

EXC 003 Sean Thomas
Excelsior Band Collection (EXC), Acc. 756
Interviewed by Jada Jones, Ryan Morini, and Willie Dinish on April 22, 2022
30 minute audio recording • 18 page transcript

Abstract: In this recording, Sean Thomas is interviewed by Jada Jones, Ryan Morini, and Willie Dinish in the McCall Library at the University of South Alabama about his experiences in the Excelsior Band. The interview begins with Mr. Thomas discussing where he grew up and the role that football and family played in the origins of his interest in music. Mr. Thomas observes some of the differences between Excelsior Band and other bands, including the fact that they do not practice or use sheet music, but rely on playing by ear and strong knowledge of keys and scales. He discusses what he learned from senior band members such as Theodore Arthur and Hosea London. The interview concludes with Mr. Thomas talking about James Seals and some of the musicianship that he learned from him.

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

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



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EXC 003 Sean Thomas
Interviewed April 22, 2022

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 003

Interviewee: Sean Thomas

Interviewer: Ryan Morini, Jada Jones, Willie Dinish III

Date: April 22, 2022

M: This is Ryan Morini with the McCall Libraries, University of South Alabama. I'm here with my colleague—

J: Jada Jones.

M: —as well as—

D: Willie Dinish III.

M: And we have the pleasure of honoring—or interviewing, sorry—

T: Sean Thomas.

M: Yes. Thank you for joining us today.

T: You're welcome.

M: So, if we can start just—when and where were you born?

T: I was born here in Mobile, in [19]72. February.

M: Okay. Where at in Mobile?

T: Mobile Infirmary.

M: Okay, okay. Where did you grow up? Where'd your family live?

T: Maysville. Like, two blocks from Ladd-Peebles.

M: Okay, okay. And what memories do you have of—or would you want to share—about where you grew up?

T: Well, mostly everything around there is football. Senior Bowl was like a major thing around there. So, just football season, everything is going on, it's like right there in the midst of where we at.

M: Okay, it's—was that part of your introduction to music, was the bands at the football games and things like that, or—?

T: Mostly that, and then because—well, my family's deeply into music. My mother played clarinet, bells. And everyone in the family pretty much plays. All my cousins play clarinet. My wife plays, my daughters. And then, like I told you, the next interview is my little cousin. [Laughter] And he pretty much wants to be—wanted to be my mini-me. He plays tuba also; drums, saxophone. He was the band director at Williamson.

M: Wow. Well, that—so, it's a lot of music in the family there, yeah.

T: Yeah, I mean, me and him were music majors. My wife was a music major. I was the last interim band director at Shaw High School around the corner; it's now Clarke Magnet. So, it's a rich thing for us in the family. Everybody's a musician, so. And I'm the minister of music at the church. So, yeah.

M: So, were you—I mean, how did your relationship to music start? Was that—?

T: Well, I always tell people it wasn't like a *relationship*-relationship. It was kind of like your parent put it there, and you had to figure it out? [Laughter] You could go to piano lessons or you go to soccer. "Well, I want to go to soccer practice." "Well, you got to go to piano lessons." So. [Laughter]

M: Okay. And what instrument did you start with?

T: My first instrument, I started playing piano. And from there, drums; drums to trombone; trombone to tuba; and it's like a correlation from there. I think just—.

M: And what is your instrument today, your main instrument?

T: Tuba.

M: Okay. Do you still play the others, or—?

T: Yeah, on a regular basis. [Laughter] Yeah. Yeah.

M: Okay, so it's not one after the other. It's one, and then additional ones as you go along kind of thing.

T: Pretty much, I mean.

M: Yeah.

T: I'll tell people I wake up the next morning, I don't know what I'm playing. [Laughter]

M: That's—so, what led the transition? Like, you started piano, you said, right?

T: Because my mother required me to play piano so that I could play anything else. I wanted to play drums. So, I had to learn to play the piano in order to play drums. When I got to middle school, I ended up playing trombone. When I got to high school, my high school band director wanted me to play tuba. And everything else just kind of picked up from there, because when I went away to school—well, I went to Bishop first as a music major. Then, on to Grambling. Then, I was at South for three years as a music major. So. So, it was one of those things where I had to learn everything, because I was going to be a music teacher.

