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Bronx African American History Project
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Interviewers: Natasha Lightfoot
Mark Naison
Laura Kelly

Interviewee: Matthew Swain
February 2, 2006

Mark Naison (MN): This is the 142nd interview of the Bronx African-American History project. We're at Fordham University February 2nd 2006 with Matthew Swain who has been a life long resident of the Bronx and who lived through some of the most important events in the history of the borough, the fires, the disinvestment, the rise of hip-hop, but also saw a lot of the positive things that existed in those times as well. So Matt if you could tell us a little bit about how your family ended up in the Bronx.

Matthew Swain (MS): Okay, this is Matthew Swain speaking. Good morning.

MN: Okay [laughs].

MS: Me and my family were born in the Bronx, I don't know about, I believe at one point that I can recall from around 2 or 3 years old that we lived on Mapes Avenue, and therefore moved to 182nd Street just not far from Tremont near the Bronx Zoo. The Bronx Zoo was in walking distance.

MN: Right.

MS: We lived in a brownstone type of building across the street from a famous bakery, which I had two uncles that worked there and would always bring us this good bread and stuff.

Natasha Lightfoot (NL): What was the name of the bakery?

MS: I can't tell you, it was just a building and it was a bakery, wholesale and stuff.

MN: Right.

NL: Okay, I see. And was your mother and her siblings, they were all raised in the Bronx as well?

MS: Yes.

NL: Yes okay. Was it in the same area you were living in the Tremont section?

MS: Yes, actually we all lived in the same apartment. Back then the apartments were huge, there were two bathrooms and two entrances.

MN: So you lived in like an extended family?

MS: Yes.

MN: How many people were in the apartment? So this is when you were about 4 or 5 years old?

MS: Yes, that's when I started kindergarten, around 4 or 5. It was me, my brother, mother, grandmother, two uncles, and aunt.

MN: Was your family mostly of Southern origin or Caribbean origin?

MS: It's kind of a combination. My grandmother's parents are from Barbados and stuff so I know she's been since she was young. She was born here though. Her father's from [unclear] who was a butcher. And of course he taught her how to be such a great cook that she is today. We had lots of family from the South, particularly my father's side of the family, Paul Swain. His whole family's from down there. He lived up here but so many years in Bronx, New York. He was born and raised in Windsor, North Carolina, stayed up here I guess throughout his teens until his very early adult years and went back to north Carolina, to Windsor.

MN: Now where did your parents meet?

MS: They met in the Bronx. I forgot exactly where and how. I think it was around my mother's neighborhood or something. Yes they met around her old neighborhood basically.

MN: Now did you visit at all with the southern relatives of your father, do you ever go down there?

MS: I have never been there until I turned 17 for the first time. At one point my father left when I was about, I would say about 5. And I hadn't seen him for some years and he came back up here when I was around 12 or so. So then it was that point, after a few years [unclear], I finally made a trip down there to visit that side of the family.

MN: Right. Now what were your childhood recollections of the Bronx? You were born in 1969, so you're talking about the early mid 70's. Did it seem like a pretty safe place where you were living?

MS: Yes, it was very much safe. I've seen events happen. People have their confrontations, the adults, but it was nowhere near where it had progressed to be like in the, say, late 80's or so.

MN: Right. So in the sense - -it was a pretty nice neighborhood.

MS: Yes.

MN: Were adults sitting in the street looking out for kids?

MS: Of course they did, definitely. We had a community that lived on the stoop, as we called it, because we lived in - -it was a tenement building, but almost like a brownstone to it, just a wider version --

MN: Right.

MS: These long stoops and everybody just out on the stoops. You got people you daily communicate with through their window and looked out for everybody inside the neighborhood.

MN: Yes sure. Now what was the ethnic composition? Was it pretty diverse where you were?

MS: It was kind of diverse, yes. I would say, at that point from my recollection, it was mostly African-Americans, Hispanic. You still had a few Jewish or Italian people in there as well.

MN: Right. Now of the African-Americans were - -was it more African-American, West Indian? Were people so mixed that those distinctions didn't matter that much.

MS: Back then, it was mostly African-American. Yes.

MN: And of the Latinos, mostly Puerto Rican?

MS: Yes, then it was just Puerto Rican. I hadn't heard of any other type of Hispanic or Latino back then. I just knew of Puerto Rican.

MN: Now in your early childhood what kind of music were you exposed to like in the house or in the street? What were you hearing?

MS: I can recall back as far as 2 and 3, James Brown, Otis Redding, nothing but Aretha Franklin. Particularly Stevie Wonder and Jackson Five. It was just secondhand. It was just there.

NL: Did your mother play records in the house?

MS: Yes. My mother, my grandmother, my uncles and aunts.

NL: Yes, and what kind of dances did they do?

MS: Back then?

NL: Yes.

MS: Man, I remember, let's see, let's see, let's see. The hustle.

MN: Right.

MS: A popular dance. The hustle was a very popular dance back then, and me being a kid I recall doing the robot. Standing on my grandmother's coffee table, which she still possesses. [Laughter] This solid wood heavy table, that probably weighed about three tons in it. That very table I can recall, I have pictures of me standing in it.

MN: Can you still do the robot?

NL: Oh God. [Laughter]

MN: We don't have the camera here.

MS: I don't have the cartilage in my ligaments, or I could do it again. But if I did I could do it now.

MN: Now this is interesting. Where --so did you see this from kids doing this in the neighborhood? Were there break dancers?

MS: Really, I've seen a lot of this on Soul Train. I myself back then being so young, and this was probably between the age of 3 and 4, would watch Soul Train with my family. I remember this black and white tv, seeing everybody dance with their afros and everything. My mother dressed that way. Everybody just dressed that way. Now that's interesting because the robot preceded the hip hop.

MS: Way, way before that. Way before that. Imagine hip hop came from that.

MN: That's interesting because that's a lot of what Michael Jackson did when he was on the Grammys.

MS: Michael Jackson and James Brown a lot. I mean as a matter of fact you never could have told them that dance wasn't everything. And it was right from there.

MN: Wow, wow. Now was there any Latin music in the neighborhood that you were overhearing from the streets or in the apartments?

MS: I did hear. Yes, I did. Sometimes it would be inside the apartments, or just outside in the street, yes.

NL: Were your family members consumers of Latin music at all or no?

MS: No, not so much of that, as far as me hearing it inside the house, but I definitely heard it.

MN: Did you go with your family to any live music events?

MS: It wasn't so much live music events. No I didn't have anybody who was really into going to live music, but it was just the house parties. I'd been to various house parties where they played just all types of music.

MN: So these were house parties with the families there.

MS: Right, just like that.

MN: Okay then we have to deal with cooking. [Laughter] At these house parties, what were some of the things that were served?

MS: The very typical to this day, fried chicken. You had everything, it was strictly a southern cuisine.

MN: It was southern cuisine.

MS: Right. Greens, macaroni and cheese, candied yams, you had roast pork, you got barbeque ribs. It was all types of food.

MN: Were there any family picnics that people went to?

MS: Oh yes. Those were the best. Particularly I remember us going to Crotona Park, which is in the Bronx as well. We would have picnics there or even over in Van Cortland Park.

MN: So how many people would go - -with your family would go when you did a picnic?

MS: Whether it was my family throwing a picnic, or somebody else's family, there was always a couple families that came which was a good, at least fifteen to twenty people.

MN: Now did people bring portable record players? Was there music at these picnics?

MS: They had radios.

MN: They had radios.

MS: Yes, and some would have a portable record player which they would have rent a power cord to the lamppost outside.

MN: Now this whole idea of plugging into the lamppost, so this was done both in the street and in the park?

MS: In the park, I've seen that, right.

MN: How do you do that? I'm very poor mechanically.

MS: Yes, it all depends on just how close your picnic setting was to somebody's building. And you ask someone can we run this wire through your apartment.

MN: Oh it was into the apartment?

MS: Yes, it went into somebody's apartment, and sometimes into the lamppost because they would have at the base of it the plate would come off. It was kind of like an outlet inside there.

MN: Oh so there's - -I didn't - -so anybody could do this?

MS: [crosstalk] I rarely see it.

MN: So there were outlets on - -so that's how Grand Master Flash and those guys did it.

There was a panel down there that you could plug your system into.

MS: Oh I could tell you about Grand Master Flash personally. My Uncle Keith knew him. This was before records were being done.

MN: Yes tell us a little bit.

MS: A little before that. I remember I was about that time in the 1st grade, 6 years old.

My Uncle Keith - -one particular night, I think it was a Friday or Saturday night because he was the younger sibling of my mother. And he was just five years older than me.

NL: Right and your mother had you young, so that would make sense that your uncles were close to you in age.

MS: That's correct, yes. I was close to this uncle. He took me and my brother everywhere, to the movies to watch all the Bruce Lee karate flicks back then. But when it came to hip hop, Keith would hang out at these certain spots and clubs. I remember this one club called The Sparkle which was on Mt. Eden.

