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Rodriguez, Angel

Bronx African American History Project
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Interviewee: Angel Rodriguez

Interviewer: Mark Naison

Date: May 8th 2007

Dr. Mark Naison (MN): Hello today is May 8th 2007. We are at Fordham University. This is the Bronx African American History project. My name is Mark Naison and we are interviewing Angel Rodriguez musician, community educator, historian, film consultant, and a person who has for years and years kept alive the cultural traditions of the Bronx. We have with us today Dr. Susan Stenler of Metropolitan University in Berlin as a co interviewer. So Angel will begin as we do with everyone else, tell us a little about your family, and how your family ended up coming to New York in the Bronx.

Angel Rodriguez (AR): Absolutely. I remember because of the work being diminished in the island. Of course, like every other family they're looking to come to America to make a better living. But you couldn't take the whole family so my father would make many trips and leave us with my mom in Puerto Rico. As children we come from a poor, Christian – regular Christian family, you know white Puerto Ricans from the mountains. And on a farm no running water no light –

MN: --- And they say hebaro is this –

AR: Hebaro yes! And I am a hebaro Mark. I want to make it clear, I am a true hebaro. And those times of my life were so beautiful with my grandparents and my people up there in those mountains.

MN: What was the nearest biggest city?

AR: Probably Ballamon, but you had to go off -- we were 2500 feet above sea level.

MN: Wow!

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AR: So to get off of that mountain there was no roads, the only things that went up there I remember was the American Jeeps you know or Volkswagens because they had the motors in the back and there was traction. So they could go up those dirt roads. But you know the closets town – the biggest town was Ballamon, so you have to get through all these dirt roads and then from where I live a barrio called Anonez, it was called Anonez. It was all dirt road until we go to the paved road, that's where the school bus ran so we had to walk and walk and walk like a mile to the school bus, like really crazy stuff. It was very seldom as kids that we went anywhere because there was like one car and like a ton of people. So anytime my grandfather, who own a little grocery store he was Don Chago, you know DON CHAGO, like he was a respected man of the community. He was like the guru, you know, and he had the only grocery store there and everybody shopped in – so he would get in his car and we would all want to go with him to town you know, but of course only a few of us and some of us would stay behind crying. It was such a beautiful tender life. So now I also experience the electricity coming in, water –running water coming in, I remember helicopters with telephone poles putting them –

MN: Now what year were you born?

AR: I was born in 1954.

MN: Ok, so the electricity is coming in the late 50's or early 60's?

AR: Early 60's. No, no, late 50's to early 60's. You know you figure that places like that you expect to have electricity and running water but I experienced that and it was fun for me as a kid you know to see all this stuff coming in. And here comes my aunty who buys the first television

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in el barrio so now the way it was she would bring it out on the balcony, set it up, and everybody would sit in front of the patio and we would watch television. It was only for a couple of hours a week. But on Sunday there was a special show called “De la doce” and it was only two channels on the island at the time and “De la Doce” had a Grand Conco of Puerto Rico. So now I'm a kid, it was either church or my auntie's house to see the Grand Conco.

MN: Ok, was church Catholic Church or Christian

AR: Christian.

MN: Oh ,so you were Pentecostal?

AR: The music that I wanted to listen to was paganism. The music of the world. They were erroneous lullabies if we may.

MN: Now in church, was there singing in your church?

AR: Absolutely.

MN: Was there percussion?

AR: No.

MN: No, it was just-

AR: Just singing and in those times maybe a guitar, because the white Puerto Ricans were more inclined to European music with the guitars and –

MN: So there was a very clear white identity that you were conscious of at that point?

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AR: No, I wasn't conscious of that, and black people were never talked about around my family. In fact there was maybe mulattos or a little darker people in the family and they will shun them or – so it was never talked about. Color or race, black especially or black culture, bomba playing and all that stuff, I found that out later.

MN: Wow so this – so your first electricity, did they then buy a record player?

AR: No.

MN: Just a television?

