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Bataan, Joe

Bronx African American History Project
Fordham University

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Transcriber: Angela Dugan

Mark Naison (MN): Hello, this is going to be the 174th interview of the Bronx African-American History Project. Okay, here we are at Fordham University on June 12, 2006 and we're honored to have Joe Bataan, one of the great musicians of the Latin Soul era who has reinvented himself with many new audiences. And interviewing are Maxine Gordon and Mark Naison, and our videographer is Princess Okieme. This is the 173rd interview of the Bronx African-American History Project.

Joe Bataan (JB): Unbelievable. [laughter]

MN: So tell us a little bit about your family and how they came to New York City.

JB: Well first let me thank you for having me, it's an honor to be here. My family, okay goes back to one of my songs Rainy Sunday Morning in 1942. That's when my mother was [unclear]. She was African-American, came back from Newport News, Virginia. She settled in New York and met my father who came from the Philippines. He's actually a chink and [unclear] straight black hair. He came all the way from San Diego across the United States to Harlem. Settled in Harlem and he met my mother there. Of course I was conceived, and that was the beginning now. They had a little problem there because when I was born he decided if I was going to be a boy my name was going to be Bataan, but if I was a girl it was going to be Corregidor.

Maxine Gordon (MG): Uh oh.

JB: Now you got to understand the history of World War II back then. Corregidor's an island. Bataan is an island. United States knew nothing about this so they had to get permission. Because you know at that time, you have to understand, they wanted to

know what that name meant. Was it something involving war-like profanity [unclear], so we had to look up [unclear] in the dictionary. And of course the name Bataan is my first name. Actually people think it's my last name and people think it's my first name. And it means the word youth. And so there in Harlem Hospital, the town was brewing [laughter] the rest is I guess a little history.

MN: Now what sort of work was your father doing when you were born?

JB: Well as I told you he took his brother's papers and joined the navy and when he came over here he got an accountable and I guess he could. Back then for Filipinos coming in, they do work in the fields just like the Chicanos did in California, but he came here and he was a short-order cook. Turned out to be very good at it. I mean he cooked at all these Jewish resorts so he was in high demand. He did a lot of seasonal work. Have you heard of seasonal work it's- -that's like merchant marine, going away and coming back? Well he did that cooking. So he would go to the Catskills.

MN: Oh wow!

JB: And in the summertime and in the winter he'd go down to Florida, so he always missed the cold. But he didn't like the cold, and he would cook down some of the swankiest hotels in Florida. And I saw him maybe six months, but it was exciting.

MG: What was is your last name?

JB: Okay that was funny because people keep asking me that. My last name is Nitalano. It has sort of an Italian ring to it and when I asked him questions about it he said they're not going to even expect. He said back then a lot of Americans came over to the Philippines and they integrated. And I guess the Spaniards, and what they were able to

do was change a lot of the history in the Philippines, but they could never change the language.

MN: What language did your father speak as his first language?

JB: It's Por- -well it's Tagalog. Tagalog. I guess English over here- -he used to tell me stories when he came to United States- -he used to ask for directions and people said which way to go [unclear] okay that way, and everybody else would point the other way so I guess that was a [unclear] back then. But you have to understand coming to this country, back then it was not a lot of time given to them except for the freedom that they were going to get here.

MN: Did your father speak any Spanish?

JB: Yes he did. It's amazing because until I studied the history, I had no knowledge that Filipinos spoke Spanish because they were conquered and occupied by the Spaniards until we had the Spanish-American War, where they got delivery, but they spoke Spanish. Their names are Spanish.

MN: His background was predominantly Chinese? He was a Chinese Filipino or did he have Polynesian ancestry also?

JB: Good question. As far as I know it's Filipino-Filipino. He wasn't a hawk- -that's what the hawks grew up in Pompinia. He had a proverb and it used to make me laugh. He said the Japanese are here, and the Chinese are here. He said the Filipinos are the good people. [laughter] I don't know why. Because it's like he said look, God is making man, and he made the first one and put him in the oven and he came out too light. He said I out the next one in he came out too dark. He said they put the Filipino and he came out [unclear] [laughter]. So what are you going to say? [laughter] Memories.

MN: Was your family Catholic?

JB: My father was. My mother, she wasn't at all with anything. I mean, she wanted me to go to church, and she made me make my communion, and of course that was the norm back then in Spanish Harlem. Most families were Catholic. When they came here, at least the Spanish people and the Puerto Ricans [unclear].

MG: So your mother's African-American?

JB: Right.

MG: And your father's Filipino?

JB: Right.

JB: And so he identified as a Latino? That's why you lived in Spanish Harlem.

JB: No, no, no. It's a rarity. You didn't find many chinks or Filipinos like that living in Harlem.

MG: Right.

MN: Now some- -when you use the term chink, is that- -

JB: I don't call it derogatory; you know you have chinky eyes. You have to understand people couldn't tell Chinese, Japanese, and Filipinos apart- -and it took me awhile, it's the eyelids, it's how tall you are, and it's how close the eyes are. And for some reason you couldn't really talk, especially when you'd hear them talk. But the different sizes and I guess the arrogance of their culture, you can tell. And the walk. It's like Bruce Lee says when he says, man you see Chinese walking this way. Well he's not into nothing. If he walks straight then you know he demands respect. And a lot has to do with that. They do it in the karate, in the catas and they show their stance and how they stand up. And he says how they gained their respect, that's why a lot of the Chinese used to be

farmers. They'd have to defend themselves with any kind of tool. They didn't have the weapons like the samurais had the sharp weapons. And that's who became dominant I guess in history.

MG: But the - -so how- -were their other Filipino people in the barrio?

JB: Yes but not that many.

MG: [unclear]

MG: Yes they used to play cards. Filipinos loved to gamble. And they used to have a card pledge where they'd play munta. And they would go out there in the nighttime. We didn't what it was, it was always private. But they would get together and I used to hear them talk. I never understood what they were saying, but- -

MG: You don't speak the language?

JB: No, excuse me, but the only word I ever learned was puta, and I knew that was a curse. But they used to laugh every time I used to say that. But every other word was that. It was just like what up, what up. They were very private, they didn't bother anybody. And of course if they were accepted in the neighborhood, nobody bothered them either. So the old ones had a handful of Irish. Maybe one or two are still left there, somebody names were Russian, but the [unclear] in East Harlem. And [unclear]

MG: And when did you learn Spanish?

JB: In East Harlem.

MG: In the neighborhood.

JB: Because they were speaking Spanish I had to learn. My wife was Puerto Rican, and I had to speak whatever she did. She grew up while speaking English. But growing up we had to learn quickly because, most of my playmates were Puerto Rican.

MN: Now did the kids in the neighborhood speak Spanish in the street?

JB: Oh yes.

MG: In the barrio, yes.

JB: Yea, sure. I mean it was like, you would say it was half.

MN: So they moved back and forth from Spanish to English.

JB: It became Spanglish, and they called them nuyoricans.

MN: Can you speak some Spanglish for us?

JB: I don't know if this Spanish. I'd say [Spanish] - -I would talk to you and I would say [Spanish], and then I would say how you doing, and I would say yes [Spanish]. [laughter]

I would always break it up and you would know if you went to Puerto Rico, they'd stop me and tell me you're around a lot of Puerto Ricans, you have to speak like the natives.

[unclear]

MG: Not like nuyoricans.

JB: We'd speak Spanish, yes like nuyoricans. So that was always a standing joke between nuyoricans and people that lived in New York. [unclear]

MG: But I'm from the same year you are, so I speak nuyorican too.

JB: Okay. [laughs]

MG: If you're born in 1942, we all- -we have too.

JB: Baby, baby boomers. Yes.

MG: But what about on your mother's side? So in the barrio, you identify as Latino?

You identify as Filipino, Black?

JB: I never thought about things like that. This is very odd because I grew up in a predominantly Puerto Rican neighborhood, of course there were Blacks, there were Chinese, there were Jewish. And we went to school, and almost everybody - -

MG: Where did you go?

JB: P.S. 72 on 104th Street, Lexington and Park. And most everybody had to speak English in school. Now the kids that were handicapped were the ones that couldn't speak English. If you just came from Puerto Rico and you didn't know the language, they'd put you in a special class, right? And growing up there in [unclear], it was pretty easy for me. But then when I had to go out and play after school, then the language changed. Because everybody was predominantly Spanish, so I had to learn. So you hear the word, and the first word you learn of course, a curse word. [laughter]

MG: Of course.

JB: And at that time what we didn't have was the conventional balls to play with a bat. We'd pick up broomsticks, play with the cans. And we'd throw the cans at each other and we'd throw those cans as far as we could. Sometimes they would end up on the roof of the school and everything, but that was big to us. So the fear of growing up was eliminated by the rough games that we played. We used to play ring your leader, coca poa. We used to play Johnny and the pony.