NL: And what?

MS: And that's where Grand Master Flash -

ML: Mt. Eden and What?

MS: Jerome Avenue specifically.

MN: Jerome Avenue and Mt. Eden.

MS: It was a club called The Sparkle. He took me there as a kid one time, by there where you would see Grand Master Flash, Nelly Nell, it was a bunch of them. Cool Herc was there. It was mainly Cool Herc, he was like the main DJ over there.

MN: Right.

MS: But that's where you see these guys in. Even growing up later in years, me coming across Grand Master Flash again, still stuck in his hay day with the hot leather suits in the summertime. [Laughter]

NL: Right. So what was the scene like in there? Can you remember as a child?

MS: It was strictly a party, it was just party music.

NL: Yes, so like mostly disco records.

MS: It was disco era too now. [crosstalk]

NL: Yes, it was mostly disco records. [crosstalk]

MS: Hip hop was just starting. I remember the first time I heard of break dancing was from my uncle, and I was still in first grade then.

NL: So that's like, if you were in the first grade how old were you then?

MS: I was 6.

NL: You were 6.

MS: So it wasn't called break dancing, it was called b-boying. That was the original term for this dance. And he showed me this dance and I fell in love with it, just started mimicking that's all.

MN: Wow. Now were any girls doing break dancing out in the street, or was this a guy thing?

MS: Back then, it really seemed more so of a guy thing. It progressed into being a unisex thing more so like in the 80's when hip hop and break dancing, and battling started to occur back then. I used to take part in a lot of those battles. It'd be like the guys from Millbrook against the guys from Mitchell and Patterson.

MN: So you were in a break dance crew.

MS: Yes. [Laughs]

MS: Do you have any pictures of that?

MS: Not of - -I don't think I have any still up, maybe my mother might have some, I'd have to check. But I personally don't have any pictures.

MN: Now at the parties, were there a lot of girls at Sparkle?

MS: Yes, yes.

MN: And so they were like the consumers in the music?

MS: Yes.

MN: And how were they dressed?

MS: Back then girls wore bangs, and mushroom hair dos. Stuff like that. You'd have the ruffled shirt collar. They still dressed kind of girly like back then.

I thought I was too young to be amongst this crowd. This was more so my uncle's peers and stuff.

MN: Right.

MS: But that's what I do recall. Around that same era I still remember Grace Jones and Donna Summer performing and being out there.

MN: Now what was your elementary school experience like? Did you have good teachers, or were things a little chaotic?

MS: If I compare them to today? Hmm. I guess we were just learning the bare basics.

You would learn, of course your ABC's, how to read three letter words, cat, Tom, up the hill, stuff like that. [Laughter] That was basically it. It was kindergarten.

NL: But even through your older years in elementary school do you feel like teachers were particularly encouraging?

MS: Yes.

NL: Yes?

MS: Actually I enjoyed elementary schools then compared to what they are now because they incorporated music then. We had a music element. I was in tap dance class.

MN: In your elementary school.

MS: Elementary school.

MN: Wow.

NL: Which one was that?

MS: P.S. 43. We did these annual shows every year. We did plays, and we did this tribute to Duke Ellington and stuff like that. It was some really nice things.

NL: And where was P.S. 43?

MS: It's located in the Bronx. This is where I lived in Millbrook. Just up the backstreet on Brown's Place.

MN: Now how old were you when your family moved to the Millbrook houses?

MS: Millbrook? I was just entering 4th grade, so I'd say I was about 9.

MN: Right.

MS: It was that summer before.

MN: What was the feeling surrounding moving to Millbrook?

MS: That was great for me as a kid because prior to that we always lived in tenement buildings, and even back then whenever we would be inside a car or something, and we would drive by these tall buildings, I would always tell my mother, mom I want to live in

a building like this, I want to move in one of those buildings. Then after I actually move in one of those buildings, it was like heaven to us. Because number one it was giant complex, then for us to move to the 13th floor as opposed to the 3rd or 4th floor we had to look outside and see this great view, and the highways, and the airplanes landing - -that was something big for me. And it was just more kids around.

MN: Now in those days did anybody talk about those projects as a scary place?

MS: Aw it wasn't scary at all. That's the whole thing about it. If anything, it was kind of a - -I can't say a privilege, but it was a working class people in there at that point.

Early, like the 70's going into the 80's.

MN: Wow.

NL: And you felt like the actual - -the upkeep of the projects, was it clean?

MS: It was maintained much better than what it is now. It was always basically clean. The people just maintained themselves.

NL: Right. And what kinds of families lived there. Was it mostly African-American in Millbrook?

MS: It was mixed.

NL: It was mixed?

MS: I would say evenly mixed between African-Americans and Hispanics. Particularly I would say Puerto Ricans.

NL: And was there, were there other ethnicities at that point, or when you moved in it was solidly --

MS: Literally from what I can recall, it was totally just Black and Puerto Rican.

MN: Right, and that was also true of the schools you went to?

MS: Yes.

NL: Okay, Okay. And was it mostly two parent families that lived in Millbrook or were there extended families, one parent families?

MS: It was a combination of all. You had a few families who had both parents that were the mother and father, some were being raised with just one single parent, which was primarily of course the mother, and you had some raised by the grandmother, or you had a combination of mother and aunts, because some of the apartments ranged from studio to three bedrooms.

MN: Right. Now did you have the same kind of people looking out for each other that they had when you were in Tremont?

MS: It was still basically the same back then. I think it was primarily a mind set that people generally had at that point. Even since the migration to Millbrook, until I guess but somehow it seemed like when the drugs really infiltrated the neighborhood, like crack, particularly that era –

MN: So that's the 80's with the crack era.

MS: Yes. People have, I guess think oh my God they smoked marijuana and stuff, but it still wasn't a bad place to live. It was still safe.

MN: Now when you were growing up, this is in the mid 70's, did anybody talk about the fires that were happening.

MS: Aw man. I'm a product of that. I mean we moved on account of buildings catching fire. I lived on Grand Avenue. I remember a big fire happening –

MN: On Grand between where and where?

MS: Grand and 176th Street, and Grand Avenue. I remember those buildings there. And those buildings - -and again apartments back then, so huge with these marble, high ceilings chandeliers, the old style elevators, these are huge complex buildings that had - - the floors were split with a swinging door, they just ran that long. Me and my brother would play in the hall way, ride our big wheels through these long hallways and just play. At times during the winter time, we didn't have to go outside. We could stay in the building, play tag with our friends and run through different sections. But back then those - -I remember the blackouts - -no from the fire, a lot of buildings were catching fire. We moved - -

MN: Now Grand Avenue is a couple blocks off the Concourse?

MS: Yes, from Grand Avenue is just a few blocks off the Concourse, is just heading into the west side.

NL: Yes, like Jerome.

MS: Once you pass Jerome you're considered being east of that part of the Bronx. It was just a few blocks over.

MN: Okay so it was west.

NL: West of the Concourse, east of Jerome.

MN: West of the Concourse, east of Jerome.

MS: I think Jerome divides east and west of the Bronx.

NL: Yes.

MN: Wow. And I guess that neighborhood, I guess they call it Mt. Eden or something?

MS: I don't think they call it - -was it Mt. Eden? It was more so University Heights.

MN: University Heights. Okay, how did people explain those fires when they were going on, or it was just like a fact of nature, you just periodically had to move?

MS: It just happened to a point because fires were so bad we eventually had to move, because a lot of people were vacating the building. I remember one point where it seemed like it was just us and maybe two or three other families inside this one building, I remember before we actually moved. At that point I was living, when the fire happened at Andrews Avenue, which is just across town from 176th Street.

MN: Right, right.

MS: I remember a fire happening inside that building. I remember the blackouts back then of I believe '77.

MN: Well talk about that because that was a really traumatic event in the Bronx. What was your experience with the blackout?

MS: Wow. One I just thought the lights went out [laughs], until we realized it was everywhere. We looked outside it was just black.

MN: So you were how old, 8 years old at that time?

MS: Yes, in '77 yes, I was about 8 years old. I remember that happening, and I remember the looting. I remember there was an A & P supermarket just off on University Avenue, and they vandalized that store terribly. We realized that the next day going outside and we just saw the broken glass and a lot of the small shops had broken glass. They had just vandalized the stores down there, electronic stores. I remember us having candles inside the apartment. I think that blackout lasted for a few days back then.

NL: yes.

MS: I remember back on Grand Avenue, to back track, at this one particular fire, and the building didn't have the electricity sign there and back then as a kid it was safe for a kid to just go to the store. I did that often. I was just aware of my traveling and stuff young, even though I caught a serious butt whipping [laughter] for leaving the block, because I just knew where I was going. I knew how to go back to my kindergarten school, just traveling. But I remember me going to the store and coming back. The stairs ran spirally like this [motions], and me just being a kid I'm holding this loaf of Wonder Bread, which probably cost like sixty cents back then. I'm walking up, I think I lived on the 4th floor. I'm walking up and somehow I walked too far out, and remember its dark now, and I walked right into the metal grid, I mean like ding!