AR: Just a television and that was my uncle he was a famer, but my uncle wasn't a church goer. He took care of the farm. He worked like 7 days a week these people, you know, planting tobacco coffee and all that stuff they were farmers. They had 200 acres, my grandfather, he had all this land but eventually with the Brusja operation and the first governor coming in and all that stuff, he had to sell most of his land because they were importing goods into the island that were cheaper than the ones that –

MN: He was selling. Right so that all that stuff undermined the independent farmers [Crosstalk]

AR: Yes [Laughs]. So everything is gone you know, but the TV when I saw Don Poco that changed my life. As a kid I looked at my Pinky Units- the conga player. He was an animated guy. He would make faces on television and we didn't know this stuff, but when you look at the albums of the Grand Congo he's the clown, he's the funny guy of the Grand Congo. He dressed in Chinese garb in one album and [inaudible] you whatever but he was the funny guy. He was the guy that the camera went to all the time and I just thought that he was the funny guy you

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know as a kid. He caught my eye with the conga playing and then after that I had my next experience with music. I had an uncle that was a coast guard, for the – an American coast guard so he had a lot of money. His name was Angel Rodriguez too, you know. So now he had a restaurant and he builds a club on top of the restaurant, and that was my first experience seeing a live band.

MN: And where was this?

AR: This was a place called – his place was called El Marino and it was right next to El Rio de Plata in Barranqitas. And there was a crusa. There was a road that went to comayrrio; one that went to larranjito; [inaudible] Barranqitas; and then there was a bridge that went to Ballamon. A road to Ballamon.

MN: Now in this – so you saw live music in the club?

AR: Yes.

MN: And how old were you?

AR: I must have been like 7, 8.

MN: Susan Stenler (SS): And what kind of music?

AR: Latin music, the Timballes, I remember I sat right next to them on the stage. My father and everybody ran the restaurant because there was no laws saying you couldn't let kids in, you know [Laughs]. It's a restaurant out in the boondocks, you know dancehall

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MN: Now your family responded with his percussive music – did they you know have problems with the African traditions as reflected in El Grand Congo?

AR: Yes, I would say yes because in those times if you listen to Latin music, they were promoting and degrading – almost you know every record was about I hate this woman. I'm going to beat her ass. Even now the erotic era with salsa, you know, it's all about taking a woman to bed, you know a sex thing, you know, so I didn't particularly like – me I just liked the rhythms.

MN: You like the rhythms? Yes.

AR: The musicians, the instruments, the solos.

MN: Now did you start then trying to play yourself?

AR: No I – the first time I played on the drum was in New York City, in the South Bronx on College Avenue and 167th street.

MN: When you're growing up, was New York on your mind? Was that something that – you know we were talking about that migration that at certain points, migration becomes something that everybody talks about in certain places. Were people – did they know people in New York?

AR: Yes, because he had family up here. We had a lot of family. My family, when they get together now for family reunions, its 150 people. I don't even know people [Laughs]. So the New York thing was already instilled and the American thing was already instilled too. Because now if you saw a big chicken, oh that chicken is American [Laughter] that pig is American, so

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anything big, and blue eyed and white –it was a good thing. So all of us were like, “Man we want to go to America because we want to get those bigger chickens.”

MN: Bigger chickens! [Laughs]

AR: We want to get those bigger pigs you know, bigger things, and the reality was I came to a jungle of asphalt and full of drugs and –

MN: Now what sort of work did your father go to New York to find?

AR: He was a sheet metal worker in the factory.

MN: Wow, in the Bronx or . . .?

AR: Probably in Manhattan. I don't remember where. I never knew.

MN: Was he trained as a sheet metal worker in the island?

AR: No, he came to New York and his cousin Rafa, his name was Rafael, he was working in the factory already. SAnd many jobs that people get you know you need a godfather, you need a padrino –

MN: --- Yes, yes --

AR: -- to bring you in and introduce you in. That's the only way people were able to get jobs because any jobs was good.

MN: So he got a job working in the factory doing sheet metal work. Was it a unionized work force?