M: And so, why did you stick with tuba?

T: That's pretty much my major instrument. Because when I signed my scholarship, that's what I was playing. So, I played tuba the whole time while I was in college, even at South. I played tuba in the concert band. So.

M: Okay.

T: Yeah.

M: And so—I mean, who would you say were kind of your main, like, mentors in this process?

T: My high school band director and my middle school band director. He transitioned me from trombone to tuba, and he really had a firm hold on everything that went on from that point, because he made sure I got my scholarship to go to Grambling, because he marched in the band at Grambling.

M: Okay, okay. Can I ask their names?

T: His name was Vincent McCants.

M: Okay, okay.

T: Mmhm.

J: And Williamson?

T: Vincent McCants was at Belsaw Mt. Vernon, and then he was at a school on the Avenue.

J: That name sounds familiar.

T: Yeah.

J: Okay.

T: He used to play in the band, in the Excelsior Band.

J: Oh, okay.

T: Yeah.

M: Okay.

J: Maybe that's why. [Laughter]

D: Mmhm.

M: It could be. I mean, how would you describe him as a person?

T: Vincent?

M: Yeah.

T: He's a barrel of laughs, let's put it like that. [Laughter]

M: Okay.

T: Yeah, his nickname for all of us was Poppa Gummybear, because that's what he reminded us of. [Laughter] He was always—he's a joker.

M: Okay.

T: Yeah. But he made sure we all had what we had to have, so.

M: So, he kept it light, but he also kept it moving, kind of thing

T: Yeah, yeah.

M: Okay, okay. And yeah, I mean, were you learning—through all of this, were you learning how to read music and all of the—were you learning keys and music theory, or is that a later thing?

T: We were learning all of it. Because it was one of those things where you had to—growing up in the inner city, you had to learn just about everything so that you could—if you wanted to further your music career, you had to pretty much learn as much of it as possible. Because we played in the wind ensembles and all that kind of stuff, and anything they had to do in the summer. So. Because I played in the Youth Ensemble at Bishop State, also. So.

M: Oh, okay.

T: Yep, so it's been music, music, music.

M: Yeah, played all over the place, it seems like. A lot of—.

T: Here, there, and everywhere.

M: Yeah, it's—I mean, do you think there's something about music that kind of leads to those sorts of connections and those—that sort of traveling, or—?

T: Well, as long as you're enjoying it. It's like, as long as you interpret the music, and you put yourself into it, you enjoy it. And just love to do it. It's like second nature. I think I would feel like I lost something if I wasn't doing it.

M: Well, and with such a musical family, I mean, did you all play—did you play a lot like in the house, or in family gatherings and things like that, or was it—?

T: We didn't play so much at family gatherings, but in the house? Yeah. All the time.

M: Okay, okay.

- T: Right now, I think I might be put out of my house if I go to the music store again. [Laughter] I have a dining room, but I don't think it's a dining room. It's, like, instruments everywhere.
- M: Musical dining room, I guess.
- J: [Laughter]
- T: Yeah, my wife call it Noah's Ark: there two of everything. [Laughter]
- M: Well, and so, beyond like mentors in your life, I mean, what were your main musical influences? What stylistically, what kind of—?
- T: When I started out, most of it was marching band, because I think that was everything that—you know, that's what we mostly saw. Then, it grew and went to jazz, and then often to gospel music. So, it's been a mixture.
- M: Understandable. So, Excelsior Band: what's your first memory of the Excelsior Band? When—?
- T: The first thing I can really remember with the Excelsior Band is seeing them during Mardi Gras; which is mostly what most people in the city, that's what you see. You basically—when you were younger, you say, "Well, that's a group of old guys in black shoes playing horns." Yeah. [Laughter] First glance, you like, "Oh, yeah. It's just them." And they kind of grow on you after a while, as you got to be an older musician. Because me growing up in the church I grew up, Hosea was a member of the church. And the guy that was the choir director at the church, he was actually a member of the Excelsior Band. If you go in the archives and see the old tapes where they talk about Mardi Gras? There's a guy up there, his name is Williams. Chappie Williams? He played trumpet in the band. But he was actually one of the choir directors at my home church. So, it's one of those things where it kind of grew on you as you got older.
- J: So, how old were you when you first saw the band? Do you remember?
- T: Probably about three or four, because I have one of those Mardi Gras families, and we would walk—like I said, Ladd-Peebles is two blocks from the house. So, we would walk down to the parades. And, you know, walk back home. So, it was like a—it's part of being in Mobile. You just know you going to be there. We all had our one spot, and we would be at that same spot every year. So.