NL: Aww.

MS: I caught a serious knot on my head as a result of it being so pitch black in there. Yes, but it was just safe then as a kid. I mean now –

NL: You still felt safe even with the fires and with the blackout.

MS: Like me going out, oh yes.

NL: Yes.

MS: I did that, of course it was during the daytime, but it was just - -it wasn't a strange thing.

NL: What kind of games did you and your childhood friends play in the area? You said you felt safe. So you played in the street? What'd you play?

MS: Well we didn't play in the street.

NL: You didn't play in the --

MS: We had these very long, deep sidewalks so that's how our buildings were set. Or maybe because I was small then, they just seemed very long and extended. But we played games out there. We played neon tag, we played hot peas and butter, of course spin the bottle. We played things like Johnny on the Pony, this game oh it was a classic game. [Laughs] We played all types of games. We played Skelzies, which we loved particularly when we could go in the street at one point when we had block parties, and they'd close off the street and we'd have these gatherings and the whole neighborhood would just come out and we were just festive and they'd have all types of food and games.

NL: And then in Millbrook was it the same atmosphere where you were playing a lot of?

MS: It was the same just even more grand to me because, again, it was just an abundance of more people. And eventually then we had these annual father's day basketball games they would have. We had just a cookout day when people would just go in the big park, as we called the Whistler where our basketball courts were. We would just have all types of parties there and particularly back then in the growing hip hop state, that's where they'd have these parties called jams.

MN: Okay, what is your first recollection of a jam in Millbrook?

MS: When that thing happened, I was like this is so cool man. [Laughter] Right there on my block and they just played [unclear] and it was a live DJ out there, and they would set up two metal garbage cans. They were turn them upside down and put this big board to set the turntables on. Run the watts to someone's second story apartment straight through, and it was just on. It would go all night and it was just a cool thing.

MN: And what'd they have two turntables?

MS: Yes two turntables these giant speakers.

MN: And what sort of mixers did they have or at that time you didn't get close to –

MS: Pioneer, pioneer. Pioneer and Kenwood I think it was. I remember those.

MN: Now was anybody doing scratching?

MS: That's all there was. You just had to be good at scratching. That's all you really heard. All you heard was just really - -then it was a lot of freestyle rappers then too.

MN: Oh, so there was rapping at these jams too?

MS: There was rapping, yes.

NL: So around what year would you estimate that this - -was like the first jams happening in the Millbrook projects?

MS: When I moved there. That --

NL: Really so –

MS: Yes well. Oh I can't remember doing that in the fall, so probably that following or that summer is when I really experienced. I guess when the weather got warm on a weekend.

NL: [crosstalk] So the summer when you were ten?

MS: Yes.

MN: Okay so this is 1979?

MS: '79 was the year.

MN: Now were the rappers using a mic?

MS: A microphone.

MN: And they would go –

MS: Use a microphone and they would just - -and the crowd would just - -the crowd was just galvanized by this one MC. He's just rapping. He just had the whole crowd going. The rhyming back then was nowhere near where it is today. Almost like scatting, but in a more hip hop way.

MN: Did you ever try this stuff?

MS: I never personally did it, but of course the kids would try it amongst themselves.

[unclear]

MN: Did you every actual battling, two people –

MS: Yes.

MN: Up there at the same time?

MS: Yes they did have that.

NL: I was going to ask you if you could remember any of the local DJs, or amateur rappers that were coming up at the time that had jams in Millbrook.

MS: Just the local guys that I knew around here.

NL: Any names that stick out?

MS: Yes. I know this one guy named Larry who lived in the building behind me. He lived on 180 Brook Avenue. He was one of the main ones who would throw parties out there, DJ and stuff. It was Frank, Larry, we had a bunch of guys out there. The older guys that is.

NL: Nobody [unclear]

MS: They weren't my age. It was just the older guys.

MN: Now were there any women MCs that you recall?

MS: Once in a blue moon you would see one back then. You would, you would see one.

NL: And did they win battles?

MS: I'd never seen one more so win a battle, but just get up there and entertain the crowd. That's what they basically did.

MN: Now when these jams were going on would there be break dance crews?

MS: Yes, now that's what I was a part of.

MN: B-boying.

MS: Yes, yes. That's what they did. Well back at that point was when they called it break dancing.

MN: Okay, they were starting to call it break dancing already by '79.

MS: Yes, that's what they call it. That's when they would have the battles. Again, people would come from all over, especially if word got out that there was a jam over at this park, people would just flock to that party. Wasn't necessarily the locals there, it was people from all over [crosstalk] various parts of the Bronx. We came over from Manhattan because we were close to Manhattan. We had to [unclear] South Bronx.

MN: Right. Now you're talking about hundred of people or into the thousands?

MS: No, I wouldn't say thousands, but probably good hundreds would come to these parties.

NL: Were there rival crews that normally found themselves at a particular jam or was it something where everyone was basically –

MS: It was a combination because for the most part it was just a party setting, but at times, at a certain party there'd be rival crews, as we call it. Because it was always like this project setting against this one over here. Of course it was the just the boys.

NL: And who was Millbrook's biggest rival?

MS: Biggest? I could never. It's not [unclear] biggest

NL: Or who at least did Millbrook crews rival? Which project?

MS: It was all of them. Everybody –it always seemed everybody was against everyone.

NL: Right.

MS: Not everybody but it was just certain crews, and they were just very territorial. If anybody came on their block, it's like they instantly had to respect them.

MS: Right.

MS: Don't come here starting any trouble, don't get any beef or anything. If not then a fight would break out. [crosstalk] The music would stop, the cops would come for a minute whenever. Then after that break up, the party would just resume.

MN: Now were the Puerto Rican kids part of the scene?

MS: Yes, definitely. It was a mix literally. It wasn't always just a black DJ, it was Puerto Rican too.

MN: Right. Oh so there were Puerto Rican DJs, Puerto Rican MCs?

MS: Yes, yes.

NL: And break dancers.

MS: Yes.

MN: Now, did the break dance crews have jackets, was it that organized?

MS: Yes, at that point, I remember us having the sweatshirts with the Chinese letters on it. We'd wear the Adidas or Pumas with the fat laces, and we wore Lee jeans back then with the permanent crease put in there with the - -it was a whole dress style then.

MN: Wow. Now hold were –

MS: We'd have names. Ultimately everyone's name ended off with this suffix, -skee.

MN: So what were the –

MS: Matt-skee, or something skee.

NL: That was your name? [Laughs]

MN: So you were Matt-skee? [Laughter]

MS: I look at it now, it sounds Jewish almost. [Laughter]

MN: So, now, were people very aware of martial arts, like the Bruce Lee movies, and was that part of what people incorporated –

MS: It just seemed like everybody, all kids loved a karate flick. Everybody was - - I remember us - -at one time - -at one point Channel 5, which is called Fox 5 now, on a Saturday would have this 1 o'clock or 2 o'clock karate show. Once we came off the basketball court we would race to any of our homes together and just watch the karate flick.

NL: Tell him about your Uncle Keith and his outfit. [Laughter]

MS: Yes, I had an uncle [Laughter] his name was Kevin, and we called him Keith. He was really into that and this was before I even moved to Millbrook. Again when I was in kindergarten he would take me and my brother Marcus to the karate flicks.

NL: And where would go to see - -which movie houses would you go to, to see karate movies.

MS: I believe it was either the Fordham Theater, right here on Fordham Road I remember there were like four movie theaters.

MN: Yes, and there was one on –

MS: The Capri?

MS: On Valentine –

MS: On Valentine, on Valentine. There was a Fordham. And then Loews was on the Grand Concourse.

MN: The Paradise, the big place where they just reopened.

MS: Paradise, right. It was just south of there.

MN: So your cousin –

MS: My Uncle Keith, he was so into karate, his whole room was decorated with nothing but Bruce Lee posters. He wore karate gee with the slippers. [unclear] I imagine there were a few guys like that, and he was just one of them.

MN: Right.

MS: He was really into it. He would draw his own animated cartoons where he would have the book –a book of loose leaf paper. He would fold it up and cut it and would draw these animations, so once he gave it to me and I'd flip it, you'd see the little Chinese man flying off the house doing a flying kick. You'd flip the page and the man's just moving, doing the stick fighting. He was like that.

MN: So when you're inventing your moves. Are you watching other break dancers you're seeing on television? How was the creative process?

MS: With me, it was a combination of me watching, then still, watching Soul Train and incorporating that into my own moves. To the point - -we would just battle other kids and beat them all the time. I know I would, all the time. My brother was a really good break dancer. He would do all types of stuff. I was more so the electric boogie. I've been called the robot.

