

## A PORTRAIT OF VAL WILMER v2

R3 INTRO:

**Now on BBC Radio 3, our Sunday Feature. This month sees the re-publication of 'As Serious As Your Life', by Val Wilmer. Written over 40 years ago, it delves deep into the lives, minds and politics of several pioneers of the new Black music, and it's acknowledged widely as a "masterpiece of jazz history". But what of the writer and photographer herself? How did a girl from South London become an authority on Black music and culture? This is A PORTRAIT OF VAL WILMER.**

### 0'00" OPENING

VAL: What do you want me to say, who I am and what I do? Um... well, my name is Val Wilmer. Erm... who am I? Well that's a question I often ask myself! (laughs)

### Charles Mingus – Better Git It in Your Soul

MARGARET: Val is not a person to blow her own trumpet. So... I'm looking at the blurb, the blurb on Jazz People, in 1970. And it reads: "Val Wilmer, at 28, is one of Britain's leading jazz commentators". And it says, "Over the last ten years her articles on music and musicians have appeared regularly in periodicals on both sides of the Atlantic, including Jazz Journal, Melody Maker, Jazz Monthly, Crescendo and Downbeat. She's also an accomplished photographer (laughs) as the sensitive portraits in this book show." So that was Val...

VAL: ...and that was in 1970. And then, fast forward years later...

### Charles Mingus – Better Git It in Your Soul

### 1'00" MONTAGE

PAUL: Photographer, journalist, historian, writer, feminist, anti-racist advocate... she's an endless source of extraordinary stories.

MARGARET: She connects with the people she's writing about. The key to it is Val's ability to get them to talk, and be relaxed.

PAUL: Amongst the people who write about jazz, she has a kind of legendary status.

RICHARD: Her photographs are beautiful. Somehow she gets the sound of the music, the warmth of the musicians, into the visual image.

PAUL: Some of those photographs – they ARE jazz. People look at them, and that's what jazz is.

MARGARET: She is one of a kind!

RICHARD: She is an unacknowledged national treasure.

MARGARET: Valerie Wilmer!

RICHARD: Valerie?!

PAUL: Val.

### 1'45" BEING A GIRL

VAL: (laughs) Val, yes – Valerie is how I was christened, but I prefer Val. Erm... you know, people always fall back on clichés. So when they see me they don't know what to ask me. "Oh what was it like being a girl, then?" But they don't really know what they're asking! Or "what was it like being a white girl with all those Black men, and so on?" And I find it a bit tedious really. When I was coming along, women were supposed to take a back seat for everything. You didn't have any place in the world, what, sit around and wait to get married, and then lead the rest of their lives as housewives. But, you learn on the way and you do what you do.

RICHARD: it was very unusual – er, still is! (laughs) – to find a woman writing in a jazz publication. Mostly it's male stamp collectors like me – it's traditionally a male thing.

VAL: I was a girl, and I was treated badly because I wasn't a boy. Everywhere I went. When I was a woman it was the same thing. You're told you can't do this – and you know you can, and why can't you – you can't because you're a girl... can't you understand why I'm annoyed?!

### 3'05" SINNER'S PRAYER

#### **RADIO: The Crickets – That'll Be The Day**

VAL: It would've been about 1958 when I was doing my GCE revision for my O-level exams... and I was in the kitchen on my own, I put the radio on the table – sort of a Bacolite type of radio, with a dial with different stations, Short Wave etc – I'm not supposed to be listening to it. I'd started listening to Radio Luxembourg.

#### **RADIO: Radio Luxembourg**

And I'm revising Latin or something, Caesar's Gallic Wars. And suddenly I hear this sound over the airwaves.

#### **Ray Charles – Sinner's Prayer**

And it is the most arresting dramatic sound I've ever heard. It's a piano and a voice. And I know exactly who it is, because I've been reading my Melody Maker, and it's Ray Charles, Sinner's Prayer..... It's just the total rawness of it all... and we had grown up singing "Nymphs and Shepherds" in the school hall! (laughs) – from "Nymphs and Shepherds" to Sinner's Prayer is some leap. ... And he just, he is so – he is so... hurt. The pain of it all, it's like he's exposed his innermost feelings.

