESPIE
Interviewer: MARY EMMA HARRIS
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[BEGINNING OF SIDE 1, TAPE 1]

MEH: [GIVES IDENTIFICATION] Merrill, how did you come to be at Black Mountain College?

MG: How did I come to be at Black Mountain College? Someone else from my hometown went, liked it very much, and I was feeling insistent on going there, too, and so I managed to do it. It was Nick Cernovich.

MEH: And where were you from?

MG: Kewanee, Illinois.

MEH: Had you just finished high school?

MG: When I went, about a year or half a year.

MEH: What about the college appealed to you?

MG: It wasn't in Illinois, and it seemed to have a good deal of freedom and interesting people, including the person I knew of then as "Aiko" Asawa. By the time I got there, Albers and company had just left, so it was going into the disgusting Olson era.

MEH: How did you know the person you're calling Aiko Asawa? How did you know about her, or –

MG: She was a friend of Nick's.

- MEH:** Oh, okay. Do you remember how you traveled there the first time?
- MG:** By train.
- MEH:** From Illinois?
- MG:** Yep.
- MEH:** Had you ever been in the South before?
- MG:** Yes, my mother's from the mountains of Virginia.
- MEH:** So, you were familiar with the landscape.
- MG:** Pretty much.
- MEH:** Did you have any idea what you wanted to study?
- MG:** Music. Of course, Black Mountain being Black Mountain and a "art equals painting" school, there wasn't much in the way of music at that time, or even later.
- MEH:** Was in 1950 that you arrived?
- MG:** '50, yes.
- MEH:** Who was teaching music?
- MG:** Was it Vollmer Hetherington?
- MEH:** He was there. What was your background in music at that point?
- MG:** Piano. Just piano.
- MEH:** But you feel, you didn't feel that there was very much you could learn from Hetherington?
- MG:** Harmony lessons, which one can get anywhere, including a small town in Illinois – on the same level.
- MEH:** Was Lou Harrison there then?

MG: Lou didn't come until M.C. Richards got in touch with him, and then turned the correspondence over to me, and he came somewhere around '51.

MEH: Did you study with him?

MG: I studied with him.

MEH: Was that beneficial?

MG: I passed up Wolpe, who seemed to have nothing to do with anything that I considered music, and I wouldn't go near Cage because he never did have anything to do with music.

MEH: Was there any musician there in the time that you were there that you really felt had anything to offer you?

MG: Yeah. Lou. That was it.

MEH: You studied with him, what did you study?

MG: Composition. Unfortunately, I needed ear training and basic musicianship, which nobody until recent years ever got around to recognizing and teaching me.

MEH: But you didn't realize at the time that you needed that.

MG: No. I'm not sure a youngster on their own would ever realize that.

MEH: What did you take – composition, or – ?

MG: Composition.

MEH: But without real basic grounding in music theory and –

MG: No, we're talking ear training. We're talking being able to hear and understand what one hears, which is easily overlooked by the academic musician and probably is one of the more difficult things to teach. Any mathematician can

learn theory. Only a musician can teach musicianship. So, it was an interesting three years, but musically it wasn't terribly valuable.

MEH: Why was it interesting?

MG: You're a strange person to ask that, of course. You want an answer from me. I'm sure you have ten thousand more reasons than I could ever give you as to why Black Mountain was interesting. The people. Again, the freedom. If there were rules and regulations, you were likely to – you could easily pass them up, but you might get punished. For instance, I got no credit for my French because I slept in on the final – little things like this. The slight discipline of having to actually do some physical labor, which was usually nice for most of the people who went there, I think. You had a lot of creative people, and every once in a while somebody who was really good in his field would come to teach, at least for a short while. If they were really good, it was always a short while. Nobody could take that place (UNINTELL - PLANE SOUND).

MEH: You remained for three years?

MG: About three, yeah. I believe I went home the first summer, and then for the rest of the summers while I was there. I also stayed during the summer. So, it must have been '53. I don't remember what part of the year I left. Which reminds me of a teacher and something – information I could give you on your Black Mountain book. Paul Leser, the German anthropologist, I found an excellent teacher and enjoyed very much anthropology and history, which I took, too. But he was in love with Fielding Dawson, but he wouldn't let that be known generally, and he wanted a picture of Fee, which for some reason Paul, who

was rather outgoing, had to be tricky when he got it. What he did was pretend to take a picture of me posing for an art class in order to get a picture of Fee. If you look at the picture you have on page 183, it's a picture of Fee Dawson unfortunately sitting up against the window, so it's not a good one. But I'm the person, "unknown student," who's posing.