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AR: No, no, it was not.

MN: That could be dangerous.

AR: It was and especially, I think – [inaudible] Solavinskiya. I remember that beautiful name because he was a Jewish based community organizer who worked on community based assets. He didn't go out of his community, so we learned a lot from him, you know. Puerto Ricans, some might not admit that, but I do [Laughs]. He had a great format, you know what I'm saying? The American dreams of coming here, my dad working his fingers offM my mother was a stay home mom because we were a bunch of kids.

MN: Now when did your father bring you to New York?

AR: I remember the first time coming to New York, my first memory of New York. I was 4 years old and I was sitting in the window where my sister Liz, she's a year younger, and we're looking outside and it St. Anns avenue, St. Mary's park. And I can still see the house that's still there.

MN: Now you were there on a visit or this was . . . ?

AR: No, see, my father went back and forth to Puerto Rico. You got to understand and so even as a new born I might've come I don't know, I have to find out from my mom but my earliest recollection was there on St. Anns, and we lived on Simpson street too. 1057 Simpson street right down the block from Fort Apache while my father ran a church, a Pentecostal church.

MN: He was a minister?

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AR: Yes, he was a minister. He ran a Pentecostal Christian church on Longwood – off of Longwood on Southern Blvd across from the congressman's office.

MN: Now, how old were you at that time?

AR: I might have been – I remember being in 1st or 2nd grade.

MN: In what school?

AR: PS. 20 right on 167th street and Simpson Street.

MN: That whole area was ultimately white [crosstalk] and now being rebuilt. So what were your first impressions of New York City, the one that made the biggest impression on you when you were there?

AR: The skyscrapers and the buildings because I never saw such tall buildings, you know. You can go forward in time for a little bit? In 1980 [inaudible] from Cuba [inaudible] I was one of the first people I remember. The little old man like, "Oh my God." And listening to him took me back. It was just this impression of a giant city. And then as a child, you know, you're still a child but I was already -- by the age of 12 I was already [inaudible], for good!

MN: Now in 1st and 2nd grade, what are the sounds of the Bronx?

AR: 1st and 2nd grade sounds of the Bronx?

MN: You're living in 1050 Simpson street?

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AR: Yes, I remember a valentine [inaudible], a lot of baseball, 1963 Chevys convertibles, my uncle's, and I remember the music that they were listening to was Rafael Hernandez. They were listening to Pedre [inaudible]. They were listening to El Trio lo Pancho [inaudible], Hispanos you know. I was really exposed to all this Latin music and a lot of trio music and lots of contemporary music as far as mambo was concerned, ok? Because my mother was a mambo queen.

MN: Oh?!

AR: You see, but that was where the problem was, because my father preached to God and she danced. So she would escape and she did all kind of stuff to go out dancing you know. She's still alive, she's a crazy woman. I was dancing with her recently again -- she's 77.

MN: So there was a battle between mambo and God? Between God and mambo?

AR: Yes, yes.

SS: And mambo was considered was considered the devil's music and playing the drums with music. [crosstalk] that's what you told me right?

AR: Yes, yes, exactly because – when you consider drummers we're like the Rodney Dangerfield's of music. You know, my good friend Patato, my teacher my mentor – one of them should be a millionaire right now. He shouldn't have to be struggling and he's struggling, you know, and I say that with all confidence, because, you know, we all have meals and I'm gracious for where I am at now. I'm not a millionaire but I am very grateful for what I have: an appreciative for everything, every moment, like this one, this beautiful interview, right? There

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are things that need to be rectified there and those are other issues in music that I've encountered throughout all my years of my career, you know.

MN: So your father is running this church, and your mother is going out dancing?

AR: Right. I spent most of the time with my father, ok? Because I looked up to my father, he was my hero, and I wanted to be a preacher.

MN: Did you actually ever get up and preach in church?

AR: No, but I would go up in the pulpit and sit in the chair while he preached and watched him preach.

MN: Now what was the preaching style of a Puerto Rican Christian minister.

