

7-30-2008

## Seymone, Robert

Seymone, Robert Interview: Bronx African American History Project  
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### Recommended Citation

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Interviewee: Richard Seymone

Interviewer: Mark Naison

Date: 7/30/2008

Mark Naison (MN): Ok. Today is Tuesday, July 30<sup>th</sup> 2008 and we are here at Fordham University with Robert Seymone. Did I pronounce it correctly?

Robert Seymone (RS): You most certainly did, thank you.

MN: A actor and educator who grew up in the Maurisania section of the Bronx and who has a fascinating family background, as well as a fascinating career. So Mr. Seymone, could you spell your name and give us your date of birth?

RS: Yes. My name is Robert Seymone, Robert Wilson Seymone that is. And it's spelled, R-O-B-E-R-T W-L-S-O-N S-E-Y-M-O-N-E. My date of birth, proudly to say, January 22<sup>nd</sup> 1951. Born in the Bronx, in the Bronx hospital, New York, the borough the Bronx of course.

MN: So tell us a little bit about your family and how they ended up coming to the Bronx.

RS: Ok. My mother, who is deceased now. Was born in Little Rock, Arkansas. Ok, she was, herself and 7 brothers, the parents were sharecroppers and she was a dancer. My mother loved to dance and entertain; she was a very, very beautiful young lady, very, very beautiful, very smart and intelligent, bright. And she worked her way through the south up to Memphis, Tennessee where she met some people that saw her performing as a dancer, just out on the sidewalks and running around and playing and they offered her a position in the carnival that they had a travelling carnival. And of course my mother jumped on that idea and there was no stopping her after that.

MN: Now do you know what – was this during the depression or earlier that she became connected to this travelling carnival.

RS: Well, let's see, I don't know exactly right at this moment but my research I'm sure will help me find out the answer to that. However, there was a movie, a black and white movie called Big Timers starring Stepin Fetchit and this movie was made in 1945, so I would believe, and looking at the movie and seeing my mother in that movie of course, dancing, she was an exotic dancer. I would believe that it could have been around that era, depression era.

MN: Now when you say exotic dancer that may have one meaning today and another meaning in that time. Describe what it meant to be an exotic dancer in the 1940's.

RS: Exotic dancing in the 1940's was interpretive dancing. And – excuse me about that my phone was going off, I do apologize – interpretive dancing, and when we say interpretive dancing we're talking about, how would you say – interpreting different movements from different beings or animals, birds, lions, tigers, cats, snakes, movements, it's the body movement, ok where the dancer whoever she may have been was able to express herself from head to toe in body movement. And then when you put the

feathers and the wonderful colors and beads and silk and the makeup and along with the music it's very fascinating. But one of the numbers by the way was called the jungle dance.

MN: The jungle dance.

RS: Yes, they called it the jungle dance, my mother would come out on stage and to the drums and to – oh by the way she had her own band, her own female band, that's right five females in the background playing the music [Laughs] as she performed and danced on stage. She also came out on stage with a French poodle, a dog [Laughter]. The dog originally was white but she would dye the dog, the hair of the dog she would die according to the color of her costume that night that she was performing in [Laughs] and I remember one time she brought poor little Cathy home [laughs]. Pink! She had dyed Cathy pink! It was wonderful, very colorful.

MN: Now this carnival, was this carnival owned and managed by blacks or whites?

RS: Ok, that I'm still doing the research on as well. I would venture to say it was owned by whites that hired black entertainers to perform. Now it's a strong possibility it was owned by blacks, like I said once again, I am still doing my research, getting the facts straight.

MN: Now when this – was the carnival, did it perform for black audiences, white audiences or both? Was this the –

RS: Both.

MN: -- the equivalent of like a Negro League baseball team that performed for both black and white audiences but in segregated venues.

RS: Yes. They performed all – in all venues for all colors. Whether the venue was segregated or integrated, once again, my research will lead me to that fact, to those facts, but they performed for everyone and that's why my mother became the star that she became. Because it was, and I remember them coming to the house, her attorneys were white, her agent was black, Leroy Collins, I remember Leroy Collins.

MN: Leroy Jenkins!

RS: Yes, he was her agent and manager. But my mother, my mother's lawyers, Nemo and Campbell, I remember those names clearly, I was about 4 years old at the time, 4 or 5 years old, Nemo and Campbell. And once we – she was in New York, based in New York performing she would fly out to Canada, fly out to Chicago, she would just travel, travel, travel, performing. So I would venture to say that yes she would have to have had performed in front of a white audience.

MN: Yes. If you're going to Canada it would, the odds were – so this, you know, have you ever seen anything written about the type of shows that your mother was doing or the type of carnivals she was recruited for?

RS: Unfortunately not! Unfortunately, when my mother was dancing and performing she kind of sheltered us. We used to watch her rehearse in the basement of our home, singing and dancing and stretching and that type of thing.

MN: Now did you live in a private home?

RS: Yes we did.

MN: Where was it located?

RS: on 168<sup>th</sup> street in the Bronx between Franklin and Fulton Avenues.

MN: Between Franklin and Fulton and 168<sup>th</sup>

RS: Two little houses that my mother purchased. We were – she was into real estate. She was investing a lot of money into real estate. We had a property at, we owned the building, 1068 Franklin Avenue. Ok between 166<sup>th</sup> and 165<sup>th</sup>.

MN: So this is right – so you're right near St. Augustine's.

RS: I was baptized at St. Augustine's church. Of course that goes into another story, I'm not Catholic, but my mother made sure that I was baptized Catholic and at St. Augustine's.

MN: And are the houses that – still there?

RS: At 1066 Franklin Avenue I believe is still standing. 581 and 583 no.

MN: Now, describe these houses for us.

RS: These were tenement houses, buildings that had 2 apartments on each floor, had 3 floors. 581, 583, attached buildings.

MN: Now were these buildings, did they have fire escapes?

RS: Yes they did.

MN: So in other words, she didn't own like a brownstone. She owned two tenement buildings and you lived in an apartment in one of those buildings.

RS: Exactly, you got it right.

MN: Now what was your mother's name?

RS: My mother's is Evelyn Harvey, maiden name Branch. Dancing, performing, professional name, Tarzana.

MN: Tarzana! Have you tried Googling her?

RS: Yes, and when it comes up, it comes up, Tarzana and her all-female band [Laughs].

MN: Tarzana and her all-female band. Now so where had you, where you are – what's the birth order in your family? Do you have any siblings?

RS: No. I'm sorry to say no so quickly. I do have a sibling, it was 4 brothers originally, my mother had 4 sons. Angelo was the baby, myself, Robert, my brother older, the next one older than me, Nicholas and he's still here in the Bronx, he's attending Baruch College now for his Masters degree, and he's a social worker. And then my oldest brother, William, William Harvey. Now William is deceased, my mother of course is deceased and my baby brother Angelo is deceased. The only two left are myself and my brother Nicholas. And my father of course, he left us in 1974.

MN: And what did your father do?

RS: My father was a waiter and entrepreneur. He was a man that worked on the railroad, he worked in restaurants, he had small businesses of his own. Good man, hard worker but he was madly, madly in love with my mother. My mother was the one who was the go getter.

MN: Where did your father come from?

RS: Pennsylvania.

MN: So he was from Pennsylvania, originally and what part of Pennsylvania?

RS: I believe it was [inaudible] in the mountains, I don't have too much information and background on my father, the history of my father. I do know that his father was Indian and his mother was German. And I think they married – he, his father brought his wife back from the war, after the war.

MN: So your father didn't have African ancestry.

RS: No.