MEH: We'll look at Ruth's book (UNINTELL).

MG: But Paul was extremely interesting that way. He would go to the drunken Saturday night parties and he was a teetotaler, but you would never know it after a half an hour into it, because he especially liked to fit into the level of intoxication that was going on – and he did it quite well.

MEH: So, are you saying that he drank – or he pretended? I'm not sure what you're saying.

MG: He pretended. It's not really pretense. He didn't drink, but as the intoxication reached a certain level with certain reactions, he would fit in and be that kind of person – either dancing or sitting under a table or talking or joking or whatever. You would think that he also was drunk with the rest of us.

MEH: Was there a lot of drinking when you were there?

MG: Much too much, and the Olson group was a bunch of alcoholics, half of whom died or still are, and the other half of whom went into AA. I have no idea how much drinking was going on before. But your '50s literary people seemed to think that alcohol was the suicide of choice.

MEH: How would you describe the community when you were there, as a college or as a community?

MG: It was always ready to fall apart, and fly apart. We still had some of the Germans – Max Dehn – and Mrs. Jalowetz was still there. Which means some social discipline along with relaxed New Yorkers, and that kind of oil and water does not mix well. Like any small community, there were cliques, and there were ins and outs of the cliques. There was, voluntary or not, I think a good deal of cooperation in keeping the community plant going. Dishes did get washed, and coal did get hauled, and food did get served. Thank God, we had professional cooks! I would hate to think of what their paychecks must have been in those days. I think the people in the community were generally – even the younger, even the students were perceptive enough to know who was good and who wasn't in their field, which is – I have no idea whether that's a widespread thing in an art school or not. But the caliber of awareness of creativity I think was fairly high during the time I was there. It was also a transition of going into Olson and literature, away from Albers and the other arts. The people who were used to the old regime really didn't like the new one.

MEH: Like, for example?

MG: Well, I'm not sure that – I couldn't point my finger at any specific, but if somebody wanted to get a plastic artist and somebody else wanted to get Paul Goodman, Paul Goodman would be the one to win out and would come down and piss openly on the baseball field and make any male that he felt like making and think that was very clever. Well this was quite different than German-Jewish academic discipline. So, that's quite a difference. The people who would prefer the old regime would not particularly like that. In fact, people

who came a year after I did, had no idea what the school had been before.

Mike Rumaker still doesn't have any idea of what was going on before he got there.

MEH: I think generally that's the case that people –

MG: If you have a big transition.

MEH: Black Mountain for each person was what was happening when they were there, and there were many different periods.

MG: I just wonder if it changed quite as rapidly as it did between '50 and '51-'52 at any other time.

MEH: The only time would have been when they moved from Blue Ridge –

MG: Up on the hill.

MEH: No, from Blue Ridge to Lake Eden, to that campus. I gather you didn't think too much of the Olson group?

MG: I didn't think too much of the Olson group, and I really disliked Charles Homophobic Olson, who got his homosexual jollies off by his male friendships, which were extraordinarily strong. I don't like that kind of dance-poetry, so I didn't like his work and never have. I especially on a personal level did not like to sit at the table with this giant who would take seconds and third helpings when we had very little food and think he deserved it — because nobody else had a second. I'm afraid that doesn't speak well of his personality or his character. When you come to that kind of a level, you're not likely to like the guy unless you're in love with him in the first place and overlook all that sort of thing: "Can I bring you something else, Charles?"

MEH: Did you attend his class?

MG: No. Anyone – with most classes could sit in on anything they wanted to. I sat in on many of his classes. I really can't say what I think of him as a teacher. I didn't really notice that. I was much more interested in what was coming out of the students. So, how he handled it, or how he brought it out, if he did, I have no idea.

MEH: And do you think that good stuff was coming from the students?

MG: I thought at the age of twenty, twenty-one, and being naive from the Midwest that I really liked much of the stuff that was – I think a couple of people went on to do good work. Ed Dorn certainly did. I like Mike's novels – Mike Rumaker. I can't think of anyone else offhand. Francine Du Plessix Gray flitted in and out, it seemed to me, on summers, and she certainly has made a name for herself. Any of Charles' poetry students, I can't think of anyone. Fee never could write. Ed certainly could write. I don't know what he's written in the last ten years. Gunslinger as a '60s summary that on its own level I think is excellent. It's really excellent. But again, speaking of homophobia, Ed should have his head stuck in a barrel of water until he's almost on the verge of death and then asked if he still hates queers. There was a lot of that, which goes along with usual New York heavy drinking crowd anyway.