AR: He was like a politician. My father was a great speaker .I think that's where I get my speaking engagements and MC'ing skills from because I can go for 5 hours and MC a whole –

MN: --- He could hold a congregation spellbound?

AR: Totally.

MN: Did he use a lot of hand gestures?

AR: He walked back and forth.

MN: He'd walk up and down the aisle?

AR: Right on the pulpit, you know, this is a Pentecostal church, "Hallelujah!" [crosstalk]

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MN: A lot of Spanish or English and Spanish?

AR: All Spanish.

MN: All in Spanish? And would people get up and talk in tongues?

AR: Totally. I've seen people crash their head into the pulpit and sit on the floor – you know possessed by the Holy Spirit and then later on when I started to play. I've been playing sanitaría for 25 years or more, and now I see people getting upset with deities and horishas, and all that stuff. And then I see people in India doing what they do and all this, so I am a multi-religious person, I guess [Laughs].

MN: But the spirit was in that church?

AR: Totally, totally and you know what brought the spirit? The music, because a church without music is pretty boring.

MN: And was everybody singing or was there a choir?

AR: No, everybody has to sing – it was a requirement [Laughs].

MN: And how many people?

AR: I would say anywhere from 15 to 75 sometimes up to 100 people would go to church.

SS: [inaudible]

AR: Um, that I couldn't answer. As a child, it was Latinos, but I think the majority, of course, because at the time it was predominately Puerto Ricans and Cubans at the time.

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MN: Now, were the people in the church more mixed race than your families farming community of Puerto Rico?

AR: Yes, within the conger there were black, latinosaurs, mulattos and white Latinos.

MN: So, you got the cross section of who was in New York? Now were there any African Americans in your neighborhood or your elementary school?

AR: No, the building that I lived in was totally Latinos and – you know it was Simposon street. It was those times when the gangs fought with the police you know, and there was some crazy stuff going on.

MN: This is in the early 60s?

AR: I remember shootouts – we lived on the top floor, the 5th floor. And looking out the window, my mother putting me away because the shootouts going on with the cops.

MN: You remember the names of any of the gangs from the street?

AR: You know, I don't, I was too young but –

MN: Was there a visible heroin problem? Did you see people nodding out or did you hear about that?

AR: I would hear about that because adults talking, it was drugs – drugas.

MN: Drugas? And was it like the sense that your father's congregation was like a haven in this world of chaos?

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AR: I would think so. It's a haven for stress and depression and oppression. It was a place to congregate and a place to take you back to the island. A place that you can talk your language a place that you can eat your foods.

MN: Ok, food! What were the foods you ate in New York?

AR: Arroz con candule, perni, you know all the traditional pork eating Puerto Rican that I am not now [Laughter]. You know I don't eat pork, I don't eat beef, none of that stuff, you know. But, you know, I learned how to be healthy Mark. But, you know, that traditional way still, patelles, all that stuff, is what I remember. I even remember my father. I wrote this poem, I usually don't memorize a lot of my stuff, but it talks about me looking out La Bele Chanblang.

MN: If you want to say part of the poem go for it.

AR: If I can remember it's – you know, I thought some poems I could say. I got some stuff here if you want to listen to, but this particular poem I don't remember, but I remember the way I wrote it. That I'm sitting in the venetian blind, my mother tells me to go downstairs to take the garbage out, and I run downstairs and I run 87 steps all the way down. I hear music seeping through under the doors of the building and all these salsa or whatever. At the time it wasn't called salsa, it was mambo, and cha cha cha and all that stuff. And then I'm thinking, "Damn I got to go up 87 flights of stairs again," and when I get up stairs my father is holding the neck of the chicken ready to slice his neck with a blade. And as the chicken flaps the wing once last time and the blood splatters onto my face I thought, "That was a cleansing from the Orishas" or something, you know, as I know about Santaria at this point. You know what I'm saying, and

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because I would spend hours looking through this venetian blind outdoors as a kids, the music the food –

MN: So the music was a very powerful thing in the building? So each apartment had their own music coming out?