MN: Ok, so you – and so you were in effect from the Barack Obama tradition.

RS: There you go, there you go. Who knows!

[Laughter]

MN: Ok, so was that an issue in the community? Coming from a mixed race family?

RS: Was it an issue? At our time coming up, no. At our time coming up no it wasn't an issue because if you had an ounce or a drop of blood in you from anyone in your family that was black, we considered ourselves African American's, black. Ok, it wasn't that we were very clear on who we were and where we came from and what we were all about so.

MN: Was the neighborhood racially mixed when you were growing up?

RS: Slightly, by way of merchants in the area. Ok, the store owners, the grocery store owner, Mr. George, he was white, Mr. Lewis, he was white, he owned the cleaners and then we saw, well, the school teachers that came in the neighborhood to teach.

MN: Now what elementary school did you attend?

RS: PS 63.

MN: Was – Ok which is right on, you know.

RS: Right on Franklin Avenue between 168<sup>th</sup> and 169<sup>th</sup>.

MN: Were there any white children at your classes at PS 63?

RS: No, not that I can remember.

MN: So you were born in 1951 so you in 1956 the school was all African American. Were there any Latino children in the school?

RS: Oh yes, we did have Latino's in the school. Not very man. Not very many but we did have a strong Latino community. A population not as large as the black population but we did have them.

MN: Now what was it like growing up on your block?

RS: [Laughs] Good times, good times. Growing up on my block, oh my goodness. Well we played a lot of games after school, jumping rope, playing Johnny on the Pony, kick the can, tag you're it, hide and go seek. A lot of camaraderie, the parents stuck together, everybody knew everybody, if you got out of line and another parent saw one of the kids out of line they would take the liberty of chastising or even giving a spanking and taking us home to our parents and we'd get another spanking! My mother was one being that she was a mother of 4 boys, she would be out in the streets. If we came home late she would come out looking for us with the belt by the way. I remember one time we got into a little trouble throwing water balloons, we had a water balloon fight on the block and one of the water balloons missed and hit the Bus stand, the Bus Station where people were waiting to get on the Bus and the parents, one of the other parents went home and told my mother and my mother came out in the middle of the block in broad daylight and embarrassed us so badly. She came out with that Garrison belt and whipped us all the way home in broad daylight, it was so embarrassing! But that's the way things were. We had a tight community, a lot of love. The preventing came from everybody in the neighborhood, we stuck together.

MN: What was the school like, PS 63?

RS: PS 63 was a very, very good school. Very caring, the teachers really cared about us. They made sure that we ate, they made sure that we had after school programs, they made sure that we studied hard and there was a lot of communication between the teachers and the parents. I remember my mother coming into school, I remember Ms. Frazier, one day I was home, I came out of the bedroom and Ms. Frazier was in my house sitting down and talking to my mother. B

MN: This was the teacher, who came to the house?

RS: Yes, yes! [Laughter]. She – they would visit. And I also remember that Mrs. Cline, she lived on 168<sup>th</sup> Street and invited us, the students to our home! Made cookies for us on the weekends, it was just a wonderful time to be growing up in the Bronx.

MN: Now was education stressed in your household?

RS: Oh definitely, definitely. Education and being your own person, being independent, being responsible, being honest, having your own, nothing – my mother, she has so many favorite words but one of the lines were, “there’s nothing like having your own son. God blesses the child that has his own. It’s nothing like having your own. You be independent, you want to be independent, you don’t want to have to rely on, count on nobody or anybody, or anyone to do anything for you. And you listen to momma, you see your momma worked her tail off to get what we have and I want you all to hear this, it’s in your blood, you can do it. You go to school, you get your education, but you be your own person.

MN: Did you mother ever talk about the south and what it was like growing up?

RS: Not much. All she would say was that she didn’t want us to have to go through what she went through.

MN: She never went into details.

RS: No, no she didn’t. But as she spoke you could see the difference, the change in her facial expression and her memory, her memory bank would force her face to come out of that pleasant, smiling manner and into a very serious, very thoughtful manner. One that she just didn’t want to repeat. And experience that she didn’t want to repeat, an experience that she didn’t want us to go through.

MN: Right. Now did – were there any relatives from your mother’s side of the family that you are in contact with?

RS: My mother, she’s such a go getter. She brought all of her 7 brothers up from the south and put them in business.

MN: What?

RS: Yes! Once she got to New York and got established, she was making, of course, good money. She brought up Uncle Byrd, put him – he had a cleaners. Uncle James had a trucking company. Uncle Houty [Laughs], Uncle Houty didn’t like – I called him Uncle Houty, Uncle Houty didn’t want to come up to New York and stay. He loved staying in the south. He would travel back and forth. I think he had a grocery business down there. He would come up and get watermelons, fruit, produce and take it back down. Uncle Solomon. Uncle Solomon was in the military, he was in the war and he got wounded so he wasn’t too healthy. This scrap metal, but he lived with us and I remember my mother taking care of him, putting him in an apartment in the building.

MN: In the building. Ok, so he had his own apartment in the building.

RS: He had his own apartment, that’s right.

MN: And what's the address again?

RS: 581 and 583, 168<sup>th</sup> Street, between Franklin and Fulton.

MN: Were any of her other brothers in those buildings.

RS: No, just Uncle Solomon. Everybody else came to visit. Uncle Byrd, oh Uncle Gene was and – oh God, they look like twins. Uncle Gene was a handyman, maintenance, electrician, builder, bricklayer, anything in contracting, he knew, construction, he knew what to do. He was very well off too, he had his own business, and he had a lot of men working for him. I remember his crew used to be with them, they used to come by –

MN: Did they live in the Bronx also?

RS: They lived in the Bronx, Uncle Byrd lived in Brooklyn, they spread out all over New York. The one's that lived in the Bronx, Uncle James was –

MN: And what were their last names?

RS: Branch.

MN: So this is the Branch family.

RS: This is the Branch family.

MN: Now what about your father, did your father have relatives in New York. My father had a brother named Bus, Buster who died earlier and I forget what, it was some type of illness, kidney failure or something like that. And my father, he passed away of heart failure.

MN: Now did your father talk about race at all with you?

RS: [Laughs] My father, no. We never discussed black and white or race issues or ethnicity, he loved my mother so much, you could see, you could plainly see that this was a white man. He had features that didn't follow his father who was a dark-skinned Indian. His mother, of course like I said earlier on was German and my father –

MN: If he walked down the street you would day –

RS: He's a white man. And everybody in the neighborhood knew that, but, but he was black. His mannerisms, ok, he was a black man because that's all he was surrounded with. His friends, everybody was black and he loved his black woman, my mother.

[Laughter]

RS: And when they separated, because they separated earlier on and when he remarried his second wife after separating from my mother was also black.

MN: And where – were they living in the Bronx?



RS: They lived in Manhattan, 88<sup>th</sup> Street Central Park West.

MN: So when did your parents separate? How old were you?

RS: Oh I had to have been about 5, 6 years old around, yes, around 6 years old. But he kept coming back to visit my mother. I would come in home sometimes and they would be laughing and carrying on in the bedroom.

MN: Now did he maintain a relationship with the children?

RS: Yes, he maintained a good relationship with us, and my mother and we knew our stepsisters and stepbrother. Sheila, Josh and Anthony.

MN: Right, so when he separated from your mother he married another – a black woman.

RS: Yes, named – by the name of Priscilla.

MN: Priscilla?