MEH: Did you think that it was – I mean I've heard from a lot of women that that period was extremely chauvinistic. Do you think it was also –

MG: You're talking to someone who was eighteen, nineteen, twenty, coming out of the Midwest and he never heard of the word "chauvinism" applied to anything.

MEH: Had you heard of the word "homophobia"?

MG: At that point? Probably not the word, but I certainly had experienced it enough, I think. I don't know what she would say, how she handled it, but if there was heavy male chauvinism, if anybody handled it well it would have been Mary Caroline Richards. I think she would probably be a good source to ask about that. On the other hand, if I ever met a stiff-backed chauvinist, it was her husband at that time, so you'll have to go into that personal history on your own.

MEH: Did you take her class?

MG: Yes. Only I don't remember anything about it, except I've always liked her very much. Always admired her. Always remember going to and from Peek's in that wonderful convertible at night, with the wind.

MEH: She had a convertible?

MG: She had a Buick convertible. She was a good driver. She drove a cab during the War, I believe in Chicago.

MEH: What do you remember about Ma Peek's?

MG: Was there one during the time, living, while I was there? A "Ma Peeks"?

MEH: There was a Peek's. I understand there was a person. I don't know if she was there when you were there or not.

MG: I don't remember anybody who worked there.

MEH: What do you remember about the place?

MG: The place was always fun to go into and be looked at by the townspeople, and stick together carefully, and get into one or two booths and have a little, a few beers, which I always enjoyed doing.

MEH: What do you think about you made you stand out to the townspeople? Was it your dress, your manner, acting – ?

MG: Well, looking back and looking at the way young people act now, it was probably, number one, our loudness, though the natives weren't exactly quiet. The kind of loudness. Certainly the number that came from New York, the accents, the dress, the attitudes, which I for one certainly didn't want to make friends with the townspeople which I'm sure, as a group, was very obvious to them. The school had, by then, been there down in the valley for, what?, fifteen years at least. So, things had happened and, true or not, a story had grown up about it. So, I'm sure – then I was convinced it was a very negative story, and I still assume it was. So, I'm really surprised there's a Black Mountain Museum, there's an interest in the college, the people who went there. I have to remind myself it's in the '90s and it's not the '30s, '40s, and '50s. So, it's quite a different thing. You would never have a real Black Mountain presence in the town of Black Mountain forty years ago. Even if you bought half the town and tried to establish it, it would still be town-and-gown.

MEH: Do you think that the college was functioning effectively as a community then, as a college?

MG: Yes. Yes. It was certainly trying to fly apart from the center out and dissipate itself all the time. But it did hold itself together. People did study and people did

learn and people did work and create – which I can't imagine any other criteria. How they did it, I don't know, but they convinced academia to say that certain people had graduated from the college. This is again back to oil and water. The people in academia either didn't know what they were doing or in favor of the school, because nobody ever did anything that I've ever seen in a strict, real college/university community. It was much too unstructured. So, there must quite possibly have been enough structure within a given course of study, which I wouldn't myself know anything about. Did I hit your question centered? Because you wondered "Did the college function as –"

MEH: Things were more unstructured at that point than they had been in the earlier years. There'd never been much structure. And, as a college, were people studying and learning and taking their work seriously?

MG: Some. Not all.

MEH: That would be the case in any college, really.

MG: Right. It wasn't a vacation spot. It wasn't full of people who went down South for the summer or a semester or two just to enjoy themselves. Almost everyone came with a goal, and almost every one of those were working hard or otherwise toward that goal, but not all of them. Some very young people got there, and you would not have recognized them six months later.

MEH: How's that?

MG: Either they went to pot or they settled down and went to work. I mean either end you would find. It was a good place to do either. There was nothing there to stop you from doing either.