AR: Yes, you can hear it, and mostly guitar music from Europe. You know, the Spanish trios and, you know, it's Puerto Ricans so Rafael Hernandez, [inaudible].

MN: Now, were there any people who would play drums in your street?

AR: I didn't experience that until I got back to New York at the age of 10 or 11 I think it was

MN: And that's when you were in College Ave?

AR: Right, that's when I experienced really holding the drum and really experiencing from the barrios.

MN: But this was – you were in this densely Puerto Rican cultural zone on Simpson Street. Transplanted Puerto Ricans who still had all the culture.

AR: But you have to remember that I had a Christian father who did not believe and did not partake in any of these things. Maybe once or twice- a couple of times he took me to the Theater Puerto Rico to see shows there with El Rifante with horses on stage, you know.

MN: What street was the theater?

AR: Theater Puerto Rico on Brown Place and 138th street.

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MN: Ok, right.

AR: And the Marquee is still there but I remember watching also as a young man there Mongrivera. The Four Trombones that's where he [inaudible] about his bands. We weren't exposed to much, my father would not, you know, allow. I remember him coming into my house in the same poem. I wrote about it. He's coming into my house from church, my mother didn't go that day we didn't go. Some kids were sick, whatever, and he comes in, my mother is listening to el Grand Combo and sings. It was like push the needle because the record, it's scratched, you know, and the Grand Combo made a record out of that. And my mother's dancing with my older sister and they're dancing, and my father comes in and he's like "pagans! You pagans!" And he takes the whole thing and throws it out the backyard window. Now, because he's fighting and of course he's arguing with my mother before he did that, and I'm looking out the bathroom window and I see that in almost slow motion the whole record player just [makes sounds] and it splattered down in the backyard. And I'm thinking I already had the bug in me man no matter what you do [Laughter]. You can't take it away, you know.

MN: And what was it like in school not speaking English in first or second grade, or did you speak English?

AR: Well, I spoke very little. I remember one day saying they were talking about the first president of the United States and I'm "Oo, oo, me!" You know I'm raising my hand and they say what's the name – what's the name of the first president of the united states and I say George Washington Bridge [Laughter]. And the whole class and everybody – and the teacher just started laughing and I'm standing there like serious and not laughing. I'm very serious, I know it's

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George Washington Bridge, you know. But again, these were things that I learned – and you have to remember also that never in the 100 years of Puerto Rico being a colony has the United States integrated Puerto Rican culture into the curriculum.

SS: Curriculum.

MN: Right.

AR: Never, ever, ever and still until today the only way that it goes into our schools is through professional resident teaching artists like myself that go in there and teach culture. It's still not taught. So I was learning about western culture. I was learning George Washington and Abraham Lincon and Beehtoven and Mozart which I enjoyed and I got great vinyl collections on these guys, you know? But at the time I knew Cortijo. I knew the drum and stuff. So, where would I go to learn the drum? The streets and the parts of New York City.

MN: So you went back to Puerto Rico after first and second grade and then returned when you're 9 or 10?

AR: Right

MN: And College Ave is closer to the Grand Concourse?

AR: No, no, that was the first time I played drums, was there, but this was the Barrios' house – Barrios – both Jose Barrios. One of them was a Vietnam veteran and they both passed away. They had the drums. The older brother had the drum and the kid was my friend. I lived on – I tell you where I lived – You want to know where I lived?

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MN: Exactly where you moved when you came back from Puerto Rico.

AR: It was 1161 Sherman Ave and McLennan off of 167th street, right off of the Grand Concourse.

MN: Right off the Grand Concourse, ok. Not too far from Taft High School

AR: Like 3 blocks away.

MN: Ok, right. Ok, now what year was this like, 1964?

AR: This was '64 right '64, '65.

MN: What was the ethnic composition of that neighborhood as you remember?

AR: Um, I remember Blacks.

MN: Were there still Jewish people there? Or it was mostly Puerto Rican and Black?