MN: Johnny and the pony.

JB: Oh man these were great games because here it is, there's no bigger thrill than running on top of ten guys [laughter] that are all like a pony and trying to knock them down, and shaking them for [unclear]. Because TV wasn't dominant back then. We had

all good fun. And then radio was great. Put on that radio Saturday morning, hear Top 40, was something you fell in love to. It was a romantic atmosphere [unclear].

MN: Now were most of the buildings five story walk-up tenements?

JB: Yes, most of them. Yes [unclear]. They were just, yes; five or six story was big. [laughs].

MN: Now you spend a lot of time on the stoop, the fire escape, or the roof?

JB: Oh sure. We had to love law [laughter] on Park Avenue. Now the story about the love hall is that it had an echo chamber. You know how you go in there and your voice would project like an echo [makes echo noise]? So it was great to sing in. So everybody that thought they had aspirations of singing went to the love hall. Of course you brought your girlfriend- -you always wanted to make out in the hallways because you couldn't go home. You couldn't bring your girlfriend home, so you would go to the love hall. And everybody would tag their name on the love wall, and everybody knows everybody that went there from 1950 on. Meanwhile, we used to sing there, and that was like our starting ground. Aside from that, the subway station, because there was no greater echo than the subway. And you sang- -and a lot of those R&B groups back then like Snake, The Five Keys, a lot of those groups started right down there in the subway.

MN: What were the first groups that you heard on the radio that made a big impression on you?

JB: You know, as funny as it might seem, it wasn't R&B groups. It was Gershwin, to me, it was Cole Porter because that's how we grew up. Our heroes were Black. You understand? We didn't have African studies in school [laughter]. That was foreign to us, alright? And so a corset to the Black Panthers called me up one day, and I wrote on the

back of my album cover- -and it would say the [unclear] more so than a chocolate bar of candy and George Washington and such and such. They said Joe, why are you using the White girls to depict what you're doing? And I never thought about it so I started getting conscious about what I said, and what I was talking about. So when I thought about it, we changed it to George Washington Carver [laughter]. But you know you had to satisfy so many people back then because you [unclear]. At that time the consciousness of the country was on a lot of things. There were a lot of issues. Education, drugs, marriage, schooling. There was a thing in California for schools probably to have Spanish as a second language. We didn't have that over here. We didn't know anything about Rosa Parks and things like that. We didn't know. Right here the only hero I ever knew was Jackie Robinson. He was a baseball player. He broke the color line. Thank God that we had him. And then gradually the Brooklyn Dodgers, the baseball team that was here in New York, was responsible for breaking a lot of the color lines.

MN: Did you root for the Dodgers?

JB: No. I was a Yankee fan.

MN: You were a Yankee fan. [laughter]

JB: And that's ironic because here are brothers and sisters that lived in the neighborhood were going to take me to a baseball game, and I hated baseball. And here I am in Evans Field in Brooklyn watching a game, and I see this exciting player that no one has ever played a game before, and it's Jackie Robinson.

MG: Wow.

JB: He was so exciting that even though I liked what he was doing, I didn't root for him, but that was because of where I grew up. And then it wasn't until my consciousness reached out until I got older.

MG: When did you start singing?

JB: Oh boy. I was singing ever since I was 8 or 9 years old. They threw me out the choir. They said I had a frog in my voice. But the truth was that I couldn't sing with the girls, and I guess the teacher didn't know that the girls sing higher than the boys because they have a different pitch level. And here I am [sings in high voice], and I couldn't do it [unclear] try something else, and she threw me out. [laughs]

MN: And this was in school?

JB: Yes, P.S. 72. Because I kept blowing by trial and error. I was determined and I would imitate Nat King Cole. [crosstalk]

MG: I caught Nat King Cole in Chicago.

JB: Yes and all those guys. And any other guys that tried to play, and then eventually I became my own style. They said because I was a cross between being Black and being Puerto Rican. So my culture that came out was really Joe Bataan was a combination because I actually tried to pronounce my words. You see so that had a lot to do with my [unclear], I looked at it. But when it came down to whole soul, a lot of things I couldn't do because I didn't grow up in the church, or the gospel [unclear]. So that's another [unclear]. I had to research some my own and find out how I develop my style and what I found out, I was very gifted in one way. But I knew that the competition to become another Nat King Cole was just too tremendous. Going to be [unclear] was just too tremendous. So I developed my own style and that gave me a shortcut, so actually you

would have thought that I was trying to make my entrance to music through the American feel, but actually the American feel dominated over the Latin. Latin hadn't even crossed over in New York. And then finally bridging that gap, I believe a lot of the [unclear] from my era were the beginning of Latin music crossing over into American [unclear].

MN: Now who were some of the Latin musicians you grew up hearing in East Harlem?

JB: Eddie Parmerry, Joe Cuba, [unclear], Tino Rodriguez. They all [unclear].

MG: Yes.

JB: He was the sweetheart of Latin Music. He had such a golden voice. Then of course [unclear], then it was Frankie Lymon, the Flamingos, The Heartbeats, [unclear] The Limelighters, and putting that all together it was a combination of a style see because, when those songs, they never grew old, and I was able to research those songs and bring them back and people thought they were new. But they were actually old songs done differently, and I guess that –

MG: Did you do your own arrangements?

JB: Yes.

MG: You did?

JB: I'm a self-taught musician.

MG: You are [crosstalk]

MN: Now how did you learn to play the piano?

JB: While I was infirm for infirmary. [crosstalk]. I was in West [unclear] New York State Vocational Institute.

MN: Wow.

JB: I was sent there for five years. I think I stole a car and I was involved in a robbery.

And when I went up to the judge, my mother was there. She had spent all this money on this lawyer and he said he was going to get me out to come home. Of course my godfather was Italian and he didn't understand. That was a weird combination, don't ask me how. [laughter] He said, uh you're going to get this boy out right? Oh yes, excuse me I'm sorry [cell phone ringing]

MG: [laughs] It's okay.

JB: [on the phone] I'll have to call you back I'm doing an interview. Alright.

MG: [laughter]

MN: So you had an Italian godfather?

JB: Yes.

MG: From the neighborhood probably.

JB: Nooo.

MG: No?

JB: I don't know how he met my mother, but I never asked a lot of questions. But he was my godfather and my mother asked him for help. And he went to see that lawyer and said you better get this boy out or else. I didn't understand that [laughter] I didn't understand. But he liked me, because when I was younger he had fell of a ladder in Poughkeepsie, I guess my mother did cleaning for him and housework, and I ran and got help and he never forgot that.

MN: So your mother also worked, she did domestic work.

JB: Yes all her life. I mean I was the cleanest kid in the neighborhood because she was such handy at washing clothes. I changed my shirt three times a day.

MN: Now did she do day work or work for particular families.

JB: She worked for the Katz family, which she had to do their laundry. She cleaned the doctor's office.

MG: Downtown or the Bronx.

JB: No right around the neighborhood. She used to work downtown also. I guess I got my hustle from my mother. She was always [unclear]. She was no taller than 4'9''.

MG: Whoa.

JB: And she was a bundle of energy. Everybody knew my mother in the neighborhood. They'd say there goes Maymay, there goes Maymay because threw all the neighborhood dances with me everybody hung up in my house.

MG: Oooohh.

JB: So I grew up before my time because everybody that was around me was older than me.

MN: Did she charge admission to the dances?

JB: Yes she did. We had a little cloak called the The Saransons she started, it became a baseball team.

MN: What was it called?

JB: Saransons.

MN: Saransons.

JB: Right. It became a baseball team, then a social club, and then they'd end up fighting.

[laughter] Most of the clubs ended up that way [unclear]. Somebody would always come around and say we don't like you. Or they would say something to your girlfriend and that would evoke some kind of –

MN: So how much would you charge for a party.

JB: Oh well back then it was a quarter.

MN: Did she have food?

JB: Yeeeaahh. They had the chips and whatever they had, and money that we would use for dudes to buy sweaters. And finally we got our jackets maybe after waiting two years.

MG: [unclear] then?

JB: No I was just playing records. My mother threw the dances at the neighborhood school because back then they had to make that available to the community. [crosstalk] [unclear] every Friday we had dances. A lot of things back then were like that. We had the canteen and understreet, these different places that we threw dances. That was a big escape for a lot of people. We didn't have a lot of TV. Everybody didn't have a TV.

MN: Right.

MG: Did you have live band or it was mostly records?

JB: Mostly records. Mostly records back then.

MG: you ever have neighborhood bands? Like local bands?