RS: Yes, now she wasn't attractive as my mother and that kind of threw me off too because it was a complete change there. You know, from this very, very gorgeous, very attractive woman to a woman that's not so attractive. On a scale from 1 to 10 you give my mother an 11. On a scale from 1 to 10 you give Priscilla maybe a 4. But I do remember the thing about Priscilla that she was just so kind and loving and gentle. My mother was more abrasive, my mother was strong, forceful, aggressive.

MN: Was she a neighborhood character?

RS: Yes she was, my mother stopped traffic.

[Laughter]

RS: Momma would come up the street dressed to the nines from heel to toe, silks, furs –

MN: And you don't have pictures?

RS: No, but I will have them. My relatives, like we said earlier on, this is just the beginning of the beginning, I'm enjoying this, it's helping me a lot to go back in time and revisit.

MN: I mean this is, it's fair – she was a neighborhood fixture.

RS: Yes!

MN: Everybody knew here because of the, you know, the way she carried herself.

RS: She was a star.

MN: She was a star! That's Tarzana.

RS: That's Tarzana!

MN: People knew her as Tarzana.

RS: And people knew us as that's Tarzana's boy.

MN: Tarzana's boy.

RS: Tarzana's boy.

MN: So you all were marked as special because of your Tarzana's boys.

RS: You got it.

MN: Did they know that in the school or more in the street?

RS: Well they knew it when my mother would come to school, I would –

MN: To PTA.

RS: --[Laughs] I would be sitting in the classroom, kids, the teacher would have to stop kids from other classes on other floors, they would run upstairs to my classroom, knock on the door and tell me, "your mother's in the building," all excited, "your mother's here, your mother's here, she's so pretty, your mother's here, your mothers here!"

MN: Now did they know of her shows or was just her, what she looked like.

RS: What she looked like, some of them knew her background, like some of the teachers knew what she did of course, here occupation.

MN: In this movie is she under her name, in other words do they say –

RS: Tarzana.

MN: Ok, so here's Tarzana! And –

RS: Featuring Tarzana.

MN: Featuring Tarzana. Oh my God.

[Laughter]

MN: Ok, now I'll read this. Big Timers, beautiful and talented Betty is set to marry her soldier beau Tom, recently discharged from the Army. When her mother discovers that Tom's rich parents are planning to visit the hotel where they work she schemes to borrow a lavish apartment. All is going well until the real tenant Mrs. Page returns. But Mrs. Page has sympathy for the lovebirds and invites all of her USO friends over to raise the roof with a swinging review that includes a whoopee dance performed by the exotic Tarzana and a comic scat song performed by the inimitable step [inaudible] all backed by the All-American Girl Band.

RS: That's her.

MN: That's her. Now the All-American Girl Band, that was her band?

RS: Yes, they travelled with her and performed.

MN: Now are these all African American women?

RS: All African American women and the owner and manager and producer of that group that travelling, performing group is a black woman.

MN: And what was her name?

RS: It's in the film there.

MN: Right and her manager was named?

RS: Leroy Collins.

MN: Right, so this is Tarzana and the All-American Girl Band, now did members –

RS: That was for the movie.

MN: That was for the movie, but she had her own band separate from the movie.

RS: Exactly, when she traveled, yes, and she had other dancers surrounding her. We were too young to attend the shows.

MN: Right, yes. Now did you, did any of these dancers and musicians ever visit the house?

RS: Oh yes, yes. Oh my God. When they came you knew they were there. They were loud, boisterous, and just full of pizzazz and jazzy and just playing wonderful music and drinking their Scotch and smoking their cigarettes. The women in those days they had, I remember my mother, she smoked Kent cigarettes and her cigarettes she smoked from a cigarette holder. And they were just, I remember this was her posture, they were just glamour girls. And they wore fox boas and coats and these high heels. Oh my, beautiful girls. Now her girlfriends that she would bring home were white. From Canada. She would bring the French girls in and they would stay over.

MN: These are dancers?

RS: These are dancers, these are showgirls.

MN: So she had Canadian showgirls who were white, French-Canadian girls.

RS: Correct. She would go to Montreal, Quebec, she would, oh my mother was – Chicago.

MN: There's a movie you need to make about this. You have to write a book and a movie. Now one of the interesting things is, the musicians were black.

RS: Yes.

MN: Were most of the black performers in this show light-skinned.

RS: Yes, one or two maybe you'd, like Stepin Fetchit, he was dark skinned. The musicians, I noticed watching the movie, there were maybe just two out of the 6 women playing that were dark skinned. Everybody was dark skinned or lighter. Ok, that, how would you say, Nancy Wilson, you know, Lena Horne. One thing I noticed too that stood out in the film I was so happy to see and track this film down, my mother was, she was very, very thorough in technique and dance. When you see her in the movie you could tell that she was a teacher as well. She, when she performed she had all of that, the Josephine Baker, the Nancy [inaudible] it's like she took them to school.

MN: Now did your mother also teach dance?

RS: Yes, she taught my cousin Juanita, who by the way is right here –

MN: Did she have a school?

RS: -- you see that park, you see that.

MN: Oh, oh God. Look at that.

RS: She got that from my mother. My mother taught her how to stand, how to walk, how to sit.

MN: Did she do this in a formal studio?

RS: No. She did it from home.

MN: She did lessons?

RS: Anybody that wanted to learn. Yes, she would teach. But she would take to just special people, her nieces, like Juanita and Erma.

MN: Now were they also living in the Bronx?

RS: Yes, they were also living in the Bronx. As a matter of fact, Juanita came and lived in the house with us for a while. Everybody lived in the house. My mother, that's the other thing, my mother had an open door policy, our door was never locked. You would come, you would be able to come to the door, knock, open the door freely and come in. You would never have to open up with a key. My mother never locked her door.

MN: Describe the apartment from the inside. How many bedrooms did you have?

RS: Ok, we had two bedrooms, one bathroom, two bedrooms a kitchen and a huge living room. You would come in, as soon as you come in you would be stepping right into the living room, ok. And you would walk in, the bathroom would be to your left, the ceilings weren't very high, I would say about 12 feet, and my mother had great pictures because she – oh, another thing too, my mother also brought her mother up from the south and took care of her.

MN: In the apartment?

RS: In the house yes. Now let me do a little backpedaling and backtracking. The house that we originally moved in were, it wasn't brick, the house wasn't made of brick, the first two houses that were standing, the structure caught fire and burned down to the ground.

MN: These were wooden houses.

RS: Wooden houses.

MN: On the same block?

RS: Right, the attached houses. So what happened was my mother had those, that structure rebuilt and that's when they were brick houses and that's when she made them into tenement buildings. But prior to that each house was just a huge private house.

MN: Right, they were big, like, three story –

RS: Three story, three family.

MN: -- private houses with porches.

RS: Exactly.

MN: I know those type of houses.

RS: The New Orleans look.

MN: And then those houses burned so she had brick houses to replace them.

RS: And that's when she went into the real estate, the renting the apartments out. Instead of the whole house being one family living in it, it would be, we had 6 apartments, 2 on each floor. One in the front, one in the back of the building. Now as a child going back, you asking me to describe the house. The first houses, it was just huge. We had 16 foot ceiling's I remember that. We had the old original furniture, furniture so heavy you couldn't even lift. Ok, a lot of antiques, my mother loved antiques. A lot of space. And like, I remember the basement was her rehearsal hall where she studied, rehearse where she studied, rehearsed. My mother liked to rehearse to soft music. And another thing, I used to go down there and peep, sneak down and watch her. She would rehearse in the dark, under a red light, a red light or blue light ok. She would be down there singing and then she would be down there dancing and stretching and splitting. But when she did rehearse she rehearsed alone. She was by herself, she had that time to herself. She used to bend over backwards, do a back bend and was able – and she did this for the family of course, when we used to have parties in the house and eat and drink. She would bend over backwards and pick up a shot glass, Johnny Walker Black or Johnny Walker Red was the Scotch she drank. And she would bend over, go over on her back and slowly, slowly, slowly go all the way down to the floor, pick up that shot glass, drink that [Laughs] whiskey out of there, put the shot glass down and the come back up. And then after she got back up straight she would go down into a full split. My goodness, oh my goodness.