J: Where was that spot?

T: It's Lawrence and Government Street. Know where the Chamber of Commerce is?

J: Yes.

D: [Laughter] It's the next—.

T: Chamber of Commerce. Lawrence is on this side, Barton County is on this side. Lawrence and Government.

J: Okay. I never stood there.

D: It's a good spot. [Laughter]

T: Yes, it is. Yep.

M: Well, so you were kind of surrounded by the band at your church and other places, as well as—. When did you start realizing you wanted to be in the band?

T: Well, probably as a youth? Probably in the fifth or sixth grade, because like I said, the entire family played. So, everyone marched in the band at Williamson. That was just one of those things. And the high school band director knew everybody by name, because my high school band director was my mother's high school band director. [Laughter] So, he had been there just that long. So, you know, even if you went past the thing, he'd be like, "Yeah, I have you in a few years." And you be like, "Yeah, you won't be there when I get there." You know? But yeah. [Laughter]

M: Well, so how did you actually become involved with Excelsior Band? Like, when did you—?

T: It was, like, early 2000. Probably like, I would say, 2002, 2003, somewhere around in there. Charles Howell, longtime tuba player, he had to go out of town, and I got drafted to play with them. They had to do a—it's like a big thing where they had like, they came by—it had something to do with South Alabama. The senior citizens came in on a tour, and the band sat there and played for like a hour, for like two or three days. And I ended up playing with them then, and it kind of like took off from that point.

- M: Okay. What'd you find most challenging about joining the band?
- T: Well, when you join the Excelsior Band, it's a different type of joining a band, you know? Every other band, you can go in there and march in the band, they put the music in front of you. You sit down and you learn the music. No, unh-uh. No. [Laughter] I always tell people you get ran over by the bus. They come in there, they say, "We playing 'Satin Doll.' It's B flat. Just follow us, you'll follow the changes." And they start counting. And the song starts, and then you kind of fall in and start playing. So, you have to know your instrument, and be able to hear and interpret what's going on around you in order to actually play with them. It's not—and anybody that's been in the band, they'll tell you that's how you learn all the tunes. I mean, it's a list of tunes, and you have to go home and do your homework, listen at the tunes. And if not, you going get there, and they'll turn around and call a tune: "What key is it?" "It's in B flat. Just follow us." [Laughter]
- M: Was it a challenge at all to learn how to—because it's one thing to march in a marching band, but when you're actually in a parade or something, and you're going, and you're going, and you're going—was that a challenge, to learn how to march in a parade?
- T: For most of the members in the Excelsior Band, probably not. Because just about everybody up there participated in a HBCU college marching band. So, there only a few members that didn't. But most of them, if you can name any HBCU college band, there's a member in the Excelsior Band: Jackson State, Grambling, Mississippi Valley, Florida A&M, Miles College, Alabama State; there's a member in there that's deeply connected to that.
- M: And could you say anything about the importance of marching bands at HBCUs, and that tradition?
- T: I mean, they have a rich history. And my thing with college marching bands, I always tell the young kids—even the ones here that I usually work with: don't pass up that chance. Because, like I tell them, there are only, what, 40 to 50 football players? And marching band got 330 in there. They got scholarship money. All you need to do is learn your skill, learn your craft. Nobody's going to make you run until you hurt yourself, and then you don't have no scholarship next semester. All you got to do is march out there on that turf. So, yeah.
- J: Did the Excelsior Band ever have any involvement with the high school battle of the bands that used to happen at Ladd Stadium? I don't think they have it anymore.