JB: Well yes, Spanish groups. There were trios. They would play the guitar folkloric in the apartment, and they would play cans in the street with it and get background to it and combinations [unclear].

MN: Now did you work hard in school? Were you a good student?

JB: At first. I was a great student, except that I had trouble with the seven times tables. Once my mother had a couple of drinks and she made me stand on the table and repeat the seven times tables.

MN: She made you stand on this table.

JB: On this table yes. [laughter]

MN: Do you want to give us a demonstration? [laughter]

JB: I stood on that table for three hours, ma can I come down? No you stay up there!

She had a couple of drinks. [laughter] That's how we all did back then. Boy did I know my seven times tables.

MG: I bet you did.

JB: Day and night.

MN: Now when did you start to turn away from school? Or did that actually happen to you?

JB: When you start [unclear] [laughter] I guess when started taking note of girls. I was really shy. I didn't have brothers and sisters.

MG: You were an only child.

JB: Yes. Well as far as I knew. [laughter]

MG: And now you found some right?

JB: Well that's another story. I went to play Philadelphia once and here's, what's the guy's name? He's singing there in the other room and one of the guards comes over and says I'm the [unclear] of Philadelphia. And he says the guy upstairs is your brother. So before I could say whip bang boom boom. Here's this guy rushing to me and he grabs me and he hugs me and he squeezes me tight, and he says yo I'm your brother, you don't know the story. Your mother [unclear] And before I knew it, I had a [unclear].

Something must've happened somewhere along the line and apparently when I got home and questioned my mother, she said yes.

MG: Oooh.

JB: So he was a child that was born. He was older than me, he was a boxer. And we never really got to see him that much, but I guess he was my half brother.

MN: Now did a lot of guys, when they reached adolescence, get drawn into the street and turning off school?

JB: Well yes, because there was the motivation factor. At that time college was out of range for a lot of us. Just like music lessons. My mother would always say do you want a piano? But my mother couldn't afford a piano. Of course I wanted a piano. But she couldn't afford it so, we thought about the next way possible to get it so we took shortcuts. We went to the neighborhood center. We went to somebody's house. See at that time the only [unclear] wore black [unclear] was to become an athlete or to sing. But that was your college. You didn't make it in that, you better hit the mills or the factory because the education didn't play that big of a role [unclear].

MN: Were there teachers who took an interest in you?

JB: Yes. Some took an interest. Later on, I mean I had scholarships to go to Howard and a couple, but it was too late. When I got in trouble they sent me away. He said I don't understand. He said you dress nice, you're fairly bright, and you're a great athlete, because I was a very good athlete, and he says I can get you into a lot of schools. How come you keep getting into trouble? It was having all that time on your hands. That's what happens to a lot of people, a lot of youngsters. And being that I work in the system now, I see it.

MG: How old were you when you go in trouble? When you went away?

JB: Oh the first time was nine. I just happened to be running [crosstalk] and everybody runs in the neighborhood, and they were coming out with stuff that was for free. But actually I didn't know they were breaking in, and of course I was the last one and the smallest one to run and I got caught. So they took me down to the family court, and after they finished testing me with pictures and all that, they found out that my IQ was fairly high and I didn't need to be incarcerated at that time, at nine years old so I was let go. But then again, after that when I started to fill my oats, when I started to defend myself, I told people I felt I had an advantage, I started to get cocky.

MN: What do you mean you found that you could fight?

JB: Yes. I didn't lose many fights and I was very good with my hands. But that was only because I was ambidextrous. As a kid my father had me in the back punching this bag. Where I used to go buy the newspaper with my father, this kid used to pick on me all the time named Popeye. And everytime I would come home with a bloody nose, because he'd always punch me, and I would tell my father [unclear] they were very funny parents. They didn't get involved when you had a confrontation. They let you handle it. So I was always getting beat up. So one day he surprised me and he got a bag full of socks, tied it up to the apartment next door, and told me to come over there and start punching it. And that's what I did. From that I developed some kind of skills from punching, being ambidextrous with my left hand and right hand, and we went to buy the paper next time and I knocked him down. I never had a problem with him again.

MN: That was very typical in those days. My father bought me boxing gloves, he taught me wrestling. By the time I was fifth grade I was beating up everybody in my school.

JB: See that got out of hand. That can really get out of hand, just like taking karate or any other kind [unclear]. You know you have to have humility. You have to have fear of something. Once you start having the fear, and that's what happened to me. At the early age of fourteen and fifteen, I started having fear and I thought that I could get away with a lot of things and one thing led to another. I mean at fifteen I was running the neighborhood practically as the leader of The Dragons.

MG: Oooh.

JB: People feared me all over East Harlem.

MN: This was a gang called The Dragons.

JB: Oh yes very famous. Dragons and the Vicelords was a feud that happened for many years.

MG: Yes.

JB: Yes from Uptown to –

MG: But The Dragons is a Puerto Rican?

JB: Yes, both of them.

MN: [crosstalk]

JB: They took me for Puerto Rican.

MG: Yes right! Oh that's really interesting.

MN: So what were you called? The warlord? The vice council?

JB: I worked myself up to be the president.

MN: The President of the –

JB: Yes The Dragons. And actually when I became president there were only two guys left in the gang. [crosstalk] And I guess I had my reputation down there. We didn't have our hands, we had a gun and that was dangerous back then because –

MN: You had real guns, not zip guns?

JB: Well occasionally a real gun came in. Then we had some [unclear] in East Harlem. I don't know if you remember those Velucci killings. And then there was Dracula. This was the front page back then. And those killings started to open up the juvenile laws of what was happening in the city with our kids.

MN: I remember the Caveman and the [unclear]

JB: Those stories started to come out back then.

MG: That took place in the late 50's right?

MN: Yes that was '59.

JB: Right exactly. Yes good memory. So that was like oh boy. And I guess that was fortunate for me that right after that, I was sent away. So whatever happened after that, I missed.

MG: Were you involved when they moved to take the swimming pool- -when they didn't let the kids use the swimming pool? Further east in the Italian neighborhood?

JB: We had a problem with the Red Wigs back then. We didn't go venture into that neighborhood.

MN: The Red Wigs were Italian?

MG: Yes.

JB: And they were from Pleasant Avenue on 60th Street. So we didn't go up there and they didn't come down our way. You came down our way you got beat up.

MG: Was it later that they moved further east and took the pool from the --?

JB: They tried something like that, but it was predominantly Italians.

MG: So you left that alone and [unclear] stayed there.

JB: They went there anyway in the daytime, but what could you do in the daytime?

[unclear] it was at night. They wouldn't venture around those neighborhoods. And how ironic it was, that after they threw me out of Thomas High School, which I forget the name of - -its Thomas school now - -

MN: Norman Thomas.

JB: I went to Benjamin Franklin, which is the school on 116th [laughter], science or something like that. They changed the name again. And I couldn't get in the school and they said we don't want him in here. He's a bum. He got thrown out of the other school. What are you thinking, he had an assault there. So I went and got this priest, Father Elise, and he was one of those activists. And he said how dare them. You come with me, I'm going to get you back in school. He said you want to go? I said yes. He took me back there. When he finished with that principal, the principal was like, I'm not going to let him in here! He said you shouldn't have all these people in the school in the first place, how are you going to deny him? And something happened, and he got me into that school. And that changed my life. I was about to make the basketball team, but because I had failed subjects, they didn't allow me to play. I won my first relay at the Mayor's track meet.

MN: What distance did you run?

JB: I ran a short distance, but because I did cross country also, I was a sprinter. And I won the Mayor's trophy in '57. I was in junior high. The after that I broke my novice on

my first race, and they said oh you got a lot of talent. He said I can get you into a lot of schools. And that's when my whole dream faded because it was too late. When I started to [unclear] and rob, the judge decided to send me away because I had got into trouble three times. I was on bail three times. So I was clutching to me rosary when I got sentenced, and I heard that judge say a definite three to five years, I said well it can't be that long. Then I started to ask the guy when he was taking me back to in the [unclear], and he said all you have to stay is three months and you'll be home. It didn't work out that way. I was there frankly 2 ½ years before I [unclear]. But it's probably the best thing that ever happened to me.

MG: Many people have said that.

JB: Oh yes. I graduated three time while I was in there, I got my allegiance diploma, I was the first kid to ever pass the high school equivalency when I was only sixteen, which you weren't allowed to take at that time. You were supposed to be eighteen. I lied. Imagine lying in prison. [laughter] And then they forgot. They didn't know what to do with me because I had passed that exam. So then I didn't stop, I went on to get my reader's diploma and after that we got me into Bronx Community College for a while because the music came along and then the rest is history.

MN: Now when you were out on the street, did you have any thought of being a professional musician?