MN: Now, she was performing all over the United States and all over Canada. And where in the Bronx did she perform?

RS: She performed at the Blue Morocco on Boston Road of course. Also the Boston Road Ballroom, yes.

MN: Now did she, was – would they advertise Tarzana’s review, or would she be part of a larger show?

RS: It would be Tarzana’s review in the Bronx, I remember that. She used to open up for Mickey and Silvia.

MN: For Mickey and Silvia.

RS: At the Blue Morocco. My mother was always featured, she was a featured entertainer.

MN: Now did she ever perform at Club 845? Does that ring a bell, down on, you know, Prospect Avenue, 161<sup>st</sup> Street.

RS: It’s a possibility, I don’t recall, but like I said, once again, please forgive me, but my research is in full effect right now and I’m going to pull up all of that information eventually.

MN: No don’t worry about it. Now when did you get the performing bug?

RS: [Laughs] I probably got it the day I came out of the womb.

MN: So you were performing when you [inaudible] in front of everybody. What were you doing, what was your?

RS: I like to sing, I like to dance, I like to dance and I like to recite poetry, I love talking, I love getting the attention, holding attention of the people of my audience, I love an audience. I like to daydream a lot and what I daydreamed about was being a star. I would look up at the sky at night and actually see myself in the stars. I would relate to the stars as being myself.

MN: Now in this respect, were you different from your siblings.

RS: Oh yes, Oh yes. I was the one who was in front of the TV, I was the one playing albums, playing music. Johnny Mathis, performing after him, Sammy Davis Jr., Sidney Poitier, Victor Marceau was one of my favorite actors. I used to just study them. I would constantly study, in school I would participate in all the plays. I loved to do solo acts.

MN: So was this starting up in Kindergarten and First Grade? You get up in front of the class?

RS: Yes [Laughs], from the very beginning. And if I can find a picture, I remember in the picture, the whole class and there I was, the biggest smile, but I’m talking about with personality. You know, just different from the rest, outstanding.

MN: Now you grew up in a time when there was –

RS: And, and, I don't mean to cut you off, please forgive me. What I would do, I would, we had the 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue El back in those days. I would get on the train, I would play the bongos, drums on the train. And that's how I made my money, that was my hustle.

MN: Now how old were you?

RS: I was 11 years old.

MN: Ok, now what's very interesting is on, now this is 1962, you're playing the bongos on the 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue El.

RS: 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue El.

MN: This is not an African American tradition, this is a Latino tradition. So how did you pick up, you know, the music of your mother's generation was the snare drums, how did you pick up bongo drums?

RS: Just watching TV, going up to Crotonah park where the Latinos hung out. They would have the Congas and the Bongos and they would be playing, and the Timbala and I just picked it up automatically, I loved it, if it was music, if it was stimulating if it was anything to make me move.

MN: See, what you're talking about is – and you know, I'll actually use this when I talk in the schools. Is how African Americans who moved to the Bronx were exposed to the Latin tradition of the hand drums and immediately identified with it and incorporated this into their own lives.

RS: That's right, but you have to remember also that the drum is a means of communication. Not only entertainment, it stems from Africa, from Cuba. So that's, traditionally African Americans, Latino Americans, that's how we communicate, through our music. So it wasn't any major separation there, ok, as long as – and then you had Stevie Wonder. When little blind Stevie Wonder, when he first came out and his music, not only the harmonica but drums, if you go back far enough.

MN: Yes, hand drums

RS: There you go. But what I would do on the train, I would play the Congas and then I would pass it over to my friend, he would start playing the Bongos and I would start dancing.

MN: Ok, so you danced on the train.

RS: And then I would do my split, come up, take my hat off and go around to the people sitting on the train and collect my money. That was my hustle, I was entertaining, live entertainment.

MN: 1962 on the 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue El. Did you mother know you were doing it?

RS: No, no, I, no [Laughs] my mother didn't. My mother did know I was going down to 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue and performing out in front of the record store.

MN: Ok, where was the record store?

RS: The record store was on, oh, it had to be 153<sup>rd</sup>.

MN: So this is down closer to the hub.

RS: Yes, on 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue, the El was still up. And the music stores back then, they used to play the music the way you could hear it on the outside of the stores and the entrance is where I – people used to walk up and down 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue and I would go down there and dance in front of that store and people would come by and toss money.

MN: Right. Now did you have formal dance training?

RS: Oh yes. I'm, of course, I studied dance.

MN: No from –

RS: Liar! To no –

MN: In other words, the dancing that you were going when you were a child?

RS: Interpretative.

MN: So you were just –

RS: Creative dancing.

MN: You weren't going to ballet classes or modern dance, or –

RS: No, it was just something, it was a passion of mine, I loved and I love entertaining. That's what it was. I loved performing and I loved an audience.

MN: Now your brothers didn't move in that direction?

RS: No, not at all.

MN: Now did any of them get involved in sports?

RS: No, no, they were builders. My brother was – he played with his pigeons on the roof, he had a pigeon coop.

MN: Oh, he had – which brother had the pigeon coop?

RS: Nicholas, the one that's older than me.

MN: And is he still –

RS: Yes, he's still alive.

MN: And he did homing pigeons. Was that a big phenomenon in Morrisania?

RS: Yes, very big, very big, oh yes. I remember him teaching me, it was triplets, homing pigeons, hawks, tumblers, oh all kinds of pigeons. And these pigeons would go out, he would let them go out and when they returned home –



MN: How did he get, how did he find them, or then, they were there and you trained them?

RS: He trained them. I would love for him to –

MN: Well we should, let's bring him in for an interview. Because we've never done somebody who was involved in the whole pigeon phenomenon.

RS: Well then there we go. He was an expert. Yes, he was a leader in the community of pigeons because he built his own pigeon coop from scratch. It was like a house, an actual house on top of the roof on 168<sup>th</sup> Street. Wait until I tell him about this.

MN: [Inaudible] Now –

RS: Now I also, I have to say this, I have to share this because I'm very proud of this. I would go on, after my paper route on Sundays, I would go to the hospital, Bronx Hospital on Fulton Avenue.

MN: I know, which is still there.

RS: With my shoeshine box. And I would shine shoes but that was my hustle, one of them. I'm an entrepreneur, I have the entrepreneurial spirit.

MN: It sounds like it runs in the family.

RS: Yes, yes, well that's what my mother instilled in us you know, so – and it's in the blood. So here I am out there and the reason why I had so many steady customers on line waiting for me to show up Sunday morning is because, as I would shine their shoes I would pop my rag and do a dance move for them, as I'm shining their shoes.

MN: You're shining shoes, ok – and there no pictures of this?

RS: [Laughs] Shining, the dancing shining shoe – the dancing shoe shiner. And I had a complete act, I didn't even know what I was doing at the time, that I choreographed. I would shine shoes, and if you remember, you go back, you remember the brass railings going up the steps?

MN: Yes.

RS: I would shine the shoes, pop the rag, turn around, do a split, come up, shine the shoes again, dance backward like this, turn around, jump on the pole and slide down those poles.