- T: Not as far as I know. But on the other side of the street, everybody that's in the Excelsior Band had something to do along the line with whatever was going on, because you had a lot of high school band directors, middle school band directors, and a lot of it—most of the guys in the band, they marched in the band locally. So, like most of us, the middle range of the age bracket, all of us like right along in the same age bracket; all of us were a part of that when it first started. When they first had the first battle of the bands. I probably was at Williamson; two of the guys was at Vigor; one was at Murphy. So.
- J: I'm just thinking back. You talking about Williamson and Ladd Stadium is just making me remember just how important the battle of the bands was.
- T: Yeah.
- J: It was a fierce competition, where the high school bands came together and battled it out.
- T: Mhm. And just kind of, it's one of them things where—I think music is just one of those things where they just trying to move away from, and it's—.
- J: Unfortunate.
- T: Yeah. We talk about it all the time, so. It's just one of them things. I don't agree with it, but—.
- M: Yeah. Well, if I can ask, what makes Excelsior Band so distinctive? What makes it stand out so much?
- T: The tunes that we play. Nothing that we play is anything that you could actually say is not from the original state from where the band started. We play what most people call it traditional Dixieland music, but it's mostly—like Hosea said, it's jazz music. We play "Satin Doll," which is written by Duke Ellington; "Hello, Dolly," and stuff like that. Most of the stuff that we play are older tunes, but those tunes stay with you because most people that listen to music, they know those songs. The tunes that we play are tunes that just pretty much stay with you.
- M: How would you say you have grown as a musician since you've joined Excelsior Band?

T: Me? I've grown to like working with the guys that I work with, and I've learned a lot from them. Because like, Theodore Arthur, he's been a great mentor to people like me and some of the other guys; Hosea. They encourage you at every turn. So there's, you know—most of the time when you finish school, especially for me being a tuba player, you be like, "Well, I'm fixing to put this horn down, teach some classes or do something like that; I'm not going play it no more." So, it went from that, to it's like pretty much an every week thing, because since I've been with the band, I don't think we've been off more than like one week. [Laughter] Yeah. Yeah, we played yesterday. [Laughter] So.

M: I mean, was that a lot of an adjustment? Like, you play very often, more often than some bands play, and also in a lot of different places than a lot of bands play.

T: It's a slight adjustment? But, not as much, because like Hosea say, most times it's easy for us to set up. You grab your horn, you go in there and you sit down; grab your horn, we leave. It's nothing to set up, so it's usually—for us, it's just like second nature. You go in there, sit down, and play.

M: Doesn't matter where it is?

T: Living room, dining room, backyard, outside.

J: [Laughter] Where's the strangest place that you've played in the band?

T: Really, someone's living room is probably about the strangest spot we play. We do a lot of funerals, but they've gotten to the point where that's not strange; that's part of that genre of music that we play. We do a lot of funerals, so.

J: Hm. Didn't know that.

T: Oh yeah. Yeah, yeah. Lead them in and lead them out.

M: Do you have a favorite song out of the—?

T: My favorite song would be "When the Saints Go Marching In," because it's like—that's the first thing you learned in middle school, and it's just kind of—and the way we play it is basically an overall interpretation for each one of the musicians. And it's a unique tune. Yeah.

J: Do you think Mobile has a favorite song that they like to hear from the band?