MN: Were you aware at Millbrook that this was something which was becoming big or was this --

MS: I remember it was becoming big. The very thing which Michael Jackson's famous for, The Moonwalk, I knew how to do that probably before he'd seen it. Nobody in my neighborhood had ever seen it when they'd seen him do it. I was doing it in 5th grade. When I would do it I would have the whole class --we'd be in line walking up the hall and I'd stop and do something, they would be mesmerized, teachers and all. They'd never seen anything like that, because it looked like I was gliding on air. My mother would tell you this. Nobody had ever seen this.

NL: So Michael Jackson was late?

MN: Yes.

MS: Yes, him coming up. I'm older now, and he's doing something called the Moonwalk. I remember it appeared on The Apollo, and everybody was like, oh did you see that Michael Jackson move? And I'm like, I was doing that back when I was a kid. [Laughter] It's that serious.

NL: Right, okay.

MS: That whole era of break dancing. Roller skating was big too.

MN: Oh roller --oh okay. Where was your nearest --where was your roller skating rink?

MS: I just knew of the Bronx having them.

MN: Okay where?

MS: The Skate Palace.

MN: Now where is that located? That's --

MS: There's one off Bruckner Boulevard. Bruckner near Hunts Point.

MN: Right.

MS: In that area.

MN: Was that within walking distance, or did you have to take the bus?

MS: No, we would take the 6 train over there, because I lived along the 6 train on Brook Avenue.

MN: It was called the Skate Palace.

MS: Skate Palace, yes. It was one there. There were a few skating rinks in the Bronx. I didn't go to all of them.

NL: Did you go to Skate Key on Allerton?

MS: That's - I've never went to Skate Key before because I remember when it was on Allerton which is now on 138th Street.

NL: Yes, yes.

MN: Right.

MS: Right near the Grand Concourse.

MN: Now did you ever go to Brooklyn in those days?

MS: Are you kidding? No.

MN: The people kept - -what was Brooklyn's reputation when you - [laughs]

MS: Yes, yes. When you grew up as a kid you always heard, don't go to Brooklyn, those guys are dangerous. And you get over there meeting people from Brooklyn, they would hear that about the Bronx. Don't go to the Bronx, those guys are dangerous over there.

NL: Right. Did you have after school centers in the public schools?

MS: My after school center, because my public school, P.S. 43, was just up the block from where we lived in the South Bronx. Our after school center was in Millbrook. We had an after school program.

MN: You had a –

MS: Yes, which is all types of recreation. We did our homework there. We had tutors and helpers who'd help us with that, and this is all free. We'd just sign up. Or some times at some point, maybe ten dollars for the whole year. We did that and then we went on after school trips. Once in a blue moon we'd go to say, Yankee Stadium baseball game, or we'd go skating, or we'd go to Yankee Stadium bowling hall, bowling alley.

MN: What about during the summer, did you ever go to camps?

MS: Summer camp, yes. The same place actually facilitated our summer camps. They had Eastside Housing Development which consisted of all four projects, which was Patterson, Millbrook, Mount Haven –

MN: Yes.

MS: And Mitchell.

MN: And they had summer day camps?

MS: Yes, on each four of the complexes they would have these day camps.

MN: And would you go on day trips?

MS: Yes we did. Like every summer we went for a good six weeks or so. We would go on trips – [crosstalk]

MN: Any particularly memorable places you went?

MS: Aw man, the sleepover. [unclear] I can't remember if we went to Rockland State Park or somewhere on [unclear] But we stayed over –

NL: So you actually stayed –

MS: We went camping. That was a thing because that was the first time I had ever done anything like that, with a bunch of kids.

MN: Now what about beaches? Did your family ever go to beaches?

MS: Yes, back then I always thought the beaches were fun, just to be in the sand.

MN: Did you go to the Orchard [crosstalk] did you ever go out to Rockaway or Coney Island.

MS: We always went to either Coney Island Beach or Orchard Beach. That's where we would go.

MN: Now one of the things - - you mentioned crack as being the thing that really had the most devastating impact. Was heroin something you were aware of growing up in the world you were in and how did that --?

MS: Before crack - - of course heroin which back being a kid, me hearing it was called smack.

MN: Smack, okay.

MS: That's what it was called then. I didn't more so see it, I knew of it and I saw the effects it had on people when they were - -it was this downer type drug where they would nod and always be in this - -talk slow and slur their words.

MN: Were there neighborhood junkies who were visible on the streets?

MS: Back then when it was just heroin, not really.

MN: Really?

MS: Because heroin addicts I found compared to other drug addicts, me observing them now we can either say a crack head or somebody else. They were still basically neat.

They kept themselves up. They were just drugged. They just liked to shoot up heroin with a needle. I mean the heroin nowadays is like cocaine, you can swallow it snort it, or take it orally. Back then even before crack, again marijuana was just marijuana. I remember guys sniffing glue, which is something you really don't see.

MN: Right.

MS: But I would see the guys on the streets like zombies on this stuff. I would ask my mommy why are they holding this bag, inhaling it nonstop, I mean to the point where they were addicted on it. I learned they were sniffing airplane glue, which would put holes in your brain, but to the point where they were so addicted to it they couldn't put it down. And when they finally put it down their mouth had this white foamy stuff around it.

MN: Eww.

MS: I saw a guy on the train back then, and they'd be on the train just doing it.

MN: Speaking of trains, this was some would say the Golden Age of graffiti.

MS: Oh yes.

MN: Now was that part of your world, the graff?

MS: I didn't - -I did my own little tag inside the buildings and stuff which my mother swore to whip my behind if she found out I was -

MN: What was your tag? Do you remember what you used to write?

MS: I wrote various things. It'd be like Cool Matt or Matt-skee.

MN: Matt-skee. [laughs]

MS: That comes up again. Always [unclear].

NL: Right.

MS: Back then, we had a little gang or a posse or the [unclear] even called the Black Smurfs.

MN: The Black Smurfs. [laughter]

NL: As opposed to the blue ones.

MS: I kid you not because it was cartoon, we watched cartoons. It happened. Yes, the Black Smurfs.

NL: And wasn't there a dance called the smurf?

MS: Well that came somewhere after that. Yes.

NL: It still came after you named yourself the Black Smurf.

MN: Were there any people you know who became serious graff writers and did stuff in the trains, or that was not part of –

MS: No, my little group no. We didn't do things like that. The guys I hung out with, we were basically good kids. We did our little mischievous things of course but we were relatively good kids. We were trying to stay away from the very negative.

MN: Now what about sports? Did that play an important role?

MS: Yes we loved to play basketball, baseball, football. I mean just being active was always a good thing. We played kickball, or dodgeball was a cool sport to play. We just had to try all the different sports.

MN: Now were there adult mentors in the neighborhood who worked with kids or took kids under their wing at the community centers?

MS: Well at the community center, but even outside of that, just out in the street. It always seemed like there was always a set of guys that we just looked up to. Whether some were just the ones who were on the good and narrow - -you guys stay in school, do

this, don't follow those guys over there, don't mess with drugs or whatever. Even at times we would admire the ones who were doing, probably selling drugs, always were just cool. Even though they did their own little hustle, they were still cool guys to talk to, learn from.

NL: Wow. So what changes did you see in the neighborhood when crack infiltrated the area?

MN: And at what point did you first start feeling like things were coming apart? Is there a moment when you said, oh man this is different, this is scary, this is no good.

MS: Yes, mid-80's. I would say the very mid-80's, like '86 I would say.

MN: So you were in high school at that point?

MS: In high school. I remember when this thing crack was new, and to see people smoke crack, I remember - -I seen people, my very friend, their parents get on that stuff. I got a close friend Mike Terrance, he was in grade school with me from 4th grade until 6th grade, we graduated with each other. I watched his mother deteriorate from that. She eventually died from AIDS, from that.

MN: Jesus.

MS: I've seen people in my building whose houses I've stayed over, occasionally we would have sleepovers, within our building.

MN: Right.

MS: Neighbors who lived maybe a floor, or on the same floor, or a couple floors up whatever. I watched a couple of them get on this drug and just constantly - -they'd come to my mother begging her for money. That's one thing, you always had people knocking on doors begging for money. It got so bad to the point, sad but kind of funny though.

She had sent her son over to our house one day and asked could they borrow a bowl of cereal, so my mother gave it to them. They come back five minutes later like, can we borrow some milk to go with the cereal. [laughter]

NL: Right.

MS: I mean it's funny, but it's not funny, it's really sad.

NL: Yes.