MEH: What do you think was the effect of having so little structure in terms of an education, a community, and – (OVERTALK)

MG: Well, I would only – It would be hard to judge for anybody else. Not having any real music there, I didn't get a music education nor did I get myself turned into a direction I could take or know what I needed when I left there. In the terms of Olson's students, the people who could write were taken seriously by their teacher, and I'm sure, because of their attitude toward him, he helped them and he pointed them. In the case of Paul Leser, his discipline was much too much of a high Germanic university level to really fit in there, and there was nobody who was interested in pursuing it to that level. In the case of the artists, it's I think very much the case of Olson. If somebody worked or produced, I think that all were able to get direction, if they were willing to work. But if you didn't know quite what you were doing and didn't apply yourself every day and every week, then it's – as far as progress and so on, it was lost time. So, that in my case, for instance, back to the French. If I took it so little seriously that when I woke up that morning I did not have the drive to get up, then that was it. It was up to the teacher to say whether that could ever be made up or not.

MEH: And the teacher said –

MG: I'm not sure we discussed it, but in effect certainly the teacher said, "This is it. You missed it. You don't get a grade. You don't get credit for the course."

MEH: How might that have happened – how might that have been handled differently in a traditional institution if you didn't get up for the exam?

MG: I think if you hadn't been contemptuous of the whole thing all the way along it would depend on the institution, but the chances are you would have been given a second chance quite often. That's my idea, without any real knowledge. But with Black Mountain, individual teachers were free to do that sort of thing – to set their limits and set their standards and insist that their standards be met. So, in one sense, an eighteen, nineteen, twenty-year-old average would have to bring some discipline with them or else get a teacher that was willing to work with them and make sure that they were going on the right track – which is not the situation for the average person. But Black Mountain wasn't the average college. So, it's a dangerous situation – that you have limited time and limited interest and limited money, Black Mountain might not be the best choice.

MEH: Did you participate in any of the theater (UNINTELL)?

MG: I worked with Wes. I was in André Obey's Noah, is it? As Noah. I was in the Kafka as the – what was he called? Well the torturer, anyway, whatever it was. I think those two plays.

MEH: Had you been in theater productions before?

MG: High school. I think a horrible little music comedy in junior high school.

MEH: Did you – Was there a difference in quality in what you'd done in high school, too, that you did at Black Mountain?

MG: Oh, yes. There's a tremendous jump in quality of material, which would make a difference. Wes was certainly a serious director.

MEH: Did you have audiences for these? Did townspeople come to see them?

MG: Some townspeople came out for major things. They came out now and then for concerts or a dance concert or music concert. I can't – It was always very few, either from Black Mountain or the area of Asheville. I don't know where they were coming from. Trying to think of who really were the fine artists that I admired that were there. Certainly, Cunningham and Lou, and, within certain derivative limits, Katy Litz. Not Charles, because he's too dense to have an audience. Rauschenberg wandered in and out, and some of his work is absolutely magnificent. So, much of it is what I think Stravinsky said one should never do – "It is good to copy, but never from yourself." Bob and Picasso are on the same level for going against that stricture. But he's done some of the finest work that I know of in the last forty years.

MEH: Do you remember what he was doing when he was there?

MG: He had just – Well, at one – Again, he was in and out, because he was beginning – he was already connected with Castelli, I think, and he was already established in a multi-billion dollar little empire – at the beginning of it. But at one point, Life had just published these rather vulgar – if you don't want to see a blueprint of male genitalia, vulgar – blueprints in the early fifties. So, he had reached national prominence of a strange sort at that point. I don't know what he was doing when he was actually there. I do remember everybody was always playing around with cameras, but I don't know – either still or movie, whether he did anything. I don't remember him painting. As I say, he wasn't.

MEH: Do you remember Cy Twombly?

MG: Cy was with him then. His wife came in once with a child once in a while.

MEH: Rauschenberg's wife.

MG: Yeah. As far as I know, Cy is not bi-, but maybe he is. I don't really remember that. I remember what Bob was doing in New York right after I left, which would be the late middle fifties. I wonder – Can we put an end to this, and get me some water because I'm absolutely dry. As I was just remembering, I don't know what Bob was doing at Black Mountain, but I remember what he was doing when I visited the loft with Herb Roco after we moved to New York. That – it was a period when he had taken his bed and thrown some paint on it and created that famous work, and that I didn't approve of at the time.

[END OF AUDIOCASSETTE 1, SIDE 1. BEGINNING OF SIDE 2]

The work that I now think is owned by the museum, possibly, in Stockholm – the goat with the tire around it, which has a title, which I never did – It never did stick in my head. I thought it was terrible, splashing paint on a lovely stuffed goat. Well, one does grow a little bit over a moderately long life, and I happen to like that work very much, starting about ten, fifteen years ago when I saw it, on loan, again. There's something about some of his works, especially the ones that when I first saw them seemed like non-art, and why ruin the good basic material kind of thing – Bob was able to put things together in an utterly original way that over decades maintained its force, which is one, I think, good definition of art. At least for a short term. As I said much earlier, he's very good. Those are the things that he was doing in New York. It's quite possible he was doing nothing at Black Mountain when he came down for what I still consider to be visits.