- T: We get requests for just about anything: “On Mobile Bay,” “Stars Fell on Alabama,” “Saints.” We do “Do Whatcha Wanna.”
- J: That’s the one. [Laughter]
- T: Yeah, we get a couple requests for that, but you would be surprised at some of the requests that we get: “Can y’all play ‘Hello Dolly’?” That’s a strange request, but yeah, we play it. [Laughter] We’ve played—what, fight songs? If you request it, we’ll play it. Even if it’s something that’s not on the list; if you request it, we will play it. Yeah.
- J: Good to know.
- M: So, what are some of your favorite memories of being in the band?
- T: Going to do the parade in Montgomery. That was nostalgic. We played for the USS Mobile when it rode out. It’s so many different things because we play for a lot of different things, especially if it’s something that’s big for the city, most time we play for it. The MoonPie Drop, the original one; so, yeah. It’s a list, a long list. So, I mean it’s just, anything that’s historic, you know, we get a chance to be right there. I didn’t get a chance to play for the groundbreaking ceremony for Airbus, because I’m kind of a youngster. You know, we get a chance to see a lot of things that, historically—.
- M: Well, so what is your role in the band right now? Is it basically just playing your instrument, or is there anything else that comes with it?
- T: Usually, whatever I’m told to do on my phone. [Laughter] Whatever he tells me to do, that’s usually what I do. Like I said, I’m the regular tuba player now, and I started out playing tuba. But I went from tuba to trombone, trombone to drums, and we’ve done a couple jobs where I’ve had to actually play keyboard with the band. So, it’s—for me, it’s whatever you call and tell me to do at the time. So.
- M: Yeah, so you’ve got to keep all those skills up, huh?
- T: Oh, yeah! Yeah, yeah. And only person mad about that is probably my wife.
- M: [Laughter] I mean, does your—at home now, does the family all get together and play, or—?

- T: No. Now, my girls will come home and they'll pull their instruments out, and they'll sit down and play. But play together? I think it's, like, mm-nm. Because everyone at the house actually plays; even my wife. She fusses sometimes about the noise, but she actually plays flute and was a band director, so.
- J: Where was the band director at?
- T: She was a band director at Booker T. Washington.
- J: Oh, okay.
- T: Yep.
- J: My son's going to be there next year.
- T: Oh, okay. What is he going to play?
- J: Well, he played the saxophone, so we'll have to see what he's going to continue with.
- T: Oh, okay.
- J: We'll see. [Laughter]
- M: So, what do you like the best about being in the Excelsior Band?
- T: Getting to see the smiles and the expressions on people from hearing the music. Most of the people we play for really thoroughly enjoy what's being played. We don't—I've never played at a venue that the people that we were playing for did not thoroughly enjoy what was going on. So, that's the best thing about playing with them. Because I've played with some groups, and you get there, and you can play for a hard audience. And you like, "Aw, they ain't even clapping. It's like they just here." [Laughter] You go with Excelsior Band, you get the same response everywhere we go. So.
- M: Well, what would you say about the history of the band, and the importance of that history?

T: Well, being young like I am, is some of the stuff we're learning as we go. Because we actually, most of us got to go into the firehouse for the first time a couple months ago. Well, like—what was it? November, December of last year. And we actually got a chance to go in there and play where the band actually played the first time. Historically, it's just one of those things, knowing that this band started basically because of a birthday for a child, and it's been around ever since. What, 139 years? Be 140 in November.

J: So, how do you feel being a part of that history?

T: Some days it can be overwhelming. Sometimes you walk around and be like it's just another day, but then you sit around and you think about it. Just because we been researching it now, in the last few months, it can be overwhelming, you know? The band does not have that tag with it as being one of the oldest units in the country, so it's one of them things. It's just—it's growing on me. [Laughter]

M: How has the sound of the band stayed so consistent over all that time, though?

T: Basically, the musicians and the musicianship that you have in there. Most of the guys in the band, like I said, they marched in a college band. And most of them, they are very proficient on their instruments. Most people will say, you go out there and see the Excelsior Band: "Aw, they just went out there and picked some people and put them out there." No. That is a rigorous thing where—I've marched with some guys that'll come out there, and they get out there and do like two or three parades, and be like, "Oh, yeah! I [mumbles pantomimed complaints]." So, yeah.

M: That's—well, and one thing at least that I've been told so far, is that marching in the parades you at least have to—you've got to exercise.

J: [Laughter]

M: You've got to, I mean, was that a—?

T: You have to be in condition. If you are not, it's not—you ain't going wake up one morning and say, "Yeah, I'm finna to go join the Excelsior Band. I'm finna to dust off my horn. I'm finna to go out here—" Ooh! 18, 19 parades, plus everything in between. So, you talking about Mardi Gras, it might be anywhere from 25 to 26 performances in just the time that we play with the 18 to 19 parades that we're going to do. So. And it's like, all day. Some days, we play three times *and* do the parade that night.