JB: Nah, I wanted to be a baseball player.

MG: Oooh.

JB: My dream was to follow the stitch of Jackie Robinson. And I was good at sports, but then I started to realize that I might not have had the physical qualities to do a lot of these things. So something else better come along. I made it singing.

MN: When you say you didn't have the physical qualities, you weren't big enough?

JB: I think so. I wasn't big enough. I was too short to play basketball so they said.

Even though that's not true. Baseball I thought I could've had a shot, but because of the turn of events, having going, my critical years were when I was in prison.

MN: Right.

JB: I mean nobody could beat me running. And all the things that I could've done were wasted inside. All that time that I could've been out trying out for some big organization at that time, I was inside. So by the time I came out of there, I was on parole.

MG: How old were you when you came out?

JB: Oh, seventeen, eighteen.

MG: But you were young.

JB: Nineteen, something like that. But I had to work. So here I was, I was trying to dress with a cashmere coat out there. I had to get a job and I was a delivery boy. And they had me carry these hundred pound packages, and here I was trying to go to Bronx Community College at night. There was no way on that salary. It was \$1.25 an hour. So by the time –

MG: [unclear]

JB: Yes, I carried those packages from 6th Avenue to 11th Avenue, and I walked to 11th and said I can't do it. He says, what do you mean, you're on parole. I said, I can't do it, it's too far. And I can't dress like this and go back to school. I said there's no way I'm

going to be able to do it. So I quit. So he always wanted to know [unclear] they wanted to get into your business. And then I was happy because I had a child, and I wanted to get married. And she had the baby when she was thirteen. [gasps] I was fifteen. So the baby grew up while I was away. When I came home, eventually we got married, was a family, [unclear] I couldn't even go to the bathroom without hearing I was going to get married and try to support a family. We went through trial and tribulation with that for a while. Everybody was trying to help us out. We got an apartment. Of course if you know anything about youngsters trying to make it in this world without any kind of help, it's very difficult. I ended up going back to prison. And eventually when I came out, I got a job with the Counsel of Foreign Relations. I don't know how they talked that lady into hiring me, but this was the [unclear] place on Park Avenue. [unclear] the Kennedys go there and –

MN: When was your second time in prison? How old were you?

JB: Oh I was about nineteen. I came home when I was about twenty-two, or twenty-one.

MN: And your music career started after the second time?

JB: Yes, it briefly tried to erupt during the first time [laughter] but it happened, I was sent away and then I had to regroup and get my [unclear] together. And I did a lot of writing inside the reformatory.

MN: What was the difference between going to a youth facility, and going to an adult facility?

JB: One was biggie adolescence, thank God. But the [unclear] was lock-up. That's where they lock the door. You see a lot of the youth facilities, they're required not to

lock doors on the residents that are fifteen and younger. [unclear] childcare, so the laws are different. The other one was a lock-up and one was a [unclear].

MG: Where you work now is a lock-up.

JB: Yes, it's not a lock-up.

MG: It's not a lock-up. It's [unclear]

JB: Right. Only in a severe situation we lock a child up. But by the laws, the child abuse laws we don't lock kids up, unless they have weapons.

MN: Were there gangs in Cansackey when you were there?

JB: [laughter] Oh boy let me tell you. When I got down I had three people approach me when I was upstairs at orientation, and they kept saying where are you going to stand? I didn't know what they were talking about. And this is by crossroad of my life, identity.

Because everybody that was –

MG: Are you Black, are you –

JB: Yes, they wanted to know what the heck I am! So they said you're going to stand with us right? With all the Latinos and Puerto Ricans. I said yes. And then the Blacks say, boy aren't you going to stay with us? So I didn't know whether [unclear] Black or yellow [laughter] and all them. And then they had White kids that were the good boys. They didn't want to be associated with Black or Puertos so they [unclear] on the wall. The Blacks had their wall, and those that didn't want to get into any trouble, they stayed in the middle. They were called creeps. [unclear Spanish] That means home of cigarettes. [laughter] And to see all this in one little yard, and to see the authority not doing anything about it, and then condoning it is how they kept the peace, you start

different thoughts about American and about everything that goes on. Because I was a number. 12-173. I will never forget that number.

MN: Twelve –

JB: 173.

MN: 1-2-1-7-3.

JB: That's what they say. Here you're called by a number. You're told what to do in and out. It takes something from you. You really have to be strong to survive something like that.

MN: Toots and the Maytoves have this song, 5448 that's my number.

JB: Wow.

MN: I'll play it for you when we get back to the office.

JB: Yes the number that's what it was. Then, memories there I wouldn't want to share with anybody, but then it is- -it needs to be, it was because a lot of things that happened there, shouldn't happen. I went to return there after I became famous, to play for the population. And I wasn't treated very well. They actually went through my car to search for –

MN: These are the guards?

JB: Yes weapons, and then they only let me play for the Latino and Black population.

MG: Wow.

JB: They didn't let me play for the White kids. So it was like filtered racism in the jails, and you have that to this day. We got guys doing life in California everyday, and the conditions are so horrible that it never gets out that people don't know why these people end up being like animals. The rehabilitation thing –

MG: They said that some of the best musicians in New Orleans are in jail for life. But you can't get a band there because they have the streets stark rule.

JB: Wow.

MG: [unclear] Dr. John.

JB: yes, Dr. John.

MG: You can't get a band; they're all locked up for life.

JB: Whoo!

MG: That's unbelievable right?

JB: Yes, when you think about, a lot of people made mistakes back then and it cost them.

I guess, it's still vibrant. Sometimes you look in the [unclear] a lot of people have survived I know, but it didn't make it any easier for people who ended up doing [unclear]. A lot of things weren't available to us like it is now. If I knew I could go to school - -there's not a kid in this country that shouldn't have the chance not to go to school. Everybody has the opportunity. They don't even take advantage of it. And I'm thinking about me, I *wish* I was living back now and we had the free education all these things that I can do now. There's no telling what I would've done.

MN: Now when you were growing up in East Harlem, did you every go up to the Bronx?

JB: Yes, it was difficult because the Bronx was like Connecticut. You had to travel, so if you didn't know how to travel you weren't going anywhere. If you took a train, it was slow as molasses. Or you had to take the bus, and then you had to go through yellow to get to the bus, and change here to get back here. I remember going to Coney Island, it took a whole day to go to the beach. And then you got there, you were tired, you were angry, you were nasty, the food was stale, the sandwiches were soggy [laughter], and

then the water - -forget it. It was piss pure! Everybody was in the water, but then that was probably [unclear] back then. It's not like you have now, the Internet, and everything is so close. Back then if I had a girlfriend that lived in Brooklyn, I would only call her two or three days and then we'd call it quits because I couldn't go to Brooklyn all the time.

MG: What about the career? How did you start the band - -the first band?

JB: Well after I came out I was determined to start this band, and I went into the Center on 106th Street called Willymetager. And it was a grand piano in the auditorium. And I had seen –

MN: Was this in the settlement house on 105th?

JB: This was a public school.

MN: Oh a public school.

JB: Yes, it was an auditorium where I got my first spot in. Junior High School 13, and there was a director there, I forget his name now, but I'd ask could I go in there and touch base with him. Everybody knew I was the neighborhood thug back then, but they saw it was a change in me, and for me to say that I wanted to be a part of anything that was art, a piano, they'd say go ahead.

MN: So everybody knew you from The Dragons?

JB: Oh yes, my reputation was widely known.

MG: Did you go by Joe Bataan then?

JB: No I went by Bataan.

MG: Bataan was it.

JB: It was a name that –

MG: Struck fear.

JB: Yes. [laughter] It struck fear because no one had ever heard that name.

MG: Right.

JB: Nobody knew the history of Bataan. That it was from the Philippines, and brought over here [unclear] let me take Bataan. So folks associated it with something like, or whatever it was, a nickname. My nickname, everybody else in the neighborhood was using nicknames, and here I use my real name and that's how they always used to catch me. [laughter] You see they let me sue my real name, right? [unclear] So they say he's got a mole on his left cheek, and his name is Bataan. Okay come to my house and fix me up.

MG: Oh.

JB: Don't ever put a tattoo on your arm.

MG: [unclear]

JB: Yes I used to tell kids, I don't have time. But no, God forbid you ever do something wrong, they just look at the tattoo as a mark for life to identify you. My kids, nobody wants to have a tattoo.

MN: Now you learned to play piano in Cansagi?

JB: Actually my teacher was Mark Francis. He's a graduate of Juilliard School of Music. And when he got there, his first rule was you don't touch any instrument here, unless you're going to [unclear]. And we had to read the books. We had to study the theory.

MG: He was teaching music at Cansagi?