MN: Oh! Jesus! Oh my God! So – now what's fascinating is, your style of entertaining is something very much out of theater and the movies. And did you get involved in the street corner singing and the Doo Wop phenomenon in the neighborhood that was also there in the 50's and early 60's.

RS: Yes I did but only background, because I'm not a singer. Now I can sell a song, I just can't sing one. And my voice is a baritone voice –

MN: See you never got into the singer [Sings].

RS: No, the beat box, no.

MN: Wow, so that's very interesting. So it was the dance and the acting rather than the singing because it was the singing that kind of captured the imagination. Did any of your brothers become singers?

RS: Yes, my older brother. As a matter of fact, my mother helped him out. Stacy and Ross, they had a singing group and she bought them sweaters and caps.

MN: They were called Stacy and Ross?

RS: Stacy and Ross. And my mother backed them. She was the backer. She bought all of their wardrobe and, you know, whatever they needed, tape recorders and their equipment. And they were in it.

MN: Now were there talent shows in the neighborhood where you performed, like after school centers or community centers?

RS: In the centers yes. At 63 –

MN: They had an afterschool center.

RS: Yes. We would go roller skating and then at night we'd have, we call them sets, where we would go dancing at friends houses. Have to pay a quarter to get in the basement, down in the basement, the blue light dancing, you know. And we would perform for our friend, we would perform. But mostly it was for the public. It wasn't so much for the community, you know our friends in the community. Everybody in the community knew what each one did. Ok but I would, we would venture out of the community to, for me as a performer, I remember that. I was –

MN: And where did you go to junior high school?

RS: JHS 55 on Washington Avenue, 170<sup>th</sup> street.

MN: Now was there a good music and arts program at that school?

RS: Yes, we had one there, but it wasn't the best, it wasn't the best. But we had it, we had music and we had singing and choir, we had dance, a dance class there as I recall. Gymnastics was big at that time too, I was on the gymnastics team and I ran track, ok. But at that time I was studying, I was going to private lessons, I had private lessons, I was going to private class, actors workshops.

MN: Oh, ok. So it was acting that captured your imagination even more than dance.

RS: Even more than dance. Although I was a member of the Ron Davis Dancers, this was a jazz dance group, [inaudible] jazz. We traveled all over the country, performing throughout the country, performing throughout campuses, all kinds of places, and also at Carnegie hall.

MN: And this was – this was when you were in high school or –?

RS: High school. This was the high school later on.

MN: Ok, now when did you start getting formal acting training?

RS: Oh, we're talking back in my junior high school days. We're talking, had to be 1960, '64, around that time, around 1964. So I attended school – this actor, Savito he had a school up on University Avenue.

MN: So this was in the Bronx, near NYU?

RS: Not far from NYU.

MN: Right, and his name was Savito?

RS: Yes, Mr. Savito.

MN: And how did you – was this something your mother found?

RS: No, this is something I found through friends. Through classmates, through teachers.

MN: Were teachers supportive of your theatrical ambitions?

RS: Oh yes. I had the best teachers in the world. They were so supportive and encouraging.

MN: Are there teachers who you'd like to give a particular tribute to, who made an impact on you.

RS: Yes. Mrs. Frazier for one. She really stayed on me and pushed.

MN: She was from 63?

RS: Yes, elementary school.

[End of Side 1]

[Begin Side 2]

MN: Now was she African American?

RS: Yes, she was African American. Ok, and her and my mother were pretty, pretty close, ok, in terms of communicating. In junior high school, not so much, not so much. But high school, I did have an English teacher, her name was Mrs. Lindsay.

MN: Where did you go to high school?

RS: William Howard Taft.

MN: Ok, I know exactly where that is. And this was in the late 60's, middle to late 60's?

RS: Yes, mid 60's.

MN: And was that a racially mixed school at the time you attended?

RS: Yes it was. Yes, Jewish and African American. And we did have an actor's class there, an actors workshop. But in our English class, we had a lot of talent shows. We did a lot of performing. I remember I did my first live performance for the students and William Howard Taft, singing a song by Johnny Mathis. I did Johnny Mathis, and it was lip synching. That's when I learned how to lip synch.

Because it's an art to it. You really have to form your mouth to the words and be believable on stage that the voice of that music is coming from you. And that's what I got out of the actors class at William Howard Taft High School, how to do that.

MN: Right, now one of the things is I have, you know, I have done a number of interviews with people from your neighborhood and other neighborhoods in those years. And it's in the 60's that you begin to have drugs start to have an impact. How did drugs and gangs effect your growing up years? When did you begin to aware – to become aware that things were, you know, were becoming troublesome?

RS: Ok, well every day of my life. It was a part of, it was part of the environment, ok. It was part of the territory. You come outside, you see it – well back in those days actually the dope fiend, the drug addict in those days, had a little more respect. It was heroin. They had more respect and they wouldn't be out openly.

MN: So even when you're describing your block as a wonderful place, the heroin addicts were part of that?

RS: Underground. Underground behind closed doors. It was more respect. Even the hustling that went on, the number playing, the drug selling.

MN: Well describe the numbers guys, because that's, you know –

RS: Ok, the numbers guys were very, very classy. Drove good cars, shoes shined, wore suits, shirts, ties, ok and they would do very many things for the community in terms of giving out turkeys on Thanksgiving Day, having bags and boxes of toys around Christmas for the kids in the neighborhood, ok. Making sure that the old ladies would get across the street. They were gentlemen, there was no fighting, fussing and arguing. Any type of trouble in the neighborhood would be stopped if one of them were present, ok. They were gentlemen, it wasn't no – everybody had respect for what everybody did. You couldn't just out and openly do negative things in the community. If you to do it, if that was your way of survival, or making your money, your bread, then that's fine, but don't disrespect the neighborhood and the kids.

MN: Did you see violence on your block?

RS: Oh yes. Oh yes. The gang fighting, of course. Elderly people when they got drunk and started arguing, whether it was domestic violence or whether it was a rival, a shootout or a stabbing or a fistfight, oh yes, that you saw – that was a common thing, that was common. Well wait a minute, when I say common when we saw it go down it was at night, ok, coming out of the bars you would see it. The hollering and the screaming and the fighting, alright. It wasn't every day that you would see it, but it was there, ok, it was there.

MN: And the domestic disputes?

RS: You would hear that just walking down the street, you could hear the woman and the man hollering and screaming and fighting and arguing from the window. And basically that was the same couple. So –

MN: Now would you say more of that was related to alcohol than drugs?

RS: Oh yes. Definitely, alcohol, yes, big, big, that's what that was. It was related to alcohol, it was related to drugs, a lot of it, ok, they would just – they would be out of control.

MN: Now your talk about gang fighting, what age group was involved in that?

RS: Oh, just coming – you, you're part of – living the way we came up we were products of the hood, of our environment, alright, it was survival. I myself was in a gang, ok, and my first adventure as a member in a gang, I was 11 years old, ok.

MN: What was the name?

RS: Disciples, Disciple Tots.

MN: The Disciple Tots?

RS: Tots, yes, yes.

MN: Was this when you were in junior high or still in elementary school?

RS: Elementary, elementary, 6<sup>th</sup> grade, 6<sup>th</sup> grade and my initiation took place on the corner of Boston Road. I can remember it like it was yesterday, Boston Road and 168<sup>th</sup> street. And the number 11 is so strong with me because it was 11 other soldiers that I had to fight, other gang members.

MN: Who were kids your age.