MS: Yes I've seen a lot of things happen in that era. With guys I went to school with. I had one guy who was really a rags to riches case, his name was Walter. David we called him. Family was very poor, he was just very - -again 4th, 5th, and 6th grade he went to school with us. I remember him coming to our house, my mother would feed him sometime. He lived in the building across from mine. It came to the point when we came teenagers, then he was - -and 80's hit - -he was into selling drugs, and he went from being a local crack dealer to a major drug dealer. I mean major. Right now he's serving about 2 or 3 life sentences. He was a major drug dealer. I watched people literally try to kill him one time. A kid I knew who lived in Harlem would come over, a family member across the street from us in another building. Him and his friends would literally try to assassinate him, to no avail though. Close, shooting at him, I've seen shootouts.

MN: Okay, so you've seen - -when was the first time you saw or heard bullets flying?

MS: Wow, it was a scary, it was a strange thing. It was again the '80s.

MN: It was the --

MS: Mid-80's.

MN: Before in the 70's you never - -hearing gunshots was not something - -

MS: That wasn't the norm. I did not hear that. Even when I first came to Millbrook before crack. I just didn't hear those type of things. I mean sure it happened once in a blue, some rare occasion, but it wasn't a constant to the point people got immune to it. It became a part of life.

MN: Yes.

MS: It wasn't like that.

NL: In the 80's people got immune to gunfire.

MS: Yes, because at some point it became so common. It was just really wild, the drug dealings. That crack era did a lot for the community. It brought down communities period, the urban community. The gunfire. Whether people suffered from being on drugs, or from just being a part of the drugs selling it, or being caught in gunfire. It was just very bad, typically where I lived in the South Bronx. Up in Cypress Hill up the block from me was literally the wild west, literally the wild west. I've seen articles from the New York Times that they've done on this neighborhood.

MN: That was Cypress Avenue?

MS: Cypress Hill, Cypress Avenue rather yes.

MN: Cypress Avenue.

MS: A group called the Wild Cowboys, they would take people hostage. They took over apartments, they would [laughs] murder people, I've heard all types of things happen.

MN: Right, and that's right near the police station?

MS: Not far from it, right. Not far from the police station. I think a lot of cops then to were obviously in on it. To me drugs just can't continue going just out in the open. I mean to the point where you see cheese lines. People waiting in line to buy drugs out in

the open. I've see that. I've seen it in Harlem back then. Guys would have a storefront and open up at a certain hour, last for a couple hours and shut down. Just to sell drugs out of there, broad daylight. The line almost went half a block.

NL: And where was this?

MS: Well at that point, that's when I was hanging out in Harlem, back and forth between Bronx and Harlem. That was particularly on 113th Street between 7th and 8th.

MN: Right.

NL: But did they have stuff like that in the Bronx too?

MS: In the Bronx yes, yes. They had that in the Bronx. They had neighborhoods. I've seen - -I've just seen so much. Another guy I grew up with, the rags to riches guy, and he had another friend that sold drugs with him. Maybe he messed up some money or something, or was taking money from him but he - -all I know they sent this guy running from his first floor apartment naked. [laughs] Running hauling ass, you didn't see him the next few years. This guy did not resurface until that guy David was locked up.

MN: Now before the 80's, if there were hustlers in the neighborhood, how did they carry themselves? Were they accepted as part of the community?

MS: Yes. For some reason it seemed anybody who had money was always respected, or looked up to. And the hustlers back then were selling marijuana, even back then angel dust was out then. They were more laid back about it, they just weren't more flamboyant and raunchy and violent like that.

NL: Right.

MN: What's your first recollection of hip hop getting on records? Was that a moment when people - -

MS: I was still - -I wasn't living in Millbrook yet. I was still on Andrews Avenue and the Sugar Hill Gang.

END OF SIDE A

MS: [unclear] He's one of the Sugar Hill Gang rappers. He lived around, he didn't live too far from where we were. He was just off University and Ogden or somewhere around there. I remember us being a kid going around to his house, his block once day. And Kurtis Blow was out back then too as well. He was on records then. But Sugar Hill Gang was the first rap group to get on records.

NL: And were you excited about it? Were you --

MS: Yes that song just hearing it, that was a cool thing. But the thing that struck me most even, when they came out on records, my Uncle Keith back to him, he had collections of vintage tapes, which I regret I lost some of those. I mean very live performances from Grand Master Flash - -this was before records or anything. They would just have live sessions. It was almost like live jazz sessions back in the 40's. This was back then, the birth of hip hop back then. It was just a cool thing to hear, the scratch and how they blended all the music, it was just all new.

NL: Think you might have any of those tapes? None of them are around?

MS: None, none.

MN: This guy is coming tomorrow, Troy Smith, collects them from all over the country.

MS: I'm pretty sure somebody has them from back then because that was something to have.

MN: Are there any other venues in the Bronx, any clubs, you went to with your uncle other than The Sparkle. No.

MS: Because number one, I wasn't supposed to be out. My mother didn't know [laughs] I was out, but she found out. Not so much me going with him. Again, at that point too besides the jams outside in the park, we would have them in the community center.

MN: Right. Now did - -when you were in your teens, junior high school, were people thinking like this is a career, that you could make money from this, it was still –

MS: No, back then when I was in junior high school it wasn't so much a career thing, we were still into video games and stuff like that. They just looked at it as just a past time. It was almost like recreation, it was something to do. It was just part of life back then, it wasn't more surreal like you could just get rich and make money.

NL: In high school did you go to a lot of dances at different high schools. At your high school?

MS: Not so many dances, again those parties, those jams still happened at the time so that's what it was then with dancing. It was just parties we went to at that time.

MN: So you partied outside in schoolyards or parks.

MS: Where ever it was given, inside a park, high school, a yard.

NL: I was wondering too, how did the older generation react to the explosion of hip hop at that time.

MS: They thought it was, of course, nonsense. I guess back then what parents thought of rock and roll, just nonsense.

NL: So there were no older people who were into it that you could recollect?

MS: Not like that, no.

MN: What did your mother think of it? Did she have a clear argument about this is --

MS: She never opposed it like this is not music. She never once did that, she just knew it was something most of the kids did. I guess to a point it was even somewhat tolerable for her. She would listen to it if it was on the radio and I was playing it. Even back then you know what it was a big thing for us to have? A radio. Our own box. Now they call it a boom box, then it was just called a box.

MN: Yes.

MS: If you had a box then --

MN: Did you recall walking around with it?

MS: That was just the coolest thing to mimic that image, to have your radio [crosstalk] --

NL: On your shoulder.

MS: On your shoulder, just like that.

NL: What kind of radio was it?

MS: I remember she bought me and my brother one for Christmas. We both had identical radios. Ours was more like this rectangular and stood up erect, with a tape deck, a run, and a button, a red button to indicate the record button. It was just a cool thing, we used to have a mic.

MN: Now where would you go with your radio?

MS: We would just walk the neighborhood. It's almost like the same as people have iPods now and just to listen to their music and stroll. You would just walk, take walks.

MN: Now did you ever go in the subway with yours?

MS: I never did that, but I've seen guys. I've seen guys with radios that were the size of plasma tvs back then. [laughter] I'm not lying. These radios, I mean of course the guys

were big too, but they'd have these big radios. You would see all the lights, the equalizers, the treble and bass, they had everything. [laughter] These were elaborate radios. To me they're antiques now. I'd imagine if someone owned it, hold onto it. It's going to be worth something. But they were very heavy. It had to take about ten D batteries.

NL: Right. [laughter]

MS: These big batteries at that. Just the support, they were just big. That was also a cool thing when people sit out on the benches and just play music. Some guy would come out with that big radio, and say I'm just going to stop right here with the music, that would draw a crowd.

MN: Okay wow.

MS: It was a social setting [unclear]

MN: What were the kinds of music that people would listen to other than hip hop, or was it mostly hip hop?

MS: No really, I can't say it was mostly hip hop. Hip hop, when those jams would happen, that was just a thing in itself. But at the same time it wasn't all hip hop. They would still play the r&b, you would hear Stephanie Mills, or you would hear Shalamar, you would hear all the 80's artists back then from Michael Jackson to Stevie Wonder again. Anybody who was out at that point.

MN: Right.

MS: So r&b was still the dominant thing back then.

NL: Did you listen to other types of music?

MS: Yes, we had a lot of Spanish people around then. Especially summertime, they would have a stage set up right there off on 37th street, right in front of the bodega, a little stand at night. They'd have their live jam sessions from the bongos and playing music, have a mic and go out there singing.

MN: Are there any Latin music artists that made a big impression on you?

MS: Not me per se, I couldn't name one, but I just knew the music.

MN: If I put on Lam Bruegua* from Willi Colon, we'll try that later. [laughs]

NL: Yes, he might recognize some notes.

MS: Maybe if I hear it.

MN: Now did any people who were Black start playing congas, were there African drummers?