JB: Yes he got the job. They threw somebody out that had been there for years.

MN: At the prison.

JB: Yes. We didn't have to qualify –

MG: What's his name?

JB: Mark Francis. And because I learned, I wasn't very good at it [unclear] I never could hit the line notes. But I saw this kid, he happened to be playing the piano one day, and I was amazed at the chords and the structure and the sound that was coming out of the piano. So actually I was very good at watching somebody do something [unclear] So when I got home I remembered those same keys, and I discovered that it was three chords. It was a triad right? And I played those three chords and wrote about ten songs, on three chords. I played backwards, frontwards, sideways. And it was [demonstrating] dan-dan-dan, dan-dan-dan, and anyway I wanted. Change the beat, and that's how I developed to try to be a writer. Because I learned different chords.

MN: Now did you write in English?

JB: Yes.

MG: That's the thing about what they call Latin. With the style that he invented, they said it's Latin but he's singing in English. So nobody had done that.

MN: Its Latin beats, but you're singing in English.

JB: Right, see what had happened was, I grew up in the R&B day, rock 'n roll. But actually when Latin came along, I found out that the cha-cha beat, was pretty similar to the disco beat. It's just that I did it in English. But people didn't know how to tell the story. And I was very good at that. I had written many songs like that, so what I did was transfer my stories and my history and what I went through to the music. And I made it fit.

MG: So how did you get your first recording?

JB: First recording. I went into the Milgoode Center. I couldn't get a band to play with me for beans. I had everybody try. I had girls, boys, everything that you want to name under the sun. Everybody was always giving me a hard time. I couldn't keep a band together. Finally it was a group of kids playing in the auditorium one day, and they were about twelve years old- -thirteen years old. And I saw this and my dream was there to [unclear]. So I went up to the piano, they had no piano player, and I stuck a knife into the piano. I said I'm the leader of the band. Anybody have any objections. So of course I was the number one thug.

MG: Is that true?

JB: This is true. So [unclear] I was the [unclear] of the band! [laughter] So the problem was, what came with the territory, I had to take all of them home. That's when I was nineteen, they were twelve. And their parents didn't want them to play with me, so I had to convince them, look I'm trying to start this, I'll bring them home every night, let me rehearse with them. And finally, they were skeptical, but they allowed me.

MN: This is at Junior High School 13?

JB: 13 yes. And the rest is history.

MN: And these are your musicians [crosstalk]

MG: From the first recording?

JB: The youngest band ever in Latin music.

MG: [gasps]

JB: Let me tell you a story. When I finished with them in six months, I had them dancing, which nobody had done at that time in Latin music. [unclear] I'm going to give

you a show. And the music started to be hypnotic. Everybody would come into the center and say [unclear]. Six months later we were making records.

MN: Were these Puerto Rican kids?

JB: Yes.

MG: They played on your first recording?

JB: Yes.

MG: Don't know how you did it. So what's the first recording?

JB: Gypsy Woman.

MG: They're twelve years old on that record! The original recording of Gypsy- -get out of here!

JB: First time recorded, it was them because you see I was able to incorporate the idea that I was growing up and they would listen. I couldn't get anybody else to listen to me but a twelve year old. Those twelve year olds found out the magic, and found out they were making records, and they were eventually getting paid. It was like a dream. They were ahead of their time!

MG: Who'd you make it for Gypsy Woman?

JB: Fonman Records.

MG: Fonman.

JB: Actually if you saw the Frankie Lymon Story, the same guy in there that had the cigar –

MN: George Golder.

JB: George [unclear] Maurus Leavy.

MN: Maurus.

MG: Maurus, oh yes.

JB: Maurus, the same way he told me.

MG: He had Brulette.

JB: Right, and he sold me [unclear] what do you want kid? [laughter] [unclear] I say I want to record sir. He said yes, what else? I said well these parents are telling me if I don't sign with them, they're not going to pay my rent. He said what punk told you that? Get him on the phone. [unclear] but he got the DJ on the phone.

END OF SIDE A

MG: And Maurus Leavy, that's how he –

JB: Yes Maurus Leavy said look what is the problem son? I said well they said if I don't sign with them they're not going to play my records on the radio. He said what creep told you that? Get him on the phone! [unclear] Which one, hey wake up! He said you little faggot you, I pay you, I run you! What do you mean you're not going to play this kid? He said take it easy Maurus I'm sleeping. What are you talking about? He said I got a kid in my office that doesn't want to sign the contract because you said you're not going to play the records. He said I didn't say that. Yeah, well you better play it, you understand, and get your ass down here right away. Click. [unclear]

MG: Ooooh.

JB: So yeah, I'm shaking under the table right? And the other guy's there saying, see I told you, I told you. I'm saying, well I heard something about publishing, and I want to get paid. So he looked around [unclear] this guy's a wise guy, he wants to get paid. So okay you got it. What else? And I said, well I want to get paid for the session with the guys. Well we don't pay anybody. So I said, well I can't record. He says, you'll record,

we'll pay you. So then George Vonner walks in the room. George Vonner had been famous for starting roulette [unclear]. Then he says, Lawrence I have this guy under contract. I said, no he doesn't he tried to trick me. He tried to trick me. Then another guy came in and said I have him under contract. So actually I signed a lot of contracts.

MG: Oh get out of here.

JB: But I signed them under Joe Bataan, that's not my name. [laughter] See I didn't know about the legal aspect, but I knew I wasn't signing my name. What are you going to hold me to, in case you were trying to recruit me and they all were. Everyone in that room was trying to recruit me. So they got together and said we're going to fix you. You're a wise guy. You signed with all these guys. We're not going to even touch you. Get out. Showed me the door, walked out. No contract, no nothing. This guy Dick Ricardo heard the story, and they had this retired young cop named Jerry Mazzuci who started [unclear] Records, meet me. And he asked me the same questions. And he said trust me Joe, I'll pay you whatever. Next day I was making records. I was so nervous, on that day I had rehearsed all the songs. The band was ready. Now you know it's typical when you go to a recording studio you do the music first, then you do the drums, then you come in sing later, then you put the background. I did everything on the same day in four hours. I played the piano, I sang the songs, I did all nine songs, but when Fonny played the last song I was a little hoarse. And that was "Ordinary Guy" - -became a style. He said leave that in, leave that in. Because actually I was scared they were going to send me home and I wasn't going to have a recording, so I finished the whole doggone album in four hours. Never done before. And they looked at me and said, don't you want to rest? No I don't want to rest. I don't want to rest. Let's finish this.

MG: Wow.

JB: And I finished *Gypsy* album. So when I found that out, it got played on the American stations, WWRL at that time, and phenomenal.

MN: What year was this?

JB: 1966.

MN: 1966.

JB: Everybody went crazy in the neighborhood, because everybody knew I was from the neighborhood. People didn't know that I was the same Bataan that was a little gangster from around the neighborhood. So that actually erased my past.

MG: Yes.

JB: You see people found out- -wait a minute, that's the guy that took my jacket when I was thirteen! [laughter] Or something like that, but you know it erased and gave me an opportunity –

MG: How long after you recorded was it on the radio?

JB: Oh boy, right away. We had to put all kinds of dimes in the phone to call up and make requests. After the first week, we didn't have to do it anymore. The whole city was caught in it.

MN: Now what was the label?

JB: [unclear] Records.

MN: Now had they ever recorded before?

JB: Yes, but they never had the success that they had - -

MG: [unclear]

MN: So this was their first big success.

JB: Especially going on an American station. A Latin record never went on a black station.

MG: This was a first crossover hit.

JB: Gypsy Woman. Even though they had other Latin hits from Roulette. [crosstalk] Pete Rodriguez, Joe Cuba, but as far as taking anywhere - -they had their little fling.

MN: Now did you have an agent to set up court dates.

JB: That's funny because I had this guy named Frederico who was just interested in me playing any club that I went to. And he put me in all of these [unclear] make \$10 an hour offhand. But we played all these clubs and everybody was seeing us, and we were starting to get the exposure.

MN: Did you play any clubs in the Bronx?

JB: Oh yes, Thrope Corro, Carlos Ortiz' club. The boxing champion. I played there, used to be there every [unclear]. Call me at Gardens at Hunts Point, I mean [unclear] Gardens in Hunts Point Palace.

MN: Hunts Point Palace.

JB: Yes. The Palladium, the Bronx River Club. Oh it was so many back then. There were - -clubs were in abundance back then.

MN: Now were you playing with Latin musicians, or with soul musicians, or both?

JB: You know I actually didn't really look, but they were predominantly Latin. Most of the guys were all Spanish. But I did have Blacks play with me at one time, before I even had the Latin cats play with me. And to this day now, my make-up is always, can he play. I'll teach you the sound and the rhythm, and what direction I'm going in. I've been

able to do that, because actually when I added the guitar, nobody was adding the guitar to Latin music.