### **Ray Charles – Sinner's Prayer (QUIET)**

I think that the feeling of loss and misery is so universal, it doesn't really need any explanation. If you see somebody... I mean, I saw a woman once in the – outside the station in Dalston. She'd been in the pub, and had fallen into a doorway. And she reached out her hand for help, and I reached out to pull her up. And she said "I've just come out of prison today". And she'd gone in the pub. And a man came too. And we both reached out our hands to her. Well – that is pain. And you don't need any words, you just know it. They say we know it all from birth, don't we? And I think that's why people relate to music so much... Some of the hardest hearted people, you can see them crumble when they hear beautiful music.

### **Ray Charles – Sinner's Prayer ENDS**

I'm always surprised when people crumble when they hear dreadful music! (LAUGHTER)

### **5'45" BECOMING A WRITER**

### **Count Basie – Boogie Woogie**

VAL: I first heard jazz when I was 11 or 12... jazz seemed to me to be hip before I knew what hip meant. And my friends were listening to Bill Haley and Elvis at school, and I was listening to Count Basie and Duke Ellington. I also developed an idea that I wanted to write about jazz when I was about 15... I don't know why and how, God knows! I started writing to musicians, and one of the people I wrote to was Jesse Fuller, who played a one-man band, he came from Georgia.

### **Jesse Fuller – San Francisco Bay Blues**

He responded to my letters. And I put his story together from these letters and sent it to Jazz Journal, and they published it! That was in March 1959. And suddenly I was a writer.

I started writing for little jazz magazines ..... I went off to study photography, I became a photographer of sorts, I don't know if I was all that good, particularly, but gradually I became – I was always interested in the history, and I think like many journalists I became a historian... a social historian, if you like.

### **7'00" ANTHROPOLOGIST (PG)**

PAUL: I'm Paul Gilroy and I'm a writer and academic. One thing that's really important to understand about Val – and she wears this very lightly – is that she is a world figure. Val is a world figure in the history of African American musical culture, she's a world figure in the history of photography... In a sense she's a kind of "anthropologist"! Can I say that?! I mean, I feel that she has those sensitivities..... not that people are exotic species, but when one goes into the field, one seeks to make the shared humanity into a frame for the contact that you're trying to articulate. And I think it's her quality, she's a subtle – I suspect, actually, it's got something to do with being a photographer as well as a writer.

MARGARET: You can feel that she connects with the people she's writing about. And that probably is a lasting connection in most cases, she's probably still friends with the people she was interviewing 40 or 50 years ago. That just shows me something about the integrity in the way she approaches her involvement with the jazz world as a whole.

### **Duke Ellington Orchestra – It Don't Mean A Thing**

MARGARET: My name's Margaret Busby, and in 1967 I started a publishing company called Allison & Busby. Clive Allison and I, we published known writers, unknown writers – and one of those first books we published was by a woman called Valerie Wilmer!

### **8'30" RICHARD – 1969 + BERLIN STORY**

RICHARD: My name is Richard Williams. The first time I worked with Val was at MM in 1969 when I joined the paper and she was an established freelance contributor... The first time that I was able to spend a reasonable amount of time with Val, talking and getting to know her, was when we both went to the Berlin Jazz Festival in 1969. And I remember being in the backstage bar in the Philharmonic Hall, with Val, at the moment the Duke Ellington Orchestra arrived for their show that night. And this was a time when the Ellington band still had Johnny Hodges, Cootie Williams, Harry Carney, Lawrence Brown, you know the great figures who'd been with Ellington for decades, walking into this bar. And every one of them stopped and greeted Val, as if she were a long-lost sister! Every member of the Duke Ellington Orchestra knew who she was! And clearly felt some kind of warmth towards her. And respect. I already thought she was pretty cool, but that made her into somebody very special.

### **Duke Ellington Orchestra – It Don't Mean A Thing (ENDS + APPLAUSE)**

### **9'45" VAL – INTERVIEW TECHNIQUE**

VAL: I started out interviewing musicians when I was very young, and I was really just a fan... I really didn't know what to ask people! So therefore I didn't ask complicated questions. Where did you get your first instrument? Why did you have a saxophone? Who did you play with and who did you play with next? More or less that sort of thing... oh, and who are your

influences? People enlarge on things. And if they feel relaxed with you, then they'll talk more. I think I enabled people to speak freely, and therefore they did – and sometimes they spoke very freely indeed, much to my astonishment! Some of the things they told me! So, when – now I've got to this venerable age, and people come to interview me, I'm always a bit put off when people ask me long questions because I know it's unnecessary. It's much better to ask a simple question, and then you'll get more response from the other person.