RS: Of course, yes. And I remember the lady getting off the bus saying, "Oh my God, stop it, you're going to kill him, you're going to kill him!" [Laughs] Because after a while I ran out of breath and they got the best of me, but I stood. When the smoke cleared I was still standing, and because I stood so well and because I was a very good fighter, very strong, very quick, I really did some damage myself, but I had my own division. I had some leadership skills and I had a way of organizing.

MN: Now what about your brothers, were they also in gangs?

RS: Yes, everyone, everyone, everyone there would be. It was a way of life, it was a way of life.

MN: Did you fight kids from other neighborhoods?

RS: Other neighborhoods of course. And other boroughs. I remember going out to Brooklyn and being chased down Brooklyn by the Chaplains.

MN: That seems to be a common experience for people. I grew up in Brooklyn, and I remember the Chaplains and the Bishops. And it seems like the only people that people in the Bronx were every scared of were from Brooklyn.

RS: From Brooklyn, that's right. Nevin Street, and the project out there –

MN: Farragut Houses, Delanis Houses, Red Hook.

RS: There were some bad cats out there man. Those guys didn't play, although we, we were pretty strong too.

MN: Now did you ever go up to Fordham Road and deal with the Fordham Baldies.

RS: The Fordham Baldies! Oh yes, and we would hightail it out of there too because they were strong, they were nothing to play with, Fordham Baldies, I remember them. And don't get caught in Little Italy. Do not get caught in Little Italy!

MN: You were already aware of that if you were black that neighborhood was dangerous. Did you ever go to the north side of Crotonah Park or there was an invisible boundary?

RS: The Crowns. Yes, there was an invisible boundary but then that's where you had the Latinos. The Horsemen and the Crowns.

MN: Those were Latino gangs.

RS: Yes, and that's what their turf was, Crotonah park. Ok, you had the Fordham Baldies from Crotonah Park up to Fordham and Little Italy. Then you come down, you had your Crowns and your Horsemen, ok. Well the Horsemen and the Crowns got along pretty good, some of the Horsemen were black, my oldest brother was a Horseman. And from there you move down and you come into the Disciples and then the Diablo Saints and then the Diablo Tots. You even had the Disciple Tots, you even had the Disciple Tots, you got the Disciple Debs, then you had the Archmen, ok, then you had the Archmen. And these guys when they would go to war, and these guys when they would go to war they had bow and arrows, that's why they called themselves the Archmen. That's what they fought with. Yes, those were times [inaudible].

MN: Now did people get badly hurt in these.

RS: Oh yes. Some of them, yes, some of them would get thrown off roofs if they got caught wrong, caught them out there. Some of them would get really beaten by chains. And the Fordham Baldies were good for snatching antennas off of cars and beating and going into their gang fights.

MN: Now you're just – this is an interesting, you know, you have these very good memories but there also is the violence and how do you sort of piece them together in terms of, you know, you know, what it was like to grow up then, you know, and also what it's like to grow up now.

RS: Well, it's very different now. You got your high technology now with the kids, ok. The drug scene is different now, back in the day it was heroin, today it's this thing called crack that's doing an enormous amount of damage to our children, and adults. You have adults out there, they're in the 60's on this stuff, ok. The gangs today are, I would pretty much say that they're the same. Only thing there, they're more outside of the – they have the [inaudible] you got your Bloods and your Crips, but these are gangs that were more national based, ok. Back in the day we had our gangsters was just from the hood, from within the borough, we had – it was from borough to borough, you know, and within the borough from turf to turf. Yes we probably had members that moved to the south or moved to Boston or something like that, but that was the only connection. You got these Bloods and your Crips, these gangs are

national, in every state they have soldiers and camps set up, ok. We didn't have that back then like they have it now. The prison factor is another thing, you have many gangs there, that's really how would you say, the Pentagon for gangs.

MN: Yes, right. The prison system. Now were you optimistic growing up that you were going to come out of the, you know –

RS: I knew it all the time. That was a vehicle, I'm glad you asked that question, I'm very glad you asked that question. I knew all the time that I was going to be someone and I was going to be a winner and a high level achiever. But I also knew what I was facing day to day and I was smart enough to say I'm going to go with the program to get through the maze, get out of this maze, ok. I was part of, whatever that was in the day at that time for survival, ok. Not only that, respect and the reputation. In order for you, back in the day for you really, really to get through you had to have a reputation. Not so much where people would fear you but they knew that you were not to be messed with.

MN: Now could a kid just grow up on your block and mind their own business, go to school, you know and be left alone and not be involved in a gang?

RS: Those were the ones that you would never see playing on the block. And if we knew who that kid was we would protect him because we knew that he wasn't strong enough to be on the block.

MN: So there were, but so that – there were kids who, you know, went to school, went to their houses, went to the library, went to their music classes and did their thing.

RS: And stayed in the house, very sheltered, ok. And fortunate, maybe their parents were well to do, ok, and would, on weekends they would travel out. Summers they would never be around. They would be in a camper or they would be in another state visiting family members, ok. But the ones in the hood, that was our camp.

MN: Now did you think of yourself as living in a tough neighborhood.

RS: Oh yes, oh yes, I knew it, and I was proud of it. That was our way of protecting ourselves.

MN: Now, so what made you see yourself that way? What was your point of comparison? Was it that it was a black neighborhood therefore it was tough, or it was tough because you, what you saw on television, what you saw when you went to other parts of the city or out of, you know?

RS: I saw tough – you could say all of those. It's all-inclusive there. You were going to other – first of all, if -- back in the day you couldn't go into another neighborhood, turf, on another turf, on another turf if you weren't part of that gang and if you entered that –

MN: Now where was – how big was your safe zone?

RS: For me, my safe zone was all of the Bronx except for Fordham Road. I had carte blanche because of the reputation had and the respect that I – I was basically a facilitator. They called me a warlord, war council. They would come to me before they had gang fights, I was the one who would sit down, like the mediator and listen to the different beefs, ok, and then I would think and I would sort it out and say,

“well ok, you’re on your own that’s worth going to war over.” Or not. I was able, I kept peace! I didn’t encourage them to fight.

MN: Right, but let’s say you’re a kid on 168<sup>th</sup> street between Franklin and Fulton. Ok, could you just walk down to 166<sup>th</sup> street between Boston Road and Franklin Avenue and, you know, or would you have to be careful.

RS: You have to look over your back, you have to look over your shoulder. You got to watch your back, you had to, ok, an all-Mary kid, if he didn’t have the reputation, if he wasn’t, if he didn’t belong to a strong gang he was in trouble. He would get ripped up, beat down and sent home, or maybe to the hospital. The turfs weren’t that big in terms of parameters, in terms – you’re talking maybe an area of 20 square blocks, within that area you would have two or three gangs. Ok, because you had on Fox Street, you couldn’t work onto Fox street and we were right down on Franklin Avenue, Fox street was two, three blocks over.

MN: Down the hill.

RS: Right. Going towards Prospect. Ok, you couldn’t get caught on Prospect, if you weren’t know, if you didn’t have the reputation these were the area, the cells let’s call them, these were the cells, ok where – they were locked down.

MN: What was the reputation of Morris High School when you were, you know, in the 60’s?

RS: Morris High School, the reputation of Morris High School. You had some bad guys, in terms of gangs you had some bad guys, coming out of Morris High School. But you also, Morris High School produced a lot of smart individuals.

MN: Now what – how did you end up going to Taft rather than Morris?

RS: Because of the neighborhood that I lived in. We were no longer on 168<sup>th</sup> street. We had to move, we were on Fulton Avenue and 171<sup>st</sup> and that was in the district of William Howard Taft.

MN: Now that’s closer to Crotonah Park.

RS: That’s closer to Crotonah Park.