AR: It was still some whites, but mostly Puerto Rican and Blacks and I remember Gypsies living on the corner, a Gypsy family. But there was still some Jewish, maybe older people.

MN: What was your impression of Black culture at the time? Was this your first intensive exposure to it?

AR: Yes, yes, because my mother had separated from my dad. He had stayed in Puerto Rico,

MN: Oh, so you went back with your mother?

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AR: And I went back with my mom, right, because he took me with him and you know he kept letters from me and pictures. For a couple of years he didn't tell me that they were separated. Parents didn't tell shit to the kids [Laughter]. Once he showed me the – I came back to New York and I was exposed to the Supremes, you know, the Motown sound, because Latinos were emulating blacks in all kind of ways –

MN: In that particular time?

AR: In the clothing, in the music, you know, we had to. Even though my mother was listening to the Trio music in her 78s at the house and I was exposed to all that stuff, this was something new, and it was the American way for us.

MN: Right, so American culture was Black culture?

AR: To us.

MN: To you, in the Bronx at that point. And was that true in school also?

AR: Sly and The Family Stone, The Temptations, you know the LSD.

MN: Was it exciting?

AR: It was an exciting time for all of us. Barry White, Issac Hayes, it was songs about love and you how many times I fell in love with their songs? [inaudible] songs? You know, because I went back as a child and I took the best of both worlds. You what I'm saying? I'm in heaven. I'm not in Puerto Rico – you know I still love the creator – but I was out of that realm. I was in glory now. I'm playing drums, I'm listening to –

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MN: Who is the first person who exposed you to an actual drum set?

AR: It was, I would have to say De Funto Jose Rodriguez. He was a Vietnam veteran. The younger Jose became my sister's boyfriend and eventually they had a child who is now 30 years old.

MN: Where were they living?

AR: They were on College Avenue.

MN: They were on College Avenue, and how did you meet them?

AR: Well, through school you know. My sister became this kid's boyfriend and then they were boyfriend girlfriend and then I met him and he said come to my house play some drums, and I went over there.

MN: A hand drum set?

AR: Yes, congas. Now drum set, are you talking American drum set? I wasn't exposed to that till maybe I was taking classes from Frankie Malabel.

MN: So your first exposure was the congas?

AR: Yes, yes, totally congas, because that was what was predominate in the streets New York City and the Bronx. The congas boom, boom, boom.

MN: Now, were black kids playing it as well as Puerto Ricans?

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AR: No. The only Black band that I remember was Pucho and the Latin Soul Brothers. They were the only ones

SS: They were the only ones?

AR: A group of Black African Americans who played black music.

MN: And I have one of their CDs back at the office, Maxine Gordon.

AR: That was the only group. Everybody was either, you know Latino, German, Jewish, Irish, you know, because white people were always a part of Latin music in New York City. Always, if you look at any band right now it's a mix. It's an international band with all kind of people. It's always been like that.

MN: Now, when you started playing congas where did you play it?

AR: Claremont Park.

MN: You would play congas in Claremont Park?!

AR: And Crotona.

MN: I was probably there when you were doing it, because I had a girlfriend who lived in that neighborhood [Laughter] and she had two sisters. She lived on College Avenue and 167th. And another one lived in the north side

AR: Claremont is right there where Lebanon Hospital is.

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MN: Oh, I know that neighborhood very well. I'll show you this poem I wrote about that.

Anyway, wow, so you were playing congas in Claremont Park. And how many people would get together to play congas?

AR: Oh man, a bunch, just a bunch. All kind of people and we would be there until 4 in the morning. And I'm exposed to the worst of the worst, because the Rumba, the work. Rumba is not a rhythm. The word Rumba is the gathering of people that are going to sing, play, and dance.