#### 10'40" VAL TECHNIQUE into ANDREW CYRILLE INTRO – FREE JAZZ

#### Andrew Cyrille – Rhythmical Space

ANDREW: Valerie came on the scene and wanted to know why and how were we doing the things we were doing. She was listening to the music, she'd come to rehearsals sometimes, she would ask me questions... we stayed at each other's houses... so we always felt comfortable with each other.

#### Andrew Cyrille – Rhythmical Space

ANDREW: Andrew Cyrille is my name. And, when I met Valerie, I was playing music – playing drums – with a lot of different people.

#### Cecil Taylor – With (Exit)

ANDREW: Cecil Taylor – I joined his band. It was during the heavy Civil Rights Era. A lot of the musicians that were in association with people like Cecil, and Ornette Coleman, and Albert Ayler, John Coltrane... we all used to play this music that they called New Jazz or Free Jazz.

#### 11'48" RICHARD – LADY BRACKNELL

RICHARD: When Ornette Coleman and Cecil Taylor and Albert Ayler appeared in the 60s, most jazz critics behaved like Lady Bracknell – “oh my dear, what is this racket?!” – Val wasn't like that at all. She, like quite a lot of people, I think it took a while for her to get tuned in to the music they were making, but I think she understood the people. Straight away. She saw that they were doing what they had to do, what they needed to do. And they found in her a person who was sensitive and sympathetic and responsive in a way that most people in the mainstream media certainly weren't at the time.

#### 12'35"

ANDREW: There was a lot of projection about what we were doing, why we were doing it in relationship to culture... many people said we didn't really have Black culture, or that we inherited culture from Europe... yes we did learn a lot from playing with European instruments etc, but we decided that we wanted to bring forth Africa.

#### Ornette Coleman – Free Jazz

ANDREW: Valerie was always into African culture, and how that related to the African American musicians. And I could relate to her in that way, because I had felt that, and a lot of the musicians I had worked with had felt that. You know, why should we be called Negroes? So many of us were so glad that the name Negro had fallen out of favour... and we just decided to be called Black people. Like White people, y'know.

### **Ornette Coleman – Free Jazz**

14'05"

PAUL: it's important to understand how the nomenclature of racial politics was evolving at this time. Val's work spans a period in which people were negroes. Imagine that?! Imagine them being negroes! So you're dealing really with [...] a time of massive transformation. And people are discovering and making a Black identity, for the first time, largely through the cultural work they accomplish. And she – by her choice of language – positions herself as a supporter, an ally I suppose, an advocate for that process.

### **Ornette Coleman – Free Jazz**

MARGARET: She's respectful, and so clearly committed to what she's doing, and – she doesn't take advantage in the way that I guess it would have been possible for some writers and interviewers to do. And it can't always have been easy as a woman – as a WHITE woman, as an English woman! – going into certain areas of African-American culture.

### **15'25" VAL – THE TERM 'BLACK MUSIC'**

VAL: It seemed very important for me to stress the African-American roots of everything we heard! And in fact I was probably the very person in this country – in fact, I know I was – to use the term 'Black music', which you may find rather strange, but, the term wasn't used. Jazz was always the thing. It was Archie Shepp, Milford Graves, they were the first people I ever heard use the expression 'Black music'.

### **Archie Shepp – Portrait of Robert Thompson**

VAL: When Milford Graves and then Archie Shepp talked about Black music they were talking about "our music, with roots". This goes back, and we will call it Black music cause that's what it is. Well, prior to this, to use the term Black in America, was a term of insult. So, when people started talking about Black music, that was quite startling to me. But I could see why. And then increasingly more people used this term, the people I was meeting used this term. So when I came back here I wrote articles, interviews with the people I'd met for Melody Maker, and I used the term "Black music". And all hell broke loose! People criticised me for it.