MS: It would be that once in a blue where you'll have that one person who knew how to play it, and would play the African drums. Ironically back then, I looked at it almost - -I can't say I looked at it as a Hispanic instrument, to have that. But growing up that's what they used out open in the street, and have the maracas. And at the same time, but even before that ironically, it was cool because they had music which was a part of our daily thing in grade school. I had maracas, the tambourine and I grew up with them. My mother - -I think one me and my brother being musicians. She bought us guitars. I had bongos, the trumpets, and the saxophone, little piano, little keyboard. We had those things.

NL: You said you even played the steel drum in school right?

MS: Junior high school.

MN: Wow.

MS: Because my junior high school, P.S. 139, was more so like a performing arts school.

MN: Now where was that located?

MS: Right down the block from Millbrook on 142nd and St. Anne's Avenue. This was a performing arts school. I did steel drum, we did shows, I did drama, I did chorus maybe for a semester until my voice changed. [laughter] I've done all that, yes.

MN: Now was there a sense that you were going to end up going to college? Was that something emphasized in your family at all, or in the school? Was there a sense that –

MS: The only time a sense of – well as far as school, and hearing it from school, you said about going to college, was when I was a senior. My whole thing is – or it seemed like for some reason you just, I can't wait to get out of high school, and only for the sole purpose of just finishing school. You've just been doing it so long, you can't wait to just finish. But when I was a senior was when they talked about possible high schools and have representatives come through the schools. It didn't in fact dawn on me, and my mother always said you should go be an accountant, you should be an accountant. It was always her that said that because I was kind of good in math.

NL: And what high school did you go to?

MS: I went to Samuel Gompers Vocational Technical High School, which of course is still in the South Bronx not far from –

MN: So how did you end up going to Gompers and what were the choices of this?

MS: What brought me to Gompers was they had people come to my junior high school, I'll never forget this, and they had this thing called a computer then. They had it set up on the stage and they talked about this thing called a computer and what it can do, and I

was fascinated by this. And after that I had my first computer. My mother brought me a Texas Instrument computer which you hook to your tv.

MN: Wow.

MS: And that's when, all you're doing is programming BASIC. It wasn't the way you have computers now. The color, it was just black and white and I learned how to program, I was doing programming through BASIC then and the storage device was a tape, a real tape to store my little programs which I would make a little ball bounce around the screen, and I would just practice how to sue the programs. This is what brought me over to Samuel Gompers because my major was computer technology. It was learning how to do PASCAL, FORTRAN, COBALT, BASIC, and Advanced BASIC. I didn't even hear of this happening in college. I'm pretty sure some had, but it wasn't the norm, that was not the norm.

MN: Wow.

MS: And that was our major in high school [unclear] to today.

MN: Now what were the alternatives in terms of public high schools from your - -if you hadn't gone to Gompers, where was the nearest high school?

MS: I mean unfortunately, looking at it now, it wasn't based on a career path, it was more so convenience. Which one was closer to me, like I didn't have to travel across town and take a bus and a boat over there. It was either that or Smith High School, possibly Jane Adams. But I didn't want to go there, I thought it was a girls school. They specialized in beauty and stuff like that, hairstyling.

MN: Now were there any members of your family who were going to college at the time?

MS: Maybe my Uncle Dow, which is who I always admired. I always thought he was a smart guy, it was him. And me being a kid, I would always say I wanted to be like him.

MN: Now what about in Millbrook, were there a lot of the older kids, or was this not something that was that common?

MS: To be honest in my age group, for the ones who went to college, it was very few. At least a few talked about going to college. It was always a few who during high school, or once they went to high school they not only went to school, but ended up getting part time jobs and then from that point just ended up being workers. But it was at that point when I left high school I realized- -in my senior year in high school I became a father. I had a daughter. This was in April before me graduating. And that was my sole thing, just working at that point. I started off- - I went to Borough Manhattan Community College straight out of high school, and took up computer programming because I figured I was good at it or something. But at that point, my mind was pretty clouded with just being – number one I'm a parent, and I'm working, and being a parent was something very new to me, so I wasn't focused on the priorities of being a parent. My whole thing was, I was still into fashion, hanging out. I had a new girl - -my girlfriend then, and we were shopping, so I just wanted to work. So I didn't focus on school. I failed out of there. I was put on academic probation so I just wasn't attending class normally, I stopped going.

MN: Was the father of your- -this is your daughter?

MS: Yes.

MN: Was she from Millbrook?

MS: Actually my children's mother, she lived in St. Mary's houses, not too far from there.

MN: Right, okay.

MS: She's by Jackson Avenue.

MN: Right, and how did you meet her for the first time?

MS: Actually, through a friend of mine. She went to my friend's school and I guess of course she'd seen me and [unclear] She thought I was a movie star or something.

NL: Shut up right now. [laughter]

MN: How did you –

MS: I was a very shy guy, so she approached me first.

MN: But you liked – you were well put together dressing wise.

MS: Yes, I was just a stylist, I had things.

MN: Where did you get your clothes? Were there particular stores?

MS: I dressed after what the older guys on my block wore. I dressed after them because I would admire them. I thought they were just the coolest dudes. I was wearing Bally sneakers which was unheard of before any kid could wear them, before Shine. That was a store I remember.

MN: Okay right.

MS: Back then, I would wear the shell-toed Adidas, stuff that really wasn't the norm.

How sneakers are for everybody today from babies - -it wasn't like that.

MN: What about hats? Were hats part of this?

MS: Kangol hats were more popular back then. I didn't wear one, but it was just that from styles, to how people wore their hair.

NL: I was going to say your hair is more [unclear] in the back.

MS: [crosstalk] They wore like a fade. Definitely. The style of your hair was more important than wearing a hat.

MN: Now where'd you get your hair styled? Was there a local barber shop?

MS: Yes we had the local barber shop. It seemed that every neighborhood had that local, particularly for the men at least.

MN: Where was yours?

MS: Mines was up on Cypress Avenue its called Famous Barber Shop.

MN: I know somebody who owns that.

MS: His name's Andre? Dre?

MN: Well her name is Erica Young and I think she's related to the person, and I think she just bought part of it.

MS: She must have, yes, because I remember Famous who was partners with that guy [crosstalk].

MN: It's still there I think. [crosstalk]

MS: He went to jail for a minute. [laughter] I'm not sure if he's still alive or not. Okay his son Dre, Andre was there and he had another guy Brian that worked there. We grew up together. These guys always did our haircut and styles. One of them still worked there, another guy we grew up with, we call him Polar Bear, [laughter] he works there now. He's still a barber there. At one point they moved and went back to their original location up there.

MN: Yes.

MS: I hear it's been [unclear].

MN: Yes.

NL: So you went to Famous - -what kind of hair did you have?

MS: Back then as a kid I was getting a Caesar. Hair cuts just wasn't something we did as a norm. I didn't like - -as a kid we didn't want to get haircuts. We'd rather just let it grow out wild, but as a teenager I would have this fade, a flat top. That was my hairstyle

NL: How high was your fat top?

MS: It progressively grew. [laughter]

NL: High out there.

MS: It was like Bart Simpson type. It was really high, it got me to the point where people admired it. It was a cool thing then to have this type of hairstyle. I think I went from and up do to a down do.

MN: Do you have a series of pictures which show your –

MS: I have some pictures, with the gold chain and [unclear].

MN: Okay the chains too. Okay now when did chains start becoming popular?

MS: I would say the 80's, late 80's.

MN: Late 80's.

MS: Particularly when it was talked about, and we saw them in rap videos. They started glamorizing that. Like Run DMC.

NL: Your late years of high school basically.

MS: Yes, I had this three finger ring.

NL: Was your name on it.

MS: I had a name ring that said Matthew, my whole name on it.

NL: Why don't you tell the story about when you got mugged.

MS: Again that whole crack era and crime and stuff. I'm out of high school. I just graduated, this is during that summer. I had on this gold chain, I was with a friend of mine from my neighborhood Calvin and his friend, K, which I think right now he is terminally ill. He was around our age group, big guy, big guy, tall. Calvin's like my size, my height, a little bit taller than me. We were coming from a jam in Harlem, outside block party, playing music and stuff. We're coming back around midnight, so walking along 8th Avenue, just getting past 145th Street.

MN: And then you were going to walk across the bridge, or take the subway?

MS: No we were just walking because his friend K lived further down towards 130th. We're walking going southbound and these guys ahead of us, there were three guys. I'll never forget this. Let me paint this picture for you, [unclear] it's and articulate story. It's three of us walking more so on a wide street, and we're on the long side of the building. There's the other three guys here. One guy in the middle was, he seemed like a soccer player, he's kicking this rock with his feet, I mean literally skillfully kicking it, I'm just watching. So we're just walking all of a sudden, the guy flicks the rock and hits me in the leg. So I look down a split second, and I look up all of a sudden I had two guns to my head. Well one to my head, one to my chest.

MN: Whoa.