J: Wow.

T: Yeah.

J: That's a lot.

T: Oh, yeah. Yeah, yeah. And you might pass by, you might see two Excelsior Bands. [Laughter] You might see one band go by, and it's another one playing on the corner. "You guys just walked—." "No, that was the other band." [Laughter]

M: It's not tougher carrying that big tuba, and blowing into that as you—?

T: It can be. I think it's grown on me over the years. I mean, I've been playing tuba most of my life. Everybody always ask me when am I going swap from the horn that I'm playing to play a fiberglass one. I say, "Probably when I make 65." Right now, I've been playing that metal horn now for the last, I know, 20-plus years. Because, like I told you earlier, I started out playing with Olympia, and transitioned over to Excelsior. So.

M: I guess if you adjust to it, then it's—.

T: Yeah, yeah, yeah. It's one of them things. I mean, college band was worse than the Excelsior Band. I mean, we'd stand out there all day with the horn on your shoulder. And guys up in the rafters up there screaming, telling you, "Y'all got to get it right! Take it back to the beginning!" And you just standing out there, and I got a metal tuba on this shoulder and they ain't letting you take it off. So, yeah. It grows on you.

M: Do you have any favorite memories from your college band days?

T: Yeah, Bayou Classic was a major thing, because I went to Grambling. So, that was a major thing. My first flight was actually with the band. I went to New York; that was my first flight ever. So, yeah. It's kind of nostalgic. Plus, Grambling history, especially with—my mother went to Grambling; my middle school band director went to Grambling. It's just, for me, being there was nostalgic. Now, my daughter's at Grambling, my middle daughter.

M: Oh, wow.

T: Yeah, so.

M: Yeah, that's—well, so what would you say is the Excelsior Band's legacy?

T: Basically, I would say the overall uniform, and just being distinctive. Because it's one of those things where if you see us doing Mardi Gras, it seems like we're just walking, but it's actually a walk in time. We're walking in step, so it's something of its own. The hat, the uniform, and just, you know; basically, those are guys of distinction. And that's just one of those things that stands out with you. And then the music is just one of those things. I mean, most of the stuff that we're playing, like I told you earlier, is older stuff, and it's interpreted. It's just one of those things where it's a great opportunity, and most of us—well, all of us love it, I'm not going to say "most of us." All of us love it. So.

M: Well, so what do you hope for the future of the Excelsior Band?

T: Me?

M: Yeah.

T: We are—I'm pushing that we lead the next inauguration. I mean, that's me. I think that that's due. That's due for us. That's me; that's just me. That's my thing. I mean, who else can say a 140 years? I marched in the band at Grambling, and we just celebrated 75. [Laughter] So.

M: That's a good point. Well, I think we covered all the questions we had on our sheet. I don't know if anyone has anything else?

D: I did have a question, but it was connected to the legacy, and just a couple of other questions which we'll kind of connect to. But you are a person that's surrounded with tradition, you know? Your teachers came up here in Mobile, some of them were in the Excelsior Band. [Laughter] Some of them were major influences in music in Mobile. So, you have a deep connection to the music of Mobile. So, was there anything you felt that you'd like to express about the idea of traditional music here in Mobile, as being a member of the Excelsior Band, because that is really key to who you are and what your role has become as a member of the band?

T: I think that the city needs to do more, as well as the school system needs to do more. Because most of us that are in the Excelsior Band wouldn't be where we are if it wasn't for the music. I mean, like we explain to most people when we go play;

everybody in the band does something else other than just music. There are a few music teachers in there, but most of us do things out of the ordinary. I work at Amazon. Some of them teach some other stuff. Some of them work for major corporations. Dr. Cunningham works on the staff at South Alabama. I mean, if it wasn't for the music, most of us would not have the jobs that we have. So, I really think that's—we, all of us talk about it all the time. I feel like in some realms that, like, the school system is failing the youth of today. Because some of them don't—they are way behind what we were 20 years ago, when we went away to school.