### **Archie Shepp – Portrait of Robert Thompson**

## 16'42" PAUL – RACIALLY ORDERED WORLD

PAUL: Let's be clear: there are lots of people that LOVE Black music, as an exotic phenomenon. It gives them intense pleasure – I'm thinking of jazz, blues, reggae and all of these forms. But they don't have necessarily an equivalent appetite for the people that create the music. And I suppose I think Val's *anthropology* is something that doesn't allow you to divide the music from the people who make it. So you can't really separate the cultural form from its creators. And more than that – it's not that you should separate it – it's that there's an ethical, responsible obligation to honour that connection. And of course that puts you at odds with a racially ordered world [...] With a white supremacist world which sees no value in Black culture... with the kind of contempt within which that world of Black culture is held. So, someone like Val is going to immediately come into conflict with that world.

## 17'50" VAL – LITTLE BROTHER MONTGOMERY

The racism was intense. Some of it was quite subtle – but I grew up in a world where... it was there. Black people were seen as inferior... that was what you were told and taught, on every turn, and it was up to you to find out otherwise.

## Little Brother Montgomery – Farish Street Jive

I went to interview Little Brother Montgomery, wonderful pianist – I think it was 1960 or '61 – went to interview him with a friend of mine, and she took a photograph of us together, and he was in bed when we got there, and he jumped out of bed and put some trousers and a shirt on, and I'm sitting beside him wearing a rather smart dress and jacket made by my mother, jewellery, nail varnish, looking very posh! And he's sitting on the edge of the bed, and he's got a vest and trousers on, he's got a shirt on and it's hanging open. He's got a paunch! He's a chubby chap! With a tummy! And I showed it to the editor of this magazine I worked for – he said "very nice dear, but we couldn't really publish that, could we?" I said "what?" He said "well, white girl sitting next to a darkie with his shirt undone!" Well... there's not much more I can say about that. I was stunned, horrified, but I was also shocked. I didn't expect it coming from somebody who'd been hanging out with Miles Davis the week before... Anyway, it says more about him than it does about me! Or Little Brother, bless him.

## Little Brother Montgomery – Farish Street Jive (TAILS OFF)

## 19'25" JAZZ PEOPLE

VAL: When I did my first book, 'Jazz People', which is a collection of interviews, I went to Margaret Busby, who I knew quite well. I said "would you be willing to look at this book and tell me what you think"? I wasn't thinking SHE would publish it, because they'd only just started, Allison & Busby, and they were publishing poetry... but she said to me "oh yes, we'd like to do it". So I was quite surprised, pleasantly so!

### **Art Farmer + Jimmy Heath + Billy Higgins – Homecoming**

MARGARET: In this book, are: Art Farmer, Eddie Lockjaw Davis...

VAL: Buck Clayton and Big Joe Turner...

MARGARET: Clark Terry, Thelonious Monk, Herb McGee...

VAL: Archie Shepp, Cecil Taylor and Jackie McLean... Billy Higgins, the great drummer, wonderful guy....

MARGARET: Babs Gonzalez, Jimmy Heath, and Randy Weston.

VAL: They've come from different walks of life, the musicians, instrumentalists and singers in the book, but they're all people I felt were still being creative at that time.

### **Miles Davis – All Blues**

MARGARET: Actually my favourite interview is the one that got away, the last interview in the book. It goes: "Later! – But Mr Davis – Look baby, when I said later, I MEANT later!" (laughs)

### **20'35" THE FACE OF BLACK MUSIC**

RICHARD: So, Jazz People was a really good book. Then there was a book called "The Face Of Black Music" which was really a kind of photo essay. It had a wider span of music, represented from the most primitive blues still existing in the early 70s – this is from her trips to the Southern States – and Blues people like Albert King, Buddy Guy, also Jimi Hendrix. Beautiful, beautiful book. And around the time it was published she had an exhibition at the V&A of these photographs – that's the first time I can remember a British jazz photographer getting an exhibition in an institution like the V&A. Extraordinary recognition of her importance.

### **Ornette Coleman – Una Muy Bonita**

#### **21'20" ASAYL**

RICHARD: Then she wrote a very important book.

MARGARET: Published in 1977 – As Serious As Your Life, The Story of the New Jazz....

RICHARD: She traced the history of the jazz avant garde of the 60s and 70s, very thoroughly, by talking to the musicians about what THEY thought lay behind this movement.



MARGARET: As she says – or as the quote goes – it’s as serious as your life. Music isn’t a plaything, it’s as serious as your life. That’s McCoy Tyner. It IS as serious as your life, music! I couldn’t live without it, could you?