MS: And, take off the chain. I'm shocked this is happening, not only is it happening right there and it's still a lot of people outside, but this is in front of a police station. I kid you not, a police station. Robbed right there, I just popped one off me to give it to him. And he says, and the ring, and I'm like man they're gonna take my ring too, I worked hard for this. [laughter] I slowly give it to him, I'm slowly handing it to him and I'm just

looking at the guy. And after they robbed me, they told my friend, of course, what happened to me. They froze, they couldn't believe it was happening to them too. The guys pointing the guns at me told me to run, I didn't run. I looked and I just walked away, I crossed the small street, I turned back and just stopped and looked at them, they were still pointing their guns at me, and they just ran. The guys who had the gun. The second those guys run and hit that corner, the guys were with me, Calvin and K, after Medusa had let go her grip on them, they were frozen. They all of a sudden, oh my God Matt, I started to punch him to knock the gun out his hand [laughter] and I was gonna grab him and - -save me now. And I'm looking at them like are you all crazy, what, what. They were traumatized by this more than me, I was the one that got robbed. Ten blocks of them having to stop and pause, so shocked that just happened. They had to stop and -

Laura Kelly (LK): So you didn't know that you were in the risk of being - -of them jumping you if you had flashier things?

MS: I had never been the type to have it really - -I was never flashy with it. I always had it in my shirt collar, or you kind of knew if you stared long enough that I had it, but I never just openly had it, but I guess when summertime came it was just out. I wore it. It was just a cool thing to have.

NL: But being mugged, was that a commonplace thing at that point?

MS: It happened to people. It didn't happen to me a lot. I remember once getting mugged going to see my girlfriend then. I was crossing St. Mary's Park in the South Bronx to go to St. Mary Houses, and two older guys mugged me. Back then they were robbing people for their leather bombers, the V Bombers we had then.

MN: Oh I was about to ask.

MS: Those were popular then.

NL: Right.

MS: If you had one of those, and I had one. I was working and I had bought my own things then.

MN: So they wanted the jacket?

MS: Yes and they got it. [laughter] They didn't just come up to me and rob me, they kind of walked past me and next thing I know I'm put in a headlock and the guy pulls out a knife and is like, look take off the jacket now, and I just gave it to him. I was just mad then, they just took it and ran on with it. I still went over to my girlfriend's house jacketless. [laughs] I had to leave with one of hers that was kind of like a baseball jacket or something. That whole era, people were robbing clothing, articles of clothing.

Sneakers were popular. If you had a certain sneaker.

NL: What sneakers were people being robbed of?

MS: Anything, there were Pumas. It wasn't even so much that the sneakers got [unclear], it's the [unclear]. [crosstalk] Some guy would go after a kid in the school yard, watch a guy get mugged.

MN: And what was - -there wasn't a collective response? Were people stopping it, were people so traumatized or deadened?

MS: Well I'm going to look at it as, because it wasn't just done out in the open in front of everybody - -those that it happened, it's like they skillfully plotted to wait for the opportune moment to --

NL: Single people out --

MS: clock a kid real quick, take his sneakers, then run. It wasn't they just took it and walked away like I dare you to come get it. They did it and ran. So then at that point, they would get their brothers, go back to the block, and then the next day they come back, hopefully the guy will show up again or something. And that's happened before, the same guy will try to get another kid and they'd catch him and beat the mess out of him. A royal beat down.

NL: So there was some sort of community response, but it wasn't a formal one.

MS: No right, but typically on my block, because I spent most of my childhood there a good 15 plus years there or more. I remember my time I was on my bike, and this one girl kept bothering me. I didn't know her, she didn't live on our block, just that she was riding her bike. You know kids stick their tongue out at each other. But at this one particular point, I guess she told her big brother or father that I was bothering her, and I'm on my bike and they ran up to me. I'm so scared of the kid, I see them come, I see him coming, I jump off my bike and run. I get to the center of my block [unclear] and the older guys. When I went and told them what happened, it was a mob. I had a mob on my team. I came back, and the look on that man's face when he saw that mob coming towards him, he was really pleading his case. Give me back my bike. [laughter] They were really about to put their foot in his ass. But they gave me back my bike, we came back. The community as a whole at an early stage, were very protective.

MN: Now one question is, did you hear, and your experience as a guy is somewhat different, but did you ever heard of girls being the subject of sexual assaults or rapes or that was not something that happened or that people talked about.

MS: You heard of it. It wasn't something that just recurred over time. It happened, I'd hear her and so and so was either molested by her parents, or maybe a rapist was in the neighborhood. It was more so - I heard more of those from watching the news, oh there's a rapist in this part of the neighborhood, the people are more on alert. They wouldn't ride by themselves, or call a brother or husband to ride with them in the elevator to make sure they were safe. It was that type of thing.

MN: Laura do you have any more questions about stuff? Were there any people who made it in music in areas other than hip hop from your neighborhood? Were there any people who became singers, or musicians with an instrument. People who were like the famous people out of Millbrook, do you remember?

MS: I can only recall of one guy. I didn't personally know him, I've seen him. I mean everyone knows him now, KRS-One, rapper for Boogie Down Productions.

MN: He mentions Millbrook.

MS: Yes, Millbrook and Patterson specifically, because he stayed in both areas.

MN: Right.

NL: So basically you don't know of anybody else outside of the rap?

MS: I had a friend of mine named Manny. [laughs] He was a fraternal twin, his brother David I ran into a year ago. They got into music, he was more so into singing. He started crooning on the block and stuff. He made it as far as their song being played on WBLS.

NL: Yeah?

MS: On Mr. Magic Show. He made it there, and they were going somewhere.

MN: That brings up an issue. Who were the radio personalities that had the biggest impression on you from your childhood through your twenties? So going back to the 70's, who were the radio people when you were 8 and 9 years old?

MS: Only one I could recall, Frankie Crocker.

NL and MN: Frankie Crocker.

NL: Yes, I was thinking of the same.

MS: Still Ron Harper who's still on radio, does the White Storm. With me being a kid for some reason, I wasn't just into listening to all the latest rap, I just seemed to be a true romantic at a young age. [laughter] I just loved love songs, and I listened to them all by myself, and I just liked laid back music and I always liked jazz. Name jazz artists then, I would just know them. I just liked this type of music [crosstalk]

MN: Did you or any of your friends ever go to jazz clubs in Manhattan? Did that ever become like –

MS: No, I just remember my grandmother talking about this because she used to go particularly, I'm not sure if it was in the Bronx, but definitely Manhattan.

MN: Now, when you were in your teens and twenties, were there any places you went to hear live music in the Bronx? Any clubs?

MS: Not a club, but once in a blue they would have a special event outside in St. Mary's Park. They would have something, where they'd have a band out there. It would be a Latin band or an old –

MN: But you never went to the tea connection or anything like that.

MS: No, that I didn't do.

NL: Did you ever go to Disco Fever?

MS: Now that, Disco Fever.

MN: Where is Disco Fever located?

MS: [crosstalk] There was - -I've been to the new one that moved over off Jerome -

NL: So yes, did you go -

MS: Mount Hope? It was one there, which was also a skating rink as well back then.

NL: Okay.

MS: And this was in my high school days, or the end of my high school days. There was a Disco Fever in Harlem near 155th street.

NL: Did you go to the one that was on Tremont and Webster? Like that one or no?

MS: Tremont and Webster?

NL: Wasn't there one -

MS: Oh that was the, that was the third time around trying to come back.

NL: Right, right. [laughter]

MS: The original -

NL: The original one was the one -

MS: Downtown.

NL: Right.

MS: It was that one. I've never been in there. Again back then when it was comical to go, see that was back in the 80's and things I've heard about, most of the drug dealers hung out there. That's where you heard shootings that would take place sometime. Rival drug dealers and people getting murdered.

MN: Now in terms of drug dealers, in Patterson there was a legendary guy named Guy Fisher. Is that a name that meant anything to you?

MS: I've heard of this dude named Guy Fisher, I couldn't tell you a lot about him, but his name definitely –

MN: Nikki Barnes?

MS: I've heard of him, but he was before my time. I was a little kid. Definitely, he was a known drug dealer throughout. He just had territory like that.

MN: Right. Now what were things like when you moved out of Millbrook, and where did you go from Millbrook?

MS: From Millbrook - -I ended staying up by Fordham Road with my grandmother because of the additional space she had there.

MN: Right.

MS: At that point I was a father, and me and my daughter's mother, and daughter she was about 1, moved in and stayed there for a few years.

MN: And was Millbrook not becoming unsafe then?

MS: It was still the way it was, unsafe, and it got to a point where I became withdrawn from just being around the people up there. The last year I stayed around there, I just stayed to myself.

MN: Was it because your friends, former friends, were getting into bad stuff?

MS: Right, it was that, and I was just tired of it. I just didn't want to be around it. It got to one point where I just wanted to get into it. At one point I did, because I saw my friends were doing it, the nice cars they had, and I was like this is the thing to do. I just didn't want to become a street-level drug dealer. I'd rather become higher in the ranks, and came close to it, until I said no, this is not for me. That's when I decided to go back to school.