MN: And now, now when did you move from 168<sup>th</sup> Street to 171<sup>st</sup> Street?

RS: Right after my junior high, about the 7<sup>th</sup> grade, 8<sup>th</sup> grade we moved.

MN: Now did you move to a private house?

RS: Yes we did, moved to a private house.

MN: And what sort of house was that was that a --?

RS: That was one family house with three floors.

MN: Is it still there?



RS: It may be there.

MN: What's the address?

RS: I don't remember the numbers, but it's on Fulton Avenue between 170<sup>th</sup> and 171<sup>st</sup>.

MN: Was that considered a more desirable block?

RS: Quiet, residential, not too many tenements going on. On one side of the they had maybe three tenement buildings and on my side of the street it was just a row of private homes. So yes, it was an upgrade. Yes, it was an upgrade. Plus we had our little park right across the street, we had PS 22, the school. PS 22 was on that block, is on that block. But we started moving around a lot. My mother was in a car accident after a certain point and that's what ended her career as a dancer. Ok, she – that car, and you remember that brand new car that Leroy Collins brought home to her and how excited she was? And she got in that car one day and took a drive and the next thing you know she was coming home from the hospital and she, she broke her leg out with mid calf and that just stopped her lifestyle, stopped her career and we kind of like started going downhill after that. She began drinking, we lost the property, she just couldn't manage anymore it just did, it did a lot of damage to her psychologically as well as physically. We weren't as well off after that.

MN: And this was when you were on 171<sup>st</sup> street.

RS: Yes, that's when we moved to 171<sup>st</sup> Street, from 168<sup>th</sup> to 171<sup>st</sup>.

MN: And then after things started going downhill where did you go after that?

RS: Ok, we were just moving around kind of from 171<sup>st</sup> Street we went up to Ryder Avenue, that was right off the Concourse. We had a house up there for a while. Then my brother and I just started taking care of my mother. That house is the house that burned – wow now that I'm thinking about it there's a lot of burning took place here. Yes, the house on Ryder Avenue caught fire and that's where all of our personal belongings, pictures and everything, myself, my mother, my brother, the whole family, that's where everything was destroyed, all of our personal property. Ok, from there, my brother and I, we just started taking care of my mother. She lived with my brother, she lived with me. Of course we were working, doing pretty good ourselves.

MN: Now did you go from Taft to college or into the workforce.

RS: No. I went right into the workforce as a performing artist. I was dancing at that time with the Ron Davis Dancers, travelling around the nation, performing, and even back here in New York at Carnegie Hall. From the Carnegie Hall –

MN: Now what sort of dance did the Ron Davis Dancers do?

RS: Modern Jazz, modern Jazz dancing. That's what we did. And this was a different type of dancing, modern dance, dancing because we would tell stories. Once again, interpretative, we would tell stories and the different numbers that we performed, ok, from we danced them out rather act them out. We would tell a story through dance and jazz music.

MN: Now what was the sort of music you grew up with in your house? What kind of music did your mother listen to?

RS: Oh, you talking about Louis Armstrong, Sammy Davis Jr., Brooke Benton, you talking Nat King Cole, Sarah Barne, my mother was a big fan of Sarah Barne, Nancy Wilson, Nina Simone. Ok, my brothers and I, we listened to the Manhattans, Impressions, Aretha Franklin, oh yes the good stuff. [Inaudible], Supremes, Temptations, Miracles, the Motown sound, that's what it was, yes.

MN: Now, we've seen much of it, you know, when you were growing up was race and the civil rights movement, the subject of discussion in that place.

RS: Oh yes, oh yes. Because we had CORE, I was a member of CORE back in the day as a child. I remember picketing, demonstrating White Castle right here on Fordham Road because they didn't allow blacks [inaudible]

MN: So you were part of the White Castle demonstrations?

RS: Yes!

MN: Were you – do you know about the big riot at Allerton Avenue where the Italian's attacked the CORE demonstrators?

RS: Yes! I remember [inaudible] I was with – I was right in the mix as a youngster, I was a community activist [inaudible].

MN: So you were like 11, 12 years old.

RS: Yes, you hit it right on the nose. I used to go around and take census, knock on doors and find out how many people lived in the home.

MN: Do you remember any of the CORE leaders from the Bronx? Or any of the people that, you know, names stood out.

RS: Across the street from me, who got me involved in CORE. What was their names? It was a husband and wife team. I think their name was Tibbet, ok the Tibbet's. As a matter of fact when the houses caught fire on 168<sup>th</sup> street they took us in, we watched the firemen put the fire out. But they were strong community activists with core and that's how I got involved in CORE. I was strongly involved in the community. Like I said, I would go around – we had an organization called the Bronx Community Self-Improvement Association, I taught martial arts for them. I taught a lot of the kids in the neighborhood martial arts.

MN: When did you start doing martial arts?

RS: Around the same time. I was 10. 10 years old, 11 years old when I was doing the hand to hand combat with martial arts. We had the Muslims back then, they called it the Nation of Islam. They were also an organization that was in the community, ok.

MN: Did they sell *Muhammad Speaks* on the street?

RS: Yes, *Muhammad Speaks*, and they also, Cassius Clay used to visit often before he became Muhammad Ali. And I remember them recruiting me, and I was a soldier, I was a soldier, but they made me a leader because I was good with my hands and I was a good fighter, a good warrior. They gave me my own troop and we had cadets in the neighborhood, I remember that as well. But the Bronx Community Self-Improvement Association was the big one. I remember the gentleman coming to me, talking about he heard about me. He said listen, "I'm opening up, we're starting this organization and we'd love for you to come teach self-defense for us. And I left the Muslims, the Nation of Islam and began teaching for them. And I was getting paid for it of course and built up the community of kids in the community, inspired them, encouraged them, and got them off the street, got them out of the gangs, did a lot of good stuff. And then they knew that I was in show business too. I would do that and then I would travel going out on the road to shows, dancing and doing various plays. My first movie that I did was in 1968, ok. That was *Cotton Comes to Harlem*, my film debut, directed by Ozzie Davis. I didn't have a speaking role, but you could still see me clearly in my movie too.

MN: You said this was 1968 so you were 17 years old?

RS: Yes, and it was *Cotton Comes to Harlem*. I was also studying at the National Black Theater back then, I studied music.

MN: How did you get connected with the National Black Theater, was this when you were still in high school?

RS: Yes, still in high school, but through people that you know in the arts. Like the class that I attended, the Actors Workshop class that I attended, a lot of people – it's like networking in anything, you know, and then you venture out. Then my mother was, she, she pushed me to go down and get into these theater based organizations. I'm well theater trained.

MN: Did she see you as having a future in theater.

RS: Yes she did. Yes she did. My mother knew it. She would look at me when she said, "you going to be something big son, you going to make it boy, you got to stick with this, stick with it, you going to make it. I know talent when I see it, I'm telling you." And the funny thing is she would always tell me, leading up to the day she passed away, that year she was saying, "comedy, you'd be great in comedy," and I never saw myself doing comedy. She says, "oh, you wait until you start doing comedy, they going to love you, you're going to be great." And I haven't had a chance to do much comedy, but when the opportunity arrives, I do more dramatic parts now, dramatic roles but, so that's good.

MN: Ok, what I would like to do is I think we're going to do a second interview about your career and your own performances, but I want to make sure that we don't leave anything out in talking about your mother or your childhood or the neighborhood.

RS: Ok.

MN: Now are there any things which you want to say about those early years which you haven't had a chance to say? You know, we talked about gangs, we talked about street gangs, we talked about music.