MEH: What do you think was the value of Black Mountain to an educational community experience?

MG: Tough question for somebody who doesn't sit around introspecting all the time, or even remembering previous years or wanting to. Let me interject a personal thing here. When I went to Black Mountain – I don't know if it was a period of months or a couple of years – I completely forgot my high school years. I completely forgot the high school, I forgot the people, I forget everything I did. It was a completely different life. Then suddenly I realized, hey, I've forgotten all about those, those years. When I left Black Mountain, the experience was much stronger than in any high school I ever know of, so it stuck with me more. But it didn't stick with me trying to remember it, or put things together, or what was this or what was that, or where was the value and what did I get out of it. So, to your advantage, possibly, I don't have a set speech, which can be terribly boring even if you don't even look at this tape later. I think for somebody who admired artistic results in literature, painting, whatnot – I would mention music, except I saw very little musical result while I was there. But admiring past artistic endeavors, it certainly came down to the point that these are produced by human beings, with sometimes a great deal of effort, sometimes with a huge level of failure. That art is just as alive and a living thing as any other human process. One could get that bit of education in a number of other ways, but being in the middle of Black Mountain I think it was a little hard to escape it. That would be one thing, because the artistic expression – Finance and politics hold us all together, and religion if you happen to like that, which I don't, and art

really make life – once you've taken care of the food – worth something. So, it's nice to have – feel that I have seen the process and really value it, which I got out of Black Mountain. Another thing is if you don't have self-discipline, you're not likely to attain anything. It's something that can't be given to you, though you might be directed somewhat into the channel where you might develop it. That's one of my failings. It has been all my life. I'm lazy, and unless I'm extremely interested, at which point I have nothing but self-discipline, I have no self-discipline, and it's something I did not learn at Black Mountain. But I learned the value of it and the value of the loss or the lack of it. Basically that's it, because I consider Black Mountain still basically an art school, whether the arts go from the painting to the music, literature end or not.

MEH: Are there particularly memories you have of the college that we haven't talked about? Events? Anecdotes.

MG: The weather. The constant – what seemed to be constant rain. The fact that I can't remember snow, because the rain is wiping out all memory of snow, though I do know that it snowed now and then, though it didn't seem to stick. Cool nights. I can't remember how really hot it got in the daytime. But the general unimportance of cold dorm rooms and constant wetness within the context of the college itself wasn't important to me – the discomforts of it. I remember the terrible food. I remember I was introduced to yoghurt by Betty Jennerjehn, as many of us were, and the fact that for years, starting then, if I ate yoghurt I would flush. I could feel it, and I don't know if I showed it. It was a very strange physical reaction, which took me years to get over. But I loved

yoghurt, and I always have. The horrors of Sunday evening, which was take-out cold stuff, which is usually some of the worst cold-cuts anyone could have found in the state of North Carolina, plus some bread. The fact that you were rationed, in effect. I'm sure that the rich students were able to go into Asheville and eat well now and then, but I wasn't amongst them so I really don't know. They were stupid if they didn't. I liked the isolation of it, because the only time the townspeople did come around was the younger and later teens and early twenties going through in a car to see the strange thing that was there, and then speeding back out again. It was a strong sense of isolation, and the road that ran by it was a very isolated country road, with very little traffic. So, that was nice. What you had there was what you had, and it was never really affected by anything else. Of course, it was. It was affected by no money, and it was affected by some political pressures, which I know nothing about and don't care about, coming from outside.

MEH: Did you go into the surrounding community? Did you go into Black Mountain or into Asheville often?

MG: Very seldom. In fact I have no idea what Black Mountain looks like – it was so seldom I went there. I remember that I was in Asheville once, but all I can remember is looking for a pair of levis in a clothing store. I don't even know what the outside of the store and the street looks like. Almost, almost no contact. The contact would be going back to the train station to go home, or to go somewhere else.

MEH: What do you think was the effect of the isolation on the college?