MN: Right. Now what percentage of your friends are from your childhood group, or dead and no longer with us? Was it like that? Did you have friends who were taken out by this stuff?

MS: I had another friend of mine named Todd, who went to school with us, smart kid who got into drugs. Had his own thing going, and that guy David Walter, somehow became his rival, and allegedly, what I hear, but I mean confirmed true as well, he had him murdered in Co-op City. Not Co-op City, excuse me, City Island. That's actually made the papers, and I'll never forget that. It was a set up between him and the guy Boy George who was big in Cypress.

NL: Boy George?

MN: Oh yes, right. [crosstalk].

NL: I've heard of him.

MN: That's in Random Family. Because there's a whole book about mostly Latino dealers in the Bronx.

MS: Right he was Boy George, the Spanish dude. I knew this guy. I remember seeing him all the time. Short guy, he was partners with David. They were partners. And they were partners with Alpo as well.

NL: Oh the Harlem ones, the big ones.

MN: And also there's this song, Cross-Bronx Express by Lord Tariq & Peter Gunz which names the brands of the drugs that were being sold. They had brand names.

MS: Like back then the rival drug gangs had names to their product.

MN: Like what? I mean any examples?

MS: Like back then, they started selling particularly crack.

MN: Yes.

MS: And territory was by color now. Red tops over here, black tops there, and white tops over here. Even dope, they tried to come back as cocaine, they would have it packaged with a certain name to it. Deadly, or Venom, some pots of Venom over here. It was just stuff like that.

MN: Now in that world, somebody like Fat Joe claims he started out as a dealer. Was that something - -were people aware of hip hop guys making a career in the street economy first, or was that not a real thing you –

MS: At that point, not really, I'd never heard of Fat Joe at that point. There was one hustler who actually was one and got on record, Diamond D. Him, now he was a real hustler, a real drug dealer at one point and getting into the rap games. At that point –

NL: And he's part of the Jiggle the Crates Crew as well.

MS: Right, the Crates, so at one point rappers just really [unclear] being involved into it being more so the violence.

NL: Yes.

MN: And Diamond D was somebody who was really –

MS: Yes he was a part of that.

MN: Now of your junior high school friends, how many are still around and in decent shape of the people you were close to?

MS: I would come in contact or run into a few of them. I mean some of them I'm going to assume they moved out of town, or some still live in the city, but some of them - -okay I have a few of them that died.

NL: And the same for your high school friends too?

MS: High school friends, not only do I have a few of them that died, but also locked up.

NL: Right, even more so than junior high school.

MS: Honor roll, I had a guy senior year who decided to drop out and do something else.

MN: So crack became economic opportunity to people.

MS: That's what it was, it just seemed as a way out. Get into drugs, you make this money, count this, do all types of things. I had a friend Marvin, he was in my class in high school. Him and his friend had a record out at one point, and they really didn't go far with it. They were really local, they didn't go too far. I forgot the name of the song, it was a rap song. Didn't really go anywhere.

MN: Now your life is very much it seems live in the Bronx. At what point did you start relating to the downtown economy, and did you work downtown?

MS: In high school, I used to work in a supermarket with [unclear], and I always heard you can go downtown and [unclear] job [unclear]. This happened with a friend of mine who had a job downtown. The first time I went downtown was when I was exploring trains with him, and me just seeing how the neighborhoods looked different. I'm like wow this is a nice building. I'm seeing dogs I've never seen before. I'm like this is really something, so I ended up working down there.

MN: And which neighborhood was the [unclear].

MS: This was right on 75th street, or 76th and Lexington Avenue, so the Upper East Side.

MN: Right, so this is when you were in high school?

MS: Yes during high school.

MN: And when you went into computer stuff you were working downtown?

MS: Well I got into computers later on. When I moved up to Fordham Road section of the Bronx, I had been going to Monroe College, over there. I actually took accounting there. I did that in a year and a half, did very good. Personally I wanted to go to school. It was just the easiest thing to do, almost effortless.

NL: And then how did you find work after finishing school?

MN: Oh that's when I explored. Looking through the New York Times, I got this accounting clerk job downtown, and it was on Park Avenue and 32nd Street. A high end furniture store called [unclear]

MN: Oh okay.

MS: I started off as a clerk in there, and somehow I ventured off into the furniture business because I started learning the product, and became a product manager at their flagship store, then progressed into being a store manager. I managed a couple stores down in Spring Streeper* Village, and we closed that store. Then I had the one in Brooklyn Heights. I managed a store over there. I just got bored it, and I said you know what there needs to be a change. I got [unclear] and that's how I got back into computer work.

MN: Okay. In reviewing all this stuff - -one other question, was there any political activism? Were there any radicals or people who were talking about revolutions around Millbrook?

MS: None, the only politician I can ever recall was Jose Serrano. Him coming to graduations, elementary school, junior high, and high school.

NL: He was at every single one?

MS: Yes. [laughter]

MN: He was borough president for one.

NL: Did you feel like he was trying to contribute to local change, besides at being at these events.

MS: There was nobody on the Grassroot level talking about revolution, or making change for the neighborhood, or trying to contribute on the radar. The uprising, since crack hit back then –

MN: Did you feel like you guys were on your own when crack hit, like the rest of the city wasn't there?

MS: Yes, yes.

MN: Like they didn't care?

MS: Like on your own. It was small enough if you had supportive family or parents like that, to keep you on the straight and narrow. That was the real, the main thread of keeping you together and sane.

MN: Now if you're looking at what are the things that kept you able to overcome all this and not your friends, some of your friends, what was the difference between the people how made it through and the people who didn't. How much of it was luck, and how much of it was things you can put your finger on?

MS: I think a lot of people didn't make it - -I think part of it had to do with their parents or upbringing. They were always the ones out in the street late at night. My mother always had curfews for us until I became 17, or when I could stay out late. But at least I knew better not to get into certain things. At that point I held a part time job, I went to school full time, and I basically came home. Other guys would frown upon me laughing because they were selling drugs, I look at a lot of them now. They probably wish they

were in my position. A lot of them didn't do good, ended up dying or going to jail for years.

MN: Now you also took your responsibilities as a parent very seriously. Was that different from other guys?

MS: Yes, I'm glad you brought that up, because back then it was common for a guy to get a girl pregnant and then break out and leave. Ere amongst my peer group, that was very common.

NL: So teen pregnancy was the norm for you.

MS: It was happening. Among my very close friends, I was like the first one to become a parent. It was probably because the way I felt about my father and me wanting him around, and we had to leave before he came back. Of course I wouldn't do that, with stuff today, I couldn't see my kids growing up without their parents around.

MN: Right. You being a serious parent, did your friends respect that, or was this off?

MS: At the very beginning, they would kind of make fun of me, but I kind of distanced myself from hanging around them as much. I became more concerned with me being a parent, and specifically when she was born, I just didn't hang out like that anymore and they still went to parties and did things. I basically just worked and focused on that.

MN: Okay well, this was - -you're an amazing storyteller, I wish we had this on camera, but the voice comes through. Laura do you have any questions?

L: No.

MN: Natasha?

NL: I'm just wondering if you would ever - -even with all the things you've been through, do you think you would change anything, or you feel like the Bronx was the greatest place to be or –

MS: Ultimately, I'm glad I grew up in the Bronx. I always thought it was a good experience. I always loved the Bronx. Going to the Bronx Zoo, again being adventurous, going to the Bronx Zoo as kids. I left my parents sometimes and snuck off, but we never went too far from them. I just had a good memory –

NL: Even when things were deteriorating, you still wouldn't change?

MS: I just wish that time didn't happen, like a lot of people. But again, I love that neighborhood back in that day. Unfortunately it grew to the point as I got older, and when my daughter was growing up, I grew to really hate it.

MN: So it was like a place where you felt it was not a good place to bring up a child.

MS: Definitely. I mean you could, people did, but I just didn't feel for it. I didn't care for it at all.

MN: And what were the - -was it the schools or was it more the atmosphere?

MS: I think atmosphere. There were people I knew, just normal, it was something about standing around and just drinking, and doing nothing, and just talking mess. Nothing progressive or anything, that's all they did. To the point where I couldn't be around that, I'd rather stay at home than be out there. I'd rather be at home just watching tv than doing that. I just didn't like it, and particularly after a friend of mine was killed just standing out in front of a grocery store, hanging around his friends drinking. I guess one of the guys selling drugs had beef with some other guys from somewhere else, and came around there and just did a drive-by and my friend Ronald ended up being killed. I have

pictures of me and him graduating from 6th grade, and we're standing there with our arms around each other. That was it, it was just the major change in the neighborhood and the environment that really turned me off too the point where I became very distant from it.

MN: Well Matt –

NL: Thank you –

MN: This was amazing.

END OF INTERVIEW