RS: Well, let me tell you. What I, what most affected me as coming up, number one and it's probably a list, number one was camaraderie, ok, within the community and your friends that you would come up with and how nice it was to have friends with parents that like took you in. You know, treated you as family, invited you to sit down to dinner or would take you on trips with their family.

MN: What are some of the trips you went on? [inaudible]

RS: We'd go to the beach, Coney Island, we'd go over to Palisades Park in Jersey, but you know, when you're coming from a single parented home and your mother's not well and you know, she's experienced a loss, and there's no one driving, you know, you get an opportunity as a kid to get out of that neighborhood, out of that environment, going to camps, you know, it was a great thing, it was a great thing. But I was impacted most by the love in the community.

MN: Now do you think that, did a lot of the people you grew up with end up successful.

RS: Yes, yes. A lot of them did. I see a lot of my friends today, Nadine and Jackie, they're professionals. A lot of us are professionals, we made it through, we made it through. Don't know how, maybe because of that nature, that strong nature, that standing, you know, standing firm attitude, you know, that victorious attitude. You know, we got to get through, we don't have a choice, there's no option, you got to survive, or you're going to fold, you're going to lose it. And we all made it, the ones I see, the ones that didn't make it of course are in the grave, or in prison doing time and or even crippled, God forbid, you know, it's just, it's bad, if it's not good it's bad. But for the most part, the ones that are still alive today made it pretty good, did a pretty job with themselves and their families, they have families now, they have professions or either they are retiring. You know, you look at me now and people wouldn't believe that I'm 58 years old, 57 years old and a lot of our friends that came out of our neighborhood are the same way. We don't look like we aged over that age that we are. You know, especially how – what we came out of, you know, that pot we came out of, that experience, that life experience that we had. And you didn't let that environment design, we didn't let the goings on and the struggle.

MN: Did you think of the neighborhood, you grew up in, you thought of it as a tough neighborhood, did you think of it as a poor neighborhood?

RS: Of course we were. We weren't well to do, we were in a tenement building, my mother and father struggled to do what they had to do. We definitely weren't rich. No there were parts, of course there's parts of the Bronx that's poor, poor, homeless poor. We weren't that – we didn't go down that far but we were struggling, it was a struggle, we had to struggle to get by day to day, alright, and stick together and help out our parents, we all ran newspaper routes, we were going up to the A&P right around the corner from the library on Franklin Avenue with our carts out there.

MN: So the kids would do anything they could do to bring in income.

RS: That's correct. Ok, we would go around I would collect, I had beauty parlors I would go up, my business ain't subtle. I would go around and all the beauty parlors would save their bottles, soda bottles from there, I would cash them in. Back in the day you get 2 cents, 5 cents ok. I had my paper rout on Sunday, Mr. Freddy, he had me, I was his man, I would be the one to go up and deliver papers to the apartments. After that I'd go over to the hospital doing my shoe shining and my entertaining. In the

afternoon I'd jump on the train, up and down on the route performing. You know, it was just, we did what we had to do to survive. It was a day to day struggle but we made it. And the stakes were high. Another thing, we didn't let it get us down, we didn't realize, maybe because we didn't go outside of our environment we didn't realize that we were poor. You know, our spirits were strong and high and it was truly love. Of course we had bad days, the fights and the arguments and the battles, but yes it was part of, it wasn't anything different. You know, the gang fights, that part of it, that was a way of life to us. But then eventually you go through school, you get out and then become independent and on your own and have your own families and you look back, like we're looking back now and I just have to ask, how did we, how the hell did we make it?

MN: Now all of your brothers landed on your feet?

RS: Yes, yes, except like I said, my oldest brother is deceased, my youngest brother is deceased. Nicholas is doing wonderful, he is my role model. He is definitely my – he's a year older than myself and, you know, he's going back to school. He's at Baruch, attending Baruch for his Masters degree as a social worker. I myself, I didn't graduate college, and because of the work I do now as an actor I'm fine, but ok because I'm reputable, I'm credible, I'm in the – a part of the Screen Actors Guild, I'm a proud member of the Screen Actors Guild, as well as actor. I'm an accomplished actor. I'm in several films, independent films, commercials, national commercials, I'm the voiceover for National Geographic's National Park Series, I do voiceover work for the United Way, Red Cross, the Katrina disaster down in Louisiana, you know I'm all over the place and I'm still, I just finished a film, I have a one man show that I produce and am performing in, I'm travelling throughout New York City as a licensed vendor for the Department of Education, alright, I've got a program where I'm building self-esteem and character with the kids, the not so fortunate kids that came out of the neighborhoods like myself! I can give to them, I let them know, I'm standard example, hey, stand up and you know, be strong and come up out this, you can do it. Look at me I came from where you came from.

MN: One second, I have a feeling [inaudible]

RS: Yes, no, I have to be an inspiration to – an example for these kids. It's my way of giving back. It's incumbent of me, I came from here, this is my town, this is my home the Bronx and these are the schools that I deal with in the Bronx, so far, eventually I'm going to stretch out nationally. But right now, my company Truth Unlimited Productions, that I created and founded, that's what I'm doing, I'm taking the arts and dramatized education is what I'm calling it, ok. And now I'm also now into the prison systems, Department of Corrections, Rikers Island, working with the prisoners in terms of intervention and relapse prevention. You don't have to return here, break the cycle, break the cycle, you know, you could move on, you know, don't let that title, don't think that stigma means you got in trouble, you went to jail, you know, you have a record you can't make it. No, you can do it, hold your head up and prove it to yourself and prove it to your community and society that you can do it and somebody's going to give you another chance. And I'm making my way and I'm bridging different organizations so we can have that opportunity for these guys to come out, get involved in media, journalism, learning to operate a camera and getting, how would you say, reference letters. So when they do go out on an interview for a job they can say well, this organization here will tell you about me, you know, here's a reference letter.

MN: Now I wanted to mention a few neighborhood clubs and see if there are places – did you ever go to the Hunt's Point Palace.

RS: Oh yes, Hunt's Point Palace, we hung out there. Hunt's Point Palace was a good place, ok but mostly when we were able – when we, we left the community at a certain point. We went downtown to Manhattan Center.

MN: Manhattan Center.

RS: Yes, down there we – the Latin dances took place, ok. Right now what is it, the Rose –

MN: Roseland.

RS: Roseland ,yes.

MN: What you used to do Latin dancing?

RS: Oh yes!

[Laughter]

MN: How old were you when you learned to Latin dance?

RS: I was Latin dancing from 13, 14 [Laughs], yes! I mean if you could do the Bop, ok and the Slop, you know what I mean and the Watusi and the Shake a Leg and the Twist.

MN: Who were the Latin musicians that you listened to.

RS: Eddie Palmieri, Tito Fuente, you know, Latin Kings, that's – those are the two that stood out to me. Oh yes, big stuff, big, big, big stuff. But getting back to the community, what I can remember most is that we all kind of encouraged each other to move on, move on up and out.

MN: So this wasn't a case of crabs in a barrel where if you were ambitious, you were encouraged.

RS: Exactly! Exactly! And you wanted to come out of it, you wanted something more, you wanted a better life, a better way of living, ok. It was – you just wanted to prove it to yourself, it was that determination and desire. Now we were all pretty smart, we weren't you know, mentally handicapped, or, how would you say it, slow. We were all pretty smart kids. Bright, good looking, and yes, well groomed, well groomed and when we partied, you know, we partied and we hung out together and then we went on about our ways, our separate ways. So it was pretty nice, it was very nice.

MN: Ok, well listen let's – we'll stop here if I can figure out how to end this this.

[End of Interview]