MN: Now did you play the Apollo?

JB: Yes. I headlined Apollo when I was at CBS Records. Played there a couple times.

Played there with Jimmy Casper, and [unclear] after seeing Lena Horne and all those stars. I saw Jackie [unclear]

MN: When was that? The late 60's or the 70's?

JB: 70's. Yes 70's. After I had been hit with the bottle [unclear]

MG: Yes I was going to ask you about that.

JB: Oh. Take it one, two.

MG: So, yes.

JB: Actually, this guy Gil Scott Heron [unclear], but Gil ran out of money- -he couldn't -
-

MG: He was trying to eat and they couldn't cover the [unclear]

JB: Right, so me being the gifted fellow covering songs, I said I wanted the opportunity to do this song because it's not even being out [unclear]. So I said let me do it differently, and we'll do it instrumental. So I got all the guys together, I got Marty Cheryl who's an arranger for Motown Music –

MG: Oh no kidding!

JB: And Monty said, what do you want Joe? I said oh let's put a sax to do it. So everybody showed up at the studio CBS, I'll never forget that day. And then he says, I got this little white boy. He can blow his ass off Joe if you bring him in. I said well bring him. So everybody's sitting down, some of the best musicians, Lu Soft, Cornell

Dupree. I mean you name it. They were there sitting in this room, and everybody showed up at the same time. Normally you're supposed to come at your time slot. So they said what do you want to do Joe, we're all here. I said yes, but I didn't want you all to come at the same time. He said well you want a hit record or not. I said yes! He said let's do it. So in walks this little white guy, and we didn't know who he was, and he starts to warm up and everybody looks at him. Nobody knows who he is. And then we take the song, and magic happened. We took one take. Everybody fell off their chairs after the [unclear] was played. The little white boy turned out to be David Sandball.

MG: Oh wow, that's great

MN: Oh boy! [laughter]

JB: Nobody knew him.

MG: Because in that time he was with Gill Evans Big Band and Lu Soft was in the band.

JB: Okay yes.

MN: [crosstalk] He was a horn player.

MG: He played alto. The great Alto part.

MN: I heard him on that Motown Revival, The Funk Brothers?

MG and JB: Yes.

MN: He's ridiculous.

MG: Yes, no he is.

JB: [unclear] Encyclopedia Soul. Richard T –

MG: Right, right –

JB: Who was with Tasha Thomas with The Wiz? A lot of those guys yes. Gordon Edwards.

MG: So Marty Cheryl arranged that?

JB: He did a lot of arranging for me.

MG: Wow.

JB: You know Marty had his little problem, but he was always good with his music.

MG: Right.

JB: Now he's straight. But back then, Marty knew exactly what I wanted. He wouldn't deviate from what I told him to do.

MG: So did you know Barry Rogers?

JB: Yes! Barry played on my records!

MG: Oh.

JB: Barry, I mean later on, it was an honor to have Barry play with me. Barry, he played [unclear]

MG: Bobby [unclear]

JB: Yes I knew Bobby. Bobby played my records too.

MG: I see how [unclear]

JB: Lou Marini, a lot of those guys sure.

MN: When you started recording, did you have another job, or did the music - -was the music your main high?

JB: No I never had a job. I never worked in my life until I was 40. But I got my first job because I couldn't live by music alone, and when I went to work it was hard for me because everybody knew who I was. They said what are you doing here? They'd figured I'd be wealthy and rich. I said I need a job. And I've been there for 25 years and I haven't left it. I've been working - -I guess God sent me back there.

MG: Was that your first job with [unclear]

JB: You might as well say so. The first job I stayed there any amount of time. My jobs were one week from here. One time I stayed at a job for three years. But actually, it's the longest I've ever worked,

MN: Now when you started recording, did most of the money come in from the recording or from club dates?

JB: Oh club dates. You didn't get any money from recording. Nobody did back then. I remember when Dionne Warwick got a check for \$200, and you know how big she was. I'd seen some of those checks that they got. I've seen The Moments, "Love On A Two Way Street." I'd seen Sugar Hill Gang, when they did the biggest rap record, "Rapper's Delight. I was making more money than them. In two nights, three days hotels in Europe when I was staying at the Hilton and The Ritz. You see actually I became my own manager, and that's why I able to control a lot of what [unclear] that came into - - didn't pay us often but - -

MN: What was the first time that you played out of New York City after your first record?

JB: Well I don't know what you call out of New York City. I always went to Jersey, or Connecticut. Well actually we went to Puerto Rico and they threw us out. [laughter] The guys were twelve years old and thirteen, so all they did was water fights and all kinds of games we did in the hotels, so eventually, we got thrown out of these hotels. These were a bunch of kids still growing up. And here we are, the fame was thrust on us. They didn't know how to handle that. For some of them, it was the worst thing that ever happened.

MG: Oh really.

JB: A lot of them didn't finish school after that. They were too popular in New York. See what the story was, when a high school wanted to hire somebody for their prom, they'd say who are we going to get? They'd say get Kool & The Gang, for the Black kids. Then the Latin kids would say, no we want Willy Cologne or Tito Puente. So then they'd say we can't agree, so okay get Joe Bataan. [laughter]

MN: Wow.

JB: I got over.

MN: Now are any of the kids in that picture up there?

JB: Yes, they're all there. That's Willy Cortez, he's in Florida. This is Tito Gonzalez. He just retired from the Port Authority, Chito [unclear] lives on 110. That's Ruben, he's still around. And some of the guys that you can't see in the picture are still around. Yes, Chicky's still around. He's in California, the bass player. And Ruben is a retired officer for the Air Force. So there's a lot of them around.

MG: Do any of them still play?

JB: No, no. Not that I remember. I'm about the only one.

MG: Wow.

JB: Yes.

MG: So when did you come back now to have a band?

JB: Okay started back in 1994. I worked for Castle Hill Community Center. I was working with the little pee wee kids after work [unclear]. And Neil Burger kept saying, Joe why don't you get the band together. We do these banquets and fundraisers for the kids and stuff like that. I said, [unclear] the band. I'm not doing it anymore. It's been

almost 10 years. He said come on put the band together. So he talked me into putting a band together. We'd rehearse and I'd play at Lehman College or was it? Or Hostos College –

MN: Holsten.

JB: And the rest was history. The people were so receptive, went there, everybody came. They said Joe you haven't left, you haven't gone anywhere. And then that Phoenix started coming back into me, like what was I doing. Why did I get away from the music when I loved it? This is what I want to do. And then I guess God blessed me. That's another story. Seven years ago I almost died. What had happened was - -I testify this everytime I play now. I was working, I'd just got paid. I told my wife I wanted to be the first to see *Star Wars*, so right after work like now, I said we're going to go to the movies, so we went to New Roc City. And we got up there and I had high blood pressure and I was probably in denial of diabetes, not knowing. Scratching my leg off for two years, I didn't know why I always scratched it. It was the sugar, that sugar was high. So I came out of the movies and I got into the car and we were ready to drive off, and all of a sudden I started to feel faint and blood came out of my mouth. And the first thing you start thinking about is how you think about material things. I reached in the back of the seat, and I tried to grab my bag, which is my whole life --my badge, my credit cards, my paycheck. And let me tell you, when that happens, you're not cognizant of what you're doing. I started to choke my life because she wasn't listening to me. That I was fading out. I was going. My daughter was in there, and then I got out of the car and started banging the car, banging the car. And she didn't know what was going on. Finally the security guards tried to grab me and I punched them. The next thing I knew I woke up

ten hours later in the hospital. While I was in a coma, they told my wife to get in touch with the whole family. That it looked like I had some brain damage, that I wouldn't make it. What are the chances of getting your whole family there at the hospital bed? When I was starting to come out of my coma, I saw everybody over there, and God forgive me now, but I started cursing because I couldn't talk. They had a tube down me! They said Dad you're alright? I'm like [unclear]. They said, he's normal, he's back. [laughter] But actually the story is, I was sinking, and God reached down with his hand and said, Joe why do you keep running away from me all the time? He said I got something for you to do, and you haven't done it. I gave you this talent. You never did anything to help anybody. You're always worried about your own self. He said it's time for you to do my work. And that's what I've been doing. And that's why I'm playing more than I've ever played in my life. I'm 63, and I'm running around the world - - around the country like a 22 year old. I jump off stages. I do all that. You can't tell me that that's me. You see the words that come out of my mouth, it's him. It's just something I have to do. I have to help people. And this is what I try to do, and I testify this all the time. I recorded the Lord's Prayer back in the 70's as a way of saying thank you. Never sang the song, I felt it was too corny. Now I can't go anywhere without saying it.