D: That's an important issue to bring forward. Because the history has been deep, the tradition has been deep. And the thing that—part of the reason why we created this project is so that we come out of the shallows, and we can begin to rebuild. That's something that I think is very important to do. Did you have another question?

J: I just wonder how much do you think tradition in Mobile has been a factor in the band's longevity?

T: It's been a big part of it. Because most people would tell you, there's not Mardi Gras if you don't see the Excelsior Band. There would not be a Joe Cain procession if there was no Excelsior Band. The first thing you see in the Joe Cain procession is the Excelsior Band, and then Joe Cain. So, that's been a landmark for back as far as you can remember. And, like, the years that—even with Covid, if we didn't have Mardi Gras, everybody else didn't have Mardi Gras. We had Mardi Gras. [Laughter] Mardi Gras was full blast, you know? We didn't have no parade, but we played every night. We was on somebody's front porch. We was in somebody's backyard. We played here, we played there. So, yeah. Excelsior Band speaks Mardi Gras. So.

D: I just have one other thing, and that was—you mentioned the connection to South Alabama. And of course, that's here, the campus that we are. So, do you remember what years you were at South Alabama and what your degree was in?

T: I was working on my music degree. Did not finish, because I had a family that was moving uniquely, so—. And it was kind of rough for me, because that was in 2000—I want to say, 2006, 2007, 2008.

D: Okay, you had some cohort around that time. [Laughter]

T: Yeah. So, I was here during that time; but I was working nights, here all day, and then, most Thursday and Fridays—y'all on campus, so you know. Laidlaw, they would have a concert series that would run the whole month, so most days I didn't know if I was going to class, so—. [Laughter] I kind of kept my black suit in the trunk, so I could—because I didn't know if, "Man, you know we got a concert tonight." "Oh, okay, yeah. I got my mouthpiece." "Yeah, we got practice today." "So, I've got my mouthpiece." I just stayed on campus.

D: And my last question was about musicianship, if anybody had anything else.

M: No.

D: So, what caused your musical transition from one genre to the other; and then, what do you listen to now? So, you know, you mentioned that you started out listening to a lot of marching band music, that you liked listening to marching band music, and that's a very specific genre. Then to reach into jazz and to gospel after that is, it's kind of a big push from there. Of course, this is coming from a musician, so—[Laughter]—so, I know it's all connected. But what caused that transition for you?

T: Basically, life.

D: [Laughter] Okay.

T: Life. Because when I was younger, the only thing that, you know, you concentrated on was what was going on with the marching band. Like I said, I played at the Music Ensemble at Bishop State. The only thing we did was jazz. So, it's kind of, as you grew as a musician, stuff started to grow on you. Right now, you might hear me listening to just about anything. I have—my daughters don't like to ride in the vehicle with me. [Laughter] I might listen to rock or grunge, and they be like "What is that—? You know what they all singing?" I say, "No, I don't know what he's singing, but the music is just—." [Laughter] Yeah, so.

D: Absolutely.

J: Who did you learn under at Bishop State?

T: Michael A. Poellnitz.

J: Poellnitz? Okay. Doing some research. [Laughter]

T: Although, Mr. Seals was over there during the summer, so—.

J: Oh, okay.

T: James Seals was over—he started the youth ensemble. And then, Mike took over after that.

J: Okay.

M: Is there anything you can tell us just describing James Seals as a person?

T: To me, he was a no-nonsense type of individual. He was one of the ones that, it was going be his way or the highway. [Laughter] I played in the jazz band playing tuba, and my first experience with him with that was, he came in there and he say, “You play that tuba like it’s a string bass.” I was like, “It’s a tuba. I don’t know how you do that.” [Laughter] He explained to you, play the taps, and you hold the notes only so long. And he explained it to you, and it just kind of took off from there. He was a no-nonsense person. It was no such thing as, “I’m not going to do it your way, Mr. Seals.” [Laughter] Yeah, he was that individual.

M: Well, I think—I guess that’s it, but thank you very much for sitting down with us today.

T: You guys are so welcome.

J: Thank you.

D: Thank you.

[End of recording]

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