RICHARD: That was a very different book for her. It was a very thorough, extensive survey of the scene. Not much photography in it. It had a very important chapter – two chapters – about women in this music. One of which was about women’s role as support to the male musicians. But the second chapter about women was about women as musicians. Of course when Val wrote ASAYL there weren’t so many. And the women who did venture into that field, tended not to flourish. Now it’s very different. And Val helped that process along.

### **Albert Ayler – Holy Family**

#### **22’43” MOST IMPORTANT ART FORM**

MARGARET: “Black music is, with the cinema, the most important art form of this century. In terms of influence, there’s scarcely anyone untouched by it.” She’s right, there!

PAUL: When Val says, in “As Serious As Your Life”, that Black music is the most important art form of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – along with the cinema – when she makes that claim, she’s showing herself to be in touch with the cutting edge of African-American critical commentary on the culture.

### **Louis Armstrong – Potato Head Blues**

ANDREW: With someone like Louis Armstrong who began to improvise and to sing... even to this day, what we do is very much based on what Louis did. So, when you talk about Black music being one of the most potent and dynamic musics of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – I think, she was right about that.

#### **23’37”**

VAL: Look – Black music has influenced just about everything we hear. I mean, it’s a known fact that when people like Louis Armstrong started playing, it changed the way that the brass was played in symphony orchestras! It’s not a secret, it’s well known that sort of thing!

RICHARD: Without the music of African Americans, no Beatles, no Rolling Stones, never mind Glenn Miller or Elvis Presley, or Frank Sinatra. None of their music could have existed in anything like the form we know, without the music of the descendants of slaves. It’s the most extraordinary thing.

### **Louis Armstrong – Potato Head Blues ENDS**

#### **24’18” PAUL GILROY intro + Disco Fever**

PAUL: I knew all about Val long before I actually met her, I met her in the early 1980s. And I'd had some bad experiences trying to write for the music press. So, running into Val was a great moment for me because she was supportive and friendly, she didn't need to help me! (laughs) And I never forget the help she's given me with my own work, the odd pointers. That's not to say we agree on everything, and our musical tastes run in very different directions, for example!

### **Funky 4 + 1 More – Rappin and Rocking in the House**

In I think '82, we spent some time together in New York. And gradually that slight shyness I had towards her distinction started to melt away, and we became friends.

### **Funky 4 + 1 More – Rappin and Rocking in the House**

PAUL: I remember one night going up with her, up to the Disco Fever in the Bronx – the “ground zero” of hip hop culture. When I said to Val, we're going up there, do you wanna come, it might be interesting... I thought she'd say no! (laughs) I thought she'd say no because the music was a bit beneath her, it wasn't the pseudo-classic fruits of avant-garde modernist experimentation – well, it didn't appear to be, actually, maybe it was much more than we thought at the time! Anyway – but she was absolutely game. And I learned something new about her, which was her openness to experience, in particular to musical and cultural life. She was open, hadn't closed off. Because a lot of those people who are interested in the aspects of jazz that appear to be “esoteric”, a lot of those people are terrible snobs about jazz, and they police jazz terribly intensely. And Val is one of the rare people who doesn't have a DROP of the stamp-collector in her relationship with the things she cares about.

### **26'17" VAL PHONE CALLS**

#### **Duke Ellington – Sophisticated Lady**

PAUL: Val – she's a good friend, very generous...

#### *PHONE CALL BEGINS*

PAUL: ...funny, she's a very amusing conversationalist... the long, amusing phone calls where you get this slightly sardonic English commentary on the world and its perils, she's a very dry humour, absolutely.

*VAL ON PHONE: I dunno what's wrong with people today. D'you know, I went to some place, and I asked for a cup of tea which cost some enormous amount of money – and they served it in a cup which is like a soup bowl, so, immediately the temperature goes down – and the water hadn't boiled! I would have sent it back...*

RICHARD: When you talk to Val on the phone, it's – a phone call with Val – it can go on a long time, it can wander off in many many different directions over the course of the call! (laughs)

*VAL ON PHONE: ...I thought "you've got a damn nerve!" And why can't people make tea? What could be easier? You've got teabags, you don't even have to brew it! The proper way...*

MARGARET: Val, she likes to share things with people. And she often phones me up just to tell me some minor detail about something.