MG: Wow.

JB: That's my way of saying thank you and trying to keep on the right track and give something back to the young kids, and people that [unclear].

MG: And your daughter sings in your group. I saw her picture [crosstalk]

JB: Yes, yes, yes.

MG: Is that the daughter you had when you were 15?

JB: No that one is 45 now. That daughter is big, she's a [unclear], she's retired.

MG: Wow.

JB: This is my youngest daughter.

MG: Beautiful.

JB: Yes, yes. Aja, she's a dancer and she brings a lot of excitement when we play.

She'll be there [unclear]

MN: Now your audience in New York for the first 10 years was mostly Puerto Rican and Black.

JB: Right, Puerto Rican right.

MN: Right.

JB: There were Blacks there but –

MN: It was mainly a Puerto Rican –

JB: Yes.

MN: Now today you've developed new audiences. Tell us a little bit about your new audiences.

JB: Well I was always trying to branch out and find new avenues for my records to get played because I was only known in New York. And I took this trip to California, not knowing where I was going. And they said don't go out there Joe. You don't have to sell your records, it's too spread out. Nobody knows you. I said I want to go. Give me \$500, let me go. I went out there and I met this guy by the name of Ray Andrani, who was the producer of Chico The Man. That was his life story.

MG: Oh right, right. He did the video on you right?

JB: Oh no, that was somebody else, but eh was a good friend. And I told him I had difficulty - -actually the time of that song for that TV show, I was supposed to do, but Jose Feliciano got to do because they couldn't find me. Communication was bad back then. And he says, they love the songs you do. You talk about "Young, Gifted, and Brown." And you talk about Chicano. Let me tell you what a Chicano is. [unclear] Mexicans that are more recognized here in the States. And it's like when you call Puerto Ricans, you call them Nuyorican, we call them Chicano. I said okay can I be a Chicano? He said hell no. You just be yourself. He said, well why don't you listen to your own music because they don't say what you say. We love your old sound, we're very loyal. And that's what happened, my bass duked, and Ralphie [unclear] got killed in Columbia that I was supposed to have written with. I saw I disappeared from California, and they were looking for me. My records, [unclear] and I was a mystique. Right? I was an underground legend. And now that I've gone back, people have come from all over there. Never seen them, played my record for years, and they're amazed to see me because most of the groups that go and perform are imitations. They're not the originals. But Joe Bataan is the original. So when I go and perform, they say that's the same guy? They can't believe it. I went to Columbus, South America, and the guy said that's not Joe Bataan that's his son. He's got to be about 92 years old. So they made me sing when I got off the plane. Some songs that I couldn't even sing in New York as a kid [unclear]. And finally they ended up letting me off the plane. Because in Columbia, they play anything after 1973. They love their old stuff. They have their old jukeboxes there, with the old records [unclear] and it's just phenomenal, phenomenal. They don't like new stuff.

MN: Now you've also re-connected with your Philippine roots?

JB: Yes, well I opened [unclear] Every two years they throw a festival. And other Filipinos were starting to recognize that I had some Filipino heritage. But actually being a Mestizo, I figured I didn't belong to anybody, but I found that there are a lot of Filipinos like that.

MG: That's right.

JB: [unclear] that I had something in common and we shared stories, and I guess it's much more of an atmosphere on the west coast than it is here. Predominantly with a lot of Asians. And I've been endeared to them, so now they invite me all the time.

MN: Wow.

MG: Have you been to the Philippines?

JB: No never have. That's on the agenda, Japan and the Philippines.

MN: Now how does your band now differ from the band that you started with when you played with in the '70's?

JB: I'm able to make money now only for one reason. They got all my charts and actually I just take two or three people with me that have been with me for years, and we pick up the rest of the group around the country. And that has enabled me to play around the world. Before it was just too expensive to carry a big band of my size around the country and play everybody. You just can't do it.

MN: So you can pick up studio musicians who can read the music and follow your lead.

JB: Right, right.

MN: Anywhere in the world.

JB: Right.

MN: That's what Trump Barry did.

JB: I wish I would've known before. [laughter] I wouldn't have been an ordinary guy.

[laughter]

MG: What about Europe? How was the reaction in Europe?

JB: Oh great. We just came back from Finland.

MG: Finland?

JB: Yes. Everybody wants to be Black over there.

MG: Oh thank God Celia Cruz is in Finland.

JB: Oh do they.

MG: She's the queen of Finland.

JB: Yes I'm on national TV right now –

MG: Wow –

JB: because she sent me the tapes back. And the people just went ape. They had never heard the sound of - -the Latin soul now. They play Latin there and soul, but never Latin and soul mixed together. So we brought something to there and everywhere we went, I've just been blessed. I was able to do the [unclear] it was very funny. When they pick your music, I played to the audience. So whatever they wanted me to play, that's what I was going to give them. I have no set routine on stage. I never do the same show twice.

MN: Now are you ever asked to rap on your shows?

JB: Yes, occasionally,

MN: Because, we don't have this on tape, could you the- -what is it, rapper clap?

JB: Rappo Clappo?

MN: Yes.

JB: Let me tell you the story. Actually it was, Jekyll and Hyde. I don't know if you remember, it was old school. It was Bambaata back then and all the old schools.

MN: Yes.

MG: I know Bambaata.

JB: I wasn't a rapper. I was running the community center. I was a singer. And these young kids were doing this thing [unclear] didn't even know how the names were rapped back then. And they said look at this man. It was a thousand kids in here paying a dollar, jumping up on the mic and stomping their feet.

MN: Where was this community center?

JB: 110th Street on the famous [unclear] William Carver or Edinger, one of them.

Anyway, it was on 110th between Lexington and Park and people would come from all over New York to dance this hip hop music, which had no name back then. And I took these guys and I said look, not right here. Nobody has recorded this? He said no. I want you to come to the studio and let's put this down, I'll pay for everything, and I figured these guys would fly right. They never showed up. So here I spent all this money on the studio with the music and everything and nobody was there. And I said, no I can't go down and take a loss like this. So I sang the song myself, and the next day it was a [unclear].

MG: Oooohhh.

JB: Number one record in Harlem. They called for me to come over and they said we have a hit record. And I said how do you know you just had it for two weeks? They said we know. This is something that's going to be a sensation.

MG: What label?

JB: It was on - -it started on Salsoul Records, ended up on RCA.

MN: So could you do the little rap for us?

JB: Of course. And I'll say to you, one more story, the shirt that I bought - -I had no money. I bought a two dollar black shirt and I painted on it a disco queen one there with a guy dancing, and then I bought a fifty cents pen and put it on there and got two dollar suspenders, colorful. Right? And then I ran on TV with this, and I forgot my shoes. All I had was these green track shoes that I put down and became the rage of Europe, this outfit. It was a mistake.

MG: If you sold a million copies of that, how much money did you make off of three million copies?

JB: I made the most money I've ever made in my life, because you see residuals in Europe are much higher here than the States. I think I made at least a quarter million dollars.

MG: Oh God.

MN: That's off that song right?

JB: Yes, yes.

MG: [crosstalk] It was a bigger hit than that right?

JB: No not at one time. Ordinary Guy might compare to that over the years.

MG: Did you make that much on Ordinary Guy?

JB: No. But I'm still making money off of Ordinary Guy.

MG: Because its been a sample right?

JB: Yes.

MG: [crosstalk] What did The Fugees sample?

JB: Oh you know that story?

MG: Yes. What did they sample?

JB: [unclear] That's how I got my brand new house. [laughter] See God works in a funny way. Before I do this rap. Actually a lot of kids were coming up to me and they were saying, Joe we heard you on the radio today. I'd say, you don't know. You have me mixed up with somebody else. He said no some group called The Fugees. I said who are The Fugees? So then another girl came, and then the guy that actually knows music said, I heard your voice I know you. I went to go to the record store to buy this album by The Fugees. I said give me that one. I go home and I told my wife, they said I'm on this record but I don't if it's true. I play the record, and after the seventh song, here comes my voice singing Gypsy Woman and it's a lot of cursing. [laughter] I say shit after two seconds of my voice, they can't do that. So I call up my record company and say oh Joe you can't do anything, they sample everybody. Well meanwhile on the album cover, he's thinking everybody around the world for sampling them, but they don't mention me. He probably thinks I'm dead.

PO: What song was this?

JB: Killing Me Softly.

PO: Oooohhh.

MN: Killing Me Softly is the biggest song.

MG: Wait there's talking in the beginning.

PO: Probably on the album.