MG: On the college itself? It would not have had social, political, and financial support, which another college, if it were positively connected to a surrounding community might very well have had. Black Mountain definitely could not have had that, because of the isolation. But I think it allowed the people who were there to proceed within the morés of the place itself to do whatever they wanted to do, and not have to bother about the morés of anybody else outside it. Which is – allows a great deal of freedom.

MEH: Do you remember any particular parties or celebrations while you were at the college?

MG: Particular ones? No, except either always or often on Saturday nights there would be some kind of a little party. You have to find somebody with a better memory than me. It might have been a once-a-month thing, but I feel that it was once every Saturday. Did we ever have a party to welcome anyone? Did we ever have a party to celebrate something? Did we ever have a party to say goodbye to anyone? Had a party to say goodbye to me when I was going to go home, and I got so utterly drunk that I insisted that two people who were getting me home would worship the moon along with me as we passed the little footbridge and had one of the worst hangovers of my life the next morning, as I had to get on that train. So, I guess other people as they left might very well have had a little get-together.

MEH: What did you have to drink? I mean Buncombe County was dry.

MG: Well this was – Was it? Well how did we get..? Was Peek's — in another county?

MEH: Beer was – (OVERTALK)

MG: There was – What got to me was wine. It must have been the most atrocious California Central Valley Algerian wine that they could have found. It was not for human consumption, and whether that was ever mixed that night with anything else, I couldn't tell you. Where it was bought, I don't know.

When Cage was there, there were interesting musical-theatrical evenings. I remember one that involved ladders. I'm sure it had a name, and somebody else would say, "How could he not remember the première of Such-and-Such?" Well, it's very easy because there was no music there, and I tend to forget that sort of thing. Then I had a couple of pieces done, which was enjoyable.

MEH: A couple of pieces performed. You mean a couple of your pieces performed?

MG: Yes. Don't we "do" pieces anymore? Honestly, this is strange, and maybe it wasn't anything. I can't remember anything of Lou's being done. I remember some of Wolpe's stuff. I remember that Mary Caroline's lover – what was his name – David Tudor, did some Boulez sonatas, one or more. Those were quite fascinating at that time. Remember a little playlet with music, Valentinus and Orson, which Mary Fitton was in, and music – very nice, very capable, very accessible music by Jay Watt – a Valentine's celebration, very enjoyable. I can't remember visiting musicians, though in the back of my mind I think maybe I should, that we did have during the three years I was there – something like that. With that few people, I think we pulled together an unusual number of people who could actually perform on one instrument or another. All right. Black Mountain. Good location. Bad food. Some intolerable people. Except for a

lover, no lasting friendships. Some very good artists, the best of whom weren't really connected with the college. Rauschenberg was a student before I was there, and the time I was there, he wasn't teaching and he wasn't either a student or he spent some time there. Lou came down in a very bad neurotic period of his life and left as soon as he could – really had no connection to the school. I – A couple of the well-known artists who taught there, I don't think are very good, and I'm not going to name especially one I dislike very much. Albers and Anni Albers, both of whom were before my time – very lasting work. I think hers much better than his, actually. That's saying something, because I think he did some fine work. Off the top of my head I can't think of anybody else previous to the time I was there that really had a connection to the college. Albers certainly did. Most everybody else was in and out, or for the summer. I was sorry that it died when it did, but I can't imagine how it could possibly have gone on or what it could have ever become. So, apart from the initial shock, I don't care in the least that Black Mountain died forty years ago.

MEH: You left with Herb Roco?

MG: Yes and no. That's a little confusing. He left and I left, and I came back and waited for him, and he came back and we went, supposedly for Archer – Hazel Frieda Larsen and Charles Archer wedding. Then we went on to New York. But he had already left, and I had already left, and it wasn't at the same time.

MEH: He's a person that I have no real picture in my mind of him, I have no picture in my mind.

MG: He was a lower-class Texan, born and raised outside of Houston, was in the Navy in the Second World War or right after, got married, came to Black Mountain, was seduced by Nick Cernovich, separated from his wife, and then Nick lost interest at that point, and Herb and I became lovers. He wanted to become an architect, but he wasn't from the background, and he never had the drive to really do much of anything, so he never really studied architecture. The closest he got to it was being a model-maker for a couple of architects in Houston and Galveston. But his father was a mechanic, auto mechanic, and he grew up in that milieu and worked for his father, and went back to Texas and worked for his father. Within fifteen years, both he and his father had died of horrible results of being an auto mechanic, which means cancer of the lungs and emphysema. They both smoked. He did, along with a couple of other people – individually, not along with them – a couple of short films, terribly amateurish with an attempt at painting frames, which I can't remember I don't even know they still exist.