*PHONE CALL ENDS + MUSIC ENDS ABRUPTLY*

### **27'25" MOTHER & FATHER & BROTHER**

VAL: Go one now, where were we? Anyway – from early days, I lived in Streatham in South West London from the age of three and a half. My father died the day before my 7<sup>th</sup> birthday, I have a brother who's three years younger than me, and my mother was left with no money. And as a result she took in paying guests – lodgers – they'd live with you as a family and eat with you, eat the evening meal.

### **28'00" CHILDHOOD HOME – MINGUS + CHICKENS**

VAL: (WALKING / BIRDS FX) ...ah, here we are, this is Number 33... where the porch has now been given a front, and this is all new, used to be a path up there... and er... this is the house.

### **Charles Mingus – Pithecanthropus Erectus**

This is the house where Jesse Fuller came to stay, where Earl Warren and Herbie Lovelle came to take tea, from the best china... and Memphis Slim came for a meal, Henry Coker, Harry Carney with the Ellington Band, many times – loved my mother's cooking!

And when Charles Mingus came here, he was in London making a film called "All Night Long", loosely based on the Othello story, quite a mad film. And he was here and I got to know him, and I said would he come over for a meal? And when I went to pick him up he said, "I'm terribly sorry, we've gotta do something connected with the film, go to some event, could you apologise to your mother, I'll come again another date and I'll bring the food". So ok, another date was set, and he said "How many people are eating?" There were six of us. They'd not long started the Marble Arch barbecue, and he buys six chickens. I mean, this is unheard of – we used to see chicken at Christmas only, and I can remember when my grandmother said we could have chicken at Easter, that was absolutely amazing. Twice a year? Really? So anyway, we go in there, and he orders six chickens, they're wrapped up in some kind of greaseproof paper and that's wrapped round in newspaper, and he ordered about 12 pickled gherkins, Wallies!

### **Charles Mingus – Pithecanthropus Erectus**

And... we get back to Mum's, and he's a man of instant gratification, and – he's "hello, yeah, hi" to my mother, "Hello Mr Mingus, how are you?" And he rushes into the kitchen, throws all the packages of newspaper on to the table, and starts to get the chickens out. Mum's very refined, she wants to put some plates down, "wait a minute" – and he says "it's ok, we can eat like this, it's ok". He sits down with his hat and – he had a sort of plastic mac and beret on... sits down and starts eating! Well my mother, she'd never seen anything like this before. She just thought it was awful! So she left the room. And I said, "you can't do this, it's Charles Mingus!" She said, "I'm not gonna sit down and eat with that man." And, I was mortified, because this is my hero! And he's come here – "not only has he come here, he's kept his promise to you for messing up the other day, and he's brought all the food!" But she wouldn't have any of it, she wouldn't deal with him.

### **Charles Mingus – Pithecanthropus Erectus MUSIC ENDS**

And, when Mum was dying in the hospice, the last two weeks of her life, she said something to me – she said, without me saying anything to her, she said "You know dear, when that Charles Mingus came round, I shouldn't have behaved like that. But I didn't know that people lived like that." She'd obviously had her feelings of guilt about it. She'd learned so much from us to know that it was actually quite an offensive thing to do, in racial terms it would have been taken badly by someone like that – or it could've been. He didn't mind – well he didn't appear to mind, I don't know if he did, probably quite routine – but she said "I didn't know people lived like that. But I've learned so much about the world and its ways from what you and Clive have taught me."

### **31'30" CLIVE INTRO – LOUIS ARMSTRONG PHOTO**

CLIVE: My name is Clive Wilmer, I'm Val Wilmer's brother. I'm three years younger than her, I was born in 1945 – I suppose I'm a sort of literary person. From the age of 17 or 18 I wanted to be a poet, and I've published eight books of poetry.

CLIVE: So this was – did you make this up as a birthday present for me?

VAL: I think so, yes... "To Clive, happy birthday, hoping this reminds you of some swinging good times! Love Val, 10<sup>th</sup> of February 1988! I didn't realise it was as long ago as that – what a neat little album! There we are, that's Clive – long-sleeved shirt, tie, short trousers, long socks, and a smile on your face, cos you look like the cat that's got the cream!