JB: Yes [unclear] But whatever happened, and I never told this story because I didn't want anybody to find out and they might try to take the money back. [laughter] So

actually what happened, is I took my granddaughter. I said Veronica, there's a plan for me and I don't what it is. I said something's going to happen. They can't get away with this. I'm going back. So I went down to CBS Records. And now things have changed, they have bodyguards out there.

MG: Oh yes.

JB: You can't even walk in the building!

MG: That's right.

JB: You can't even walk in the building. I said oh man forget it. So sooner or later I get a copy of the tape and I write to them, and I acted as my own attorney. I used a different name. I said I'm the attorney for Joe Bataan, it seems that something was sampled, and I know he didn't know anything about this but please, could you please explain. We don't want to take this to court, so maybe we can settle this out of court. I get a call. They say how are you doing. It's Mr. Silverherd from CBS Records. So I'm shaking in the house. They say we have your letter and we want you to know the kids didn't know what they were doing. They want to pay you. I said okay. So if you come up with an idea of what we can settle this for, we'll be fine. He says give me a little time, so I hang up the phone. My wife says, don't go crazy now. Ask for something that's reasonable. I say don't worry about it. So he calls back, he says well we're ready. So, I'm going to tell you this, it's not me talking it must be the Holy Ghost. I said \$100,000! [unclear] other side of the phone. And I was shaking. My wife says - -she kicked me in my leg and said are you crazy? \$100,000! The guy said I didn't think, I'll get back to you. So I had to hear for three months from my wife, see they're never going to call you back! You got greedy, and you ask [unclear] you're not going to get one cent. You should have asked for

something [unclear] we could have gotten a car or something like that. [laughter] So three months later, I'm crying in my bed. He calls back, hi Joe. Hi. Okay I talked to the kids. They don't want to pay \$100,000. He says, we'll give you eighty. I said no. My wife kicked me in my butt! [laughter] She kicked me! This is not me talking you understand? You have to understand this. I never saw these people. In six months in negotiating as the lawyer for Joe Bataan [laughter], I never saw them. They didn't know who they were giving the money to.

MG: But they knew it was you. [crosstalk]

JB: What?! [crosstalk] God was guiding this. God was guiding this you understand. Because he knew I needed that money for the kids and everything right. I wanted to get an [unclear]. So lo and behold he calls back and he says, what do you want? I said ninety, he said no. Take eighty-five. It's a deal!

MG: Aw good.

JB: And the first time in my life I ever did anything was I bought the house. A nice new house.

MN: Where did you buy the house?

JB: Mount Vernon.

MN: Oh wow. Now where were you living before?

JB: Where was I living before - -right there on White Plains Road and Stevenson Commons in the Bronx.

MN: Oh so you were living in the Bronx.

JB: I was yes.

MN: And moved from the Bronx - -

JB: Bronx to Mount Vernon.

MN: There you go.

MG: You took that whole check and put it down right?

JB: The whole check. [laughter] It was the down payment and I still paid for it. But I got the housing. God blessed me.

MN: Wow.

JB: There was no way I could've paid that mortgage we'd been paying. And I got the house worth today almost \$800,000. And I bought the house for two hundred eighty-five.

MN: Wow.

JB: Brand new. Actually the guy that I went to see about the house, he said, you're such a nice guy. Here's the keys. I said don't you want the money. He said no go ahead, we trust you. You need help paying for it. We'll give it to you. I'd never bought a house. I thought he was pulling my leg. Right, because these things don't happen to you. What guy will tell you, here's the keys you can pay anytime you want. In a brand new house? He said you need help with the loan, I'll help you. Suspicious.

MG: Yes.

JB: I got the house, you don't even have the money. I didn't have the money until the last day, until they made the settlement.

MN: How long did you live at Stevenson Commons?

JB: Oh about 11 or 12 years.

MG: Oh good!

MN: So you brought your kids up in the Bronx?

JB: Oh yes, yes, yes. We were into karate. We actually studied [unclear] Kong because I had all these girls.

MG: How many children did you have?

JB: I had six.

MN: You had six girls.

JB: Two girls by my first wife who passed away and then the other four. But the three girls, all of them are girls except for one boy. And everytime we would sit there on the couch he'd say, what is it? Another girl. [laughter] So he had to defend her. So I put them all in karate, and they were beating up the boys.

MN: Where did they study the karate?

JB: Right there at Stevenson Commons under Derrick Williams. Master Derrick Williams. And that was my life, my family.

MN: What schools did your kids go to?

JB: Well we got the boy to Mount Saint Michael. We had some problems there. He wanted to play football. He had a scholarship from Saint Raymond, but he didn't want to go to Saint Raymond. I don't know why we listened to him. We sent him up to Mount Saint Michael, which he had difficulty in getting on the team, it was private. A lot of red tape in some of those schools. And the girl went to another Catholic school, Scanlin. And the one that we have now we should [unclear] she's graduated last week from Columbus. Some of these schools that they have [unclear].

MN: Yes one of these academies.

JB: Right. The other girl graduated from Mount Vernon. It was a wonderful school. That's it.

MG: And which is the daughter that sings with you?

JB: Aja. She's the one who graduated last week.

MG: Ooohh.

JB: Yes, she - -which brings me back to the turn my life has went. It's also many different stories, and when you collect them all it all comes down to the Lord blessing me now and me making my way. And with a dream and a mission, that's what I had. So I've had maybe a hundred and fifty interviews this year. More than I've had in my whole life. There's a new record that I [unclear] Call My Name. And actually what it's done is opened up the doors of finding me another audience. I'm getting Christians listening to my music.

MG: Ooohhh.

JB: they get hysteric because I talk a lot. You can tell right, I talk a lot. I'm the same way on stage. What I developed was, I connect with my audience. So some of them say, you know I felt like my uncle was talking to me on stage because I'm the same exact way. I bring their kids up on stage and I'll ride in their car without sitting a car with them. They can't believe it. But they expect you to be something else, and it's such a mystique when they have artists that say I'm going to give you my phone number. Actually what I did is I did a dedication on stage because I was trying to find out [unclear] and I called up. I gave my number out and people were calling me on stage telling me what to play.

MG: Ooh. [laughs]

JB: The phone did not stop ringing for three weeks. [laughter] I had to cut it off because I couldn't pay the bill. [crosstalk] Here's the rap song, are you ready?

MN: Yes, yes.

JB: It's a new thing now gonna make you shout/Got rhythm, got beat, g'on move your feet/Got class, finesse, sure got style/Gonna be around for a long, long while/Got something for the young, something for the old/Something that's missing from rock and roll/Just clap your hands everybody/Everybody clap your hands/Just clap your hands everybody/Everybody clap your hands.

MG: Wow. [applause]

JB: Yes. That record –

MG: Do you have time? I wanted to ask you a couple - -what groups came after you that were influenced by you, you think?

JB: Well you never like to say that somebody [unclear] I can only tell you what people have told me. At one time they said, I - -

PO: I'm sorry the tape is about to end. There's four minutes left.

JB: From what I gathered there were a lot of Latin souls all around me. They actually gave me an article saying that I am a father of it, and I've been so successful with it. It's because, I escaped the [unclear]. I needed it to last, so according to Latin soul - -actually I'm the inventor of Salsoul Records. I started that company. That's my name and it meant salsa soul for my protection for a long time to fill my audience base. For Blacks and Latinos and to get it mixed.

MG: That's great.

JB: Actually I was going to have a TV show at one time where it talked of - -the advertisers were [unclear] because I wasn't really a pure Latino but that's another story. But I believe a lot of people have been influenced by my music, especially in California a

lot of the Chicano groups. You have everybody singing - -anybody who does any kind of Latin soul song, you can probably believe that they've listened to some of my records. From Philadelphia, all around. It's all around the world now. They have Latin in Holland, Japan, even in Russia they have congresses in Israel from what I hear. So the music has grown. People don't know the extent of that music, is one of the biggest forms of music in the world now. Especially played on the radio and now we just see the multi-part of all kinds of Latinos here in New York now. It's so broad. At that time, it was either the Cubans or Puerto Ricans that controlled the whole city. Now you have everybody – Mexicans, Venezuelans, Columbians, everybody. Everybody got a taste of Latin music and everybody's trying to do it.

MN: So when you come to Brooklyn, who's going to show up?

JB: Who's going to show up? The people? I hope that it's a melting pot, because that's what I'm about. I've never identified myself. I mean Philippe Luciano said it. He said we're rainbow people.

MN: Mmmm. That's beautiful.

JB: We're in a spectrum of a rainbow so it doesn't matter what I am. Just enjoy the music that I bring to the table. And just enjoy ourselves and be proud that I was able to do something with your culture, your culture, and we all can enjoy it.

MN: Right. Well that's a great way to end this so thank you very much Joe, and this was a great experience.

END OF INTERVIEW