MEH: Was that at Black Mountain?

MG: At Black Mountain. I have a couple of products of his woodcarving or linoleum cuts, and I don't know of anything else that he did. I don't know even who he studied with while he was there. Very nice person. Not a strong creative person, though he was – "dabble" is an insulting word, I don't want to use it – but he did a few artistic things. He has one reference in your index. I looked at the book this morning. As one of the people who did make movies. There were photographs of him, so I have no idea who, amongst the alumni, have any

photographs nor of whom. I have a very limited number myself. I can't get myself to pull everything together to give it to somebody or whatever. I'm not even sure what I have anymore.

MEH: Do you have photos from Black Mountain?

MG: Some photographs? Yes. But very few.

MEH: Can you put your hand on them (INAUDIBLE)?

MG: Eventually, yes. I only heard the first part of that question, which was "can I put my hands on them." Was that it? Yes. They are not lost. But they don't really amount to anything, either of Black Mountain or any number of people.

MEH: Well, it would be interesting to see them, because – I'll explain to you why later. When you left Black Mountain, you went to New York?

MG: Yes. Then Boston/Cambridge.

MEH: Were you just in New York briefly, in transit, or – ?

MG: At that time, it wasn't very long, and I can't really remember. At some point I lived in Houston for a few months. I think that was before I came back, before Hazel's wedding. I lived in Cambridge and Boston for eleven years after leaving Black Mountain, leaving New York, so that was – immediate itinerary.

MEH: What did you do there in Boston?

MG: What did I do. I did some landscape labor, I did some building labor, I did some nothing for long periods. I drove a cab in Cambridge and I drove a cab in Boston. I went to school at Boston University for two years, until the faculty I hated suggested that maybe I take a year off because it was another situation where the absolutely painful musical curriculum that was really set up for

people who wanted to go teach band in the Midwest – So, I didn't exactly fit in there. In fact, musically, I haven't had any good training my whole life until six years ago when I started again studying with this time a young composer at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music. For the record, David Garner, who's a quite good composer himself. But he was the only one I've ever met who realized “nobody has ever trained you,” which was eye-opening to me – and he was absolutely right. So, I've begun after forty years to write again.

MEH: But in Boston you were basically doing odd jobs and going to school part of the time. Not doing music.

MG: Except when I was going to school, yes.

MEH: And when you left Boston, did you come out here?

MG: No, I went to New York. Then I came out here. Between here and Sacramento, I've been here since 1970. Sacramento, which is almost as hideous as Houston, only because that was the only place I could get a job at that point, with the State of California.

MEH: What were you doing there?

MG: Computers. Programming.

MEH: Did you do training for that? How did you get into that?

MG: When I went to New York, after leaving Boston, for a short while.

MEH: Do you still do that?

MG: Until next month, when finally I get to retire.

MEH: You've been working for a company?

MG: State of California. Which is not a company, because you would consider profit, efficiency, and sanity to go along with a functioning company. You don't find any of those three in the State of California.

MEH: But you've stayed with it all these years.

MG: Yes, because now I retire, and they're actually going to give me some money, and that was the only reason.

MEH: And you said that you have been studying music recently?

MG: Now, yes, for the last six years. A very dear non-lover friend died of AIDS in '91, and the Black Mountain get-together here in '92 came at a perfect time when I was pulling out of that. And meeting Lou again, I asked him to put me in touch with somebody I could study with, so he put me in touch with somebody at the conservatory who turned me over to David, which was a very excellent choice all the way around. So, if I stay alive long enough, I might actually continue to write.

MEH; You're still pretty young. I think you're relatively young.

MG: Psychologically, relatively young. Physically I'm noticing that one can't ignore reaching the later sixties. It is not something that you bypass or put off, especially when faced with the hideous hill that comes up to the crest that then comes down to where we're sitting down.

MEH; But you are not in your late sixties, are you? How old are you?

MG: How old am I? Sixty-six.

MEH: I didn't realize that. I would have thought you were younger. I didn't realize you were sixty-six.

MG: I'm going deaf. My battery's going off or –

MEH: I'll speak up – I would have thought you were younger. I didn't realize you were sixty-six.

MG: Well, not if you – By looking, perhaps. Okay. But not by adding. 1950 is forty-eight years ago.