CLIVE: (laughs) I was thrilled, yeah! You've got two of the most famous grins in the world there, mine and Louis Armstrong's! (laughs)

### **Louis Armstrong – Jeepers Creepers**

VAL: Louis Armstrong! With his trademark handkerchief at London Airport as it was then known. So that was the first picture. And then there we are – there's the man again! Couple

of years later, 1959, looking out of the window at the Gaumont State Kilburn. And what was he saying?

CLIVE: I think Val said must have said “say cheese”, or something, once you raised the camera – and he said “SPAGHETTI!” (laughs)

VAL: (laughs) That’s your man! Look at him.

### **Louis Armstrong – Jeepers Creepers (FADES OUT)**

#### **33’00” SWING SHOP**

VAL + CLIVE: Why don’t we wander along and look at the Swing Shop?

VAL: We’re now walking along Mitcham Lane, and we come up to this shop which now says 24 HOUR MINICABS, and this is where the Swing Shop used to be... I was walking along here one day. I remember what I was wearing – some little grey flannel shorts, and a wind cheater, zip up jacket. And I fancied myself, I thought I was a real tomboy, knew it all in the streets! (laughs) Aged 12! And something drove me in there. I went in there, and there was a man behind the counter – and he was a big guy, solid, big check shirt and lots of black curly hair, thick glasses. And he looked at me – probably thought “what’s this little girl want?!” – Beverley Sisters or something like that. And I said “You got any jazz records?” (laughs) – not knowing this was a jazz record shop! (Clive laughs) So he says “yeah, there’s one or two over there”. And facing his back to the window, was a big box with three divisions in it, full of 78s. All priced on the sleeve, thick cardboard sleeves. So of course I was a bit nervous, I went through them, and the first name I came to that I recognised was Humphrey Lyttelton – it was a record called “Fidgety Feet”.

### **Humphrey Lyttelton – Fidgety Feet**

And I thought, this’ll do – I couldn’t stand here much longer – this’ll do. It was two and sixpence, half a crown. So he said, oh you can have it for two bob. Two shillings. And so I bought my first jazz record. And I rushed home with it, and put it on the wind-up, and my mother said “what on earth’s that?” (laughs) And I said – “that’s jazz!” (laughs)

### **Humphrey Lyttelton – Fidgety Feet (ENDS)**

#### **35’00” PASSION FLOWER**

VAL: There we are... (FX record sleeve)... ok.

### **VINYL: Johnny Hodges – Passion Flower**

That’s the great Johnny Hodges playing ‘Passion Flower’, which was one of his *pieces de resistances* with the Ellington Orchestra, and he recorded it with a small group. But that’s on

the record, Rosemary Clooney and Duke Ellington 'Blue Rose', it's the only instrumental on the whole album. And I defy anybody to find anyone else who can play the saxophone like that!

I hadn't played it for years until a year ago, and..... I just think it's amazing. That glissandi is just out of this world... I found a secondhand copy of it. I've actually GOT a copy of it somewhere in this house, but my house is cluttered, it's hard for me to get to my records – and that's what I LIKE doing. I do not have downloads. You can have 'em – but I don't!

### **VINYL: Johnny Hodges – Passion Flower ENDS**

VAL (off mic): There you are! (laughs) You see what I mean?!

### **36'20" VAL'S CHARACTER**

MARGARET: Val is somebody... um... we both have a similar "unstructured" way of living if I can put it that way! – in terms of piles of books, belongings, records... it does come probably from a childhood of not wanting to waste things...

PAUL: There's something of that post-war, England, thrift, hard work, self-discipline – all of that's going on – she's a humble person. And I don't know how she thinks about herself at night, in the early hours of the morning, but she doesn't behave as if – she doesn't have any airs!

MARGARET: She doesn't feel she's better than everyone else and that therefore she deserves special privileges. But, she doesn't suffer fools gladly. She is not somebody who will take a slight lying down. And she, it's a combination of those parts of her that actually make her able to cope with what setbacks she's had to face, as well as go forward and keep trying to do different, new things!

### **37'25" CURRENT WORK**

#### **Ambrose Campbell – Yolanda**

VAL: I have been working in a rather different field of endeavour over the past couple of decades or more – writing what was originally going to be one book, and has now turned into several books, for my sins! They centre around the Black presence in Britain, particularly of musicians. They're not only – I'm not only writing about musicians, I'm writing about other people as well.