MEH: Do you have any thoughts – Now, doing all of this work on Black Mountain and somebody said, "Mary, really who cares?" I said "I don't know, but it's there for the record in case somebody does." Looking back, in sort of a broader perspective, your own experience as well as what you know about the college and other educational experiences, what do you think was really the importance of Black Mountain College? Or lack of importance?

MG: I'm not sure that this is what I really think, but off the top of my head, the first idea is that you can have artistic creativity and have it within a structured environment. The artist doesn't have to go off to a garret. I don't know if anybody thinks that way anymore, but they used to in the '20s and '30s. This obvious thing was probably very obvious to everyone in New York, with Art Students League, et cetera. But I happen to know Black Mountain and there was some structure, and it was basically an art school. It doesn't have to be a – The structure doesn't have to kill the creativity. That may not impress anyone else as a particularly valid reason for that – how long was it? twenty years of existence of the school. It could be looked at that way. By the way and being important to whom, if anyone? I'm sure – I know, after all these years — you have your own drives and reasons for it, and you're not, I hope, looking for a

reason. But, for instance, there's someone who runs the bookstore in Berkeley who is from Asheville. I can't think of the bookstore and I certainly can't remember his name, but he thought it was terrible that nobody was doing anything about Black Mountain. He started looking into it and studying what material he could find, and then found that you were doing the work you've been doing, and he relaxed and said, "Good. It's not lost. Somebody is actually doing this." I'll certainly look up - Turtle Island Books, I think is the bookstore. But I will certainly make sure of that and his name, and either when you're around here now or some other time, you really should stop in.

MEH: I'll be in Berkeley in and out for the next week.

MG: The bookstore – I think it's Turtle Island. It's on Center Street, I'm pretty sure. Just off the main drag downtown. The non-Telegraph part. So, there were people with the same interest and certainly with the feeling that it shouldn't be lost, and you – If you've accomplished nothing else, you've taken the burden off of that one person who thinks that you're doing a job that he thinks should be done. So, –

MEH: Even though you felt –

MG: Relatively open. Not make a great point of it, but not to have to hide everything kind of thing. Again, remember it was the '50s.

MEH: It seemed within the college there were so many students who were exploring in terms of the nature of their sexuality or very active sexually.

MG: Yes, but you also had many people who – Johanna Jalowetz and Nell Rice, from a completely different culture and a completely different generation.

[END OF SIDE 2, TAPE 1; SIDE 1, TAPE 2 BEGINS]

MG: There was a lot of acceptance. Well, there was a lot of lack of overt hostility. How does one say that I didn't notice somebody coming down here with a prejudice. There were a few people who were obviously more than tolerant, but again it was the '50s. See, I overlooked the male chauvinist angle, but I'm sure it existed. Homophobia is built right in along with that, during the same times, from then till now to the far future, I'm sure. It wasn't anything overt. Probably one of the things I liked about Black Mountain is I didn't have to pretend and hide all the time. If people didn't approve, to hell with them, because again I was nineteen or twenty and feeling free. It's how much *épater le bourgeois* I don't know was going on, but probably some of that, too. If you don't like it, good. I hope you suffer! I can't say that I was involved in much of that. No, it wasn't a homophobic community. But it was the '50s and it did go on and there were certain people who expressed it in their works later.

MEH: Were you aware of the presence of the F.B.I. visiting the college during that period?

MG: No. No, the whole idea is not far-fetched, but it seems ridiculous because there was nothing – Even after the '60s and '70s when the F.B.I. did learn that there is such a thing as subtlety that could even be part of their job, certainly they were going to be obvious in the '50s. There was nothing that I ever noticed. The fact that the anti-Communist was very strong in the country at that time, and that we had at least one acknowledged Communist on the faculty had left us, in the '30s and '40s before that, made it a kind of target-of-interest. Whether a

target of infiltration or wandering through and observation, I have no idea. I was not aware of any individual or any drive-by situation.

MEH: Any other thoughts about Black Mountain before we turn the tape off?

MG: Other thoughts about Black Mountain: I'm glad it existed. I'm glad I was there. I'm glad I met certain people who were there. I'm sorry that in what seems to be sticking with me as my lifelong interest, which is composition, it wasn't more suited. But I don't blame it for that. Within a small number of people you can't have perfection for every goal of every student who might come. It was a good school.

MEH: Well I'm sure that –

[END OF RECORDING ON SIDE 1, TAPE 2]

[END OF TRANSCRIPT]