PAUL: She's someone who's changed their practice several times – photographer, journalist, critic, historian, and now the role of historian falls very much on her. I can't wait to see more of that work published.

### **38'10" BLACK HISTORY + REDUCTIVE**

VAL: The thing is, there's a lot of talk about Black history, and a lot of attention paid to it, and we have this Black History Month which of course is rather patronising, you know, cos every month should be Black History Month. Black History is OUR history, it's British history, it's very important. And er, it annoys me because, Black people – I'm making a sweeping statement here, but – Black people from all walks of life have often had to play the "minstrel", in order to earn a living. And I'm afraid that has continued through the years. And it's not recognised. It's all very well to smoke a spliff on the cover of NME or something, and twirl your dreadlocks around – I realise I'm walking on dangerous ground here – but, you know, the occasional statement is fine, but I find it's too glorified. I mean, I've been horrified sometimes at things I hear. I've heard in person people saying things, I've heard them on the radio, white people – and they really believe that all Black men are like Boyz N The Hood! They believe they're all living that life, and that that's their aspiration, to be a sort of "dope smoking pimp". What about all the people who go into the office every day? And the people who go to church? And the people who are doctors, lawyers and so on? They're not Boyz N The Hood, are they? It's so demeaning and reductive, it's reductive in the extreme, and I don't want to be any part of that.

#### 39'44" ETHICS + RESPONSIBILITIES

MARGARET: Val – she'd never be somebody to go for some cheap, sensationalised story just to get the by-line... no! And if she felt it was not appropriate for her to write something, or to tell somebody else's secrets or stories, she wouldn't do it.

VAL: You have to understand the history, and you have to earn people's respect. If people have confided in you, I feel that you have a responsibility to use their words in a respectful way. Especially when you are writing about Black music. There's a book called 'Black Talk' by Ben Sidran – it's talking about how the history of African-American people has been carried in the music. It goes back to slavery days... and it was forbidden to teach the enslaved people how to read and write. Black people lagged behind whites because they didn't have access to literacy and proper education, schools and so on... so the music became the vehicle for telling the history, the story of those people, in those communities. And when you realise that, that enhances your sense of responsibility. People are sharing their story with you, they're sharing their music – you are a guest in the community, and it behoves us to recognise that. If you're a guest, you don't abuse the privilege that the host allows you.

#### 41'12"

PAUL: Think of that scene at the end of Malcom X's biography, when the young white woman comes up to him and says "well, what can I do?" And he says – "go away. Go away. Leave us alone." And then he realised later the great deal of regret he had about that gesture. There was a real politics to this. And I don't myself think it's unhealthy to ask, "what is your investment in this history? How do you position yourself relative to this history?" I don't believe that history and culture are property, I don't believe they're owned by anybody... but that doesn't mean it's illegitimate to ask the white anthropologist-cum-

researcher, historian, what their investment is. And I think it's good for those people to ask themselves those questions and to answer them. I think it would be a great defeat to self-question, and to arrive at a destination which says, "well actually I have nothing to contribute, nothing to add". Even as a translator [.....] that's a responsible role. That's an ethical role. That's a perfectly appropriate role for a "intellectual" – Val would HATE me saying that! – but that's a perfectly responsible role for an intellectual to occupy.

42'40" JOHN TCHACHI

**John Tchachi – Round About Midnight**

RICHARD I remember, must be 7, 8 years ago, when the great Danish Congolese alto player John Tchicai was playing... he was a member of the New York avant garde of the 60s. Val knew him then but she hadn't seen him for decades. And I'd seen him a little more recently, so I said "come on Val, come and say hello". Tchicai's warmth towards her, this person he hadn't seen for a long time, it just told me everything I need to know about the support that she'd given to those musicians, when what they were doing was extremely unpopular. And she'd made them feel – if they needed validation, she gave it to them.

**John Tchachi – Round About Midnight ENDS + APPLAUSE**

VAL: D'you like it? It's absolutely amazing isn't it!

43'30" ENDS

R3 OUTRO:

**A PORTRAIT OF VAL WILMER was produced by Steve Urquhart. It was a Falling Tree Production for BBC Radio 3. And you'll find photographs taken by Val Wilmer, on our website – just search for SUNDAY FEATURE.**