That's a rumba: it's a get together, it's a jam session. So all kind of individuals would come and most of those cats there weren't really nice people you know. Malillantes, you know, crazies, ex cons, you know. All kind of people because this is an outdoor thing and then if you drunk, you got the alcohol. You got the pot flowing, you got the whatever was happening in those times – the LSD – whatever. Now here I am a little kid and my only protection was a man called Victor Ballon. We used to call him Cuba. Now, Victor was from Puerto Rico but he was black like an enslaved African and he had a white beard as far back as I could remember and everyone would call him Cuba. But he wasn't Cuban. But he was a badass drummer. But I never heard him say, "I got to go to work the next day." He was a hustler. He was a mean hustler, and he had a lot of respect in the street, but because I played, I mean the quinto, at 12.

MN: Now what is a quinto?

AR: The quinto is the primo drum. The one that solos. To do that you have to be good.

MN: Now how did you pick that up so quickly?

AR: It was in me.

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MN: It was in you? So that's interesting. E were talking about that with L.A Sunshine, you know, all these people start doing things. But what made you excel above 40 other people who were trying to do the same thing?

AR: The only thing that was important to me was the rhythm. I don't care who was there smoking, drunk whatever. And then being a white kid was very difficult for me to get into those black circles, too. Black Africans and Black Cubans. So I had to use my eyes and my ears because I was told to lead sometimes.

MN: So even among Latinos there was a race hierarchy around the drums and this was seen as an African art?

AR: Yes, yes, black thing

MN: A black thing. So there was a black consciousness around Latinos that reflected itself in these drumming circles?

AR: Because of the music, being oppressed so much by the whites in all these countries. I can understand why they would do that. But my whole philosophy is: I can see you white but who are you? I can see your black but who are you? Because I want to see the goodness in a person and stop looking at colors and I knew that my heart was black, man,. I'm a drummer, so that motivated me even more and to kick ass, and today I get all the respect over here.

MN: So this was a whole transformative experience for you in terms of not only music but dealing with race in a way which there wasn't even a language to deal with in either American or Puerto Rican culture. What did your family think of this did they – I mean I was kicked out of

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my family for falling in love with a black woman at this period. Did your family accept you being part of an Afro-Latino cultural niche?

AR: My mother was and always will be supportive of my career. Unlike my father she let us make choices even if they were bad or good. And you have to understand my mother being alone with 6 kids, being at 3rd grade reading level, working in a factory, became an alcoholic but at the same time was able to raise 6 kids. And, unfortunately, married this man that was unfamiliar with the drug heroin and he was using heroin. So whatever I did wasn't really important because alcohol and drugs was infiltrating into the family.

MN: Right, so it was complete chaos.

AR: And eventually I lost 2 brothers shot in the head- 18 and 19 years old '81 and '82. So drugs was rampant in my family: destruction, violence – so what did this kid do? I hung on to dear life to that skin and that drum.

MN: This was your lifeline.

AR: Hell yeah. Hell yeah, Mark.

MN: And you had mentors protecting you?

AR: That was my brick wall if you will, to keep me away from all the stupid ass shit.

MN: Did some of the old people try to keep you away from the stuff they were in?

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AR: No, never, never because I'm 52 now and I think, you know, I wish there was some person that looked at me when I was 12 and saw me playing the way I did. Like an adult that took me to a school, like I do now with children – like I did with the Hamachi brothers. There all really Rodriguez and I saw these kids when they were 7 and 11 now there traveling the world with a band called Element and there older now and going to college. Like if someone back then would of done that for Angel Rodriguez – but then I feel like life is already planned out for all of us. You just got to process it, and that process, and that whole thing about having the drum at the time that it came into my life was perfect.

MN: Now what was going on with you in school? Did that work for you?

AR: School didn't work for me. It was a – I had counselors come to me and put their arm around me and go like, “Angel you'll never make it to college, so you might as well to go woodshop or go to metal shop.”

MN: This was in junior high?

AR: This was in high school, junior high. I never went to school man, you know. I cut class like crazy in junior high. I was scared, I was being bullied. There were times I would put my 2 dollars in the air and the bullies would smack me in head and take it, you know. So I was scared to go to school.

MN: So in the Bronx if you were small –

AR: -- get your ass kicked all the time.

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MN: Or if you didn't have a crew.

AR: Right, and I was a loner. My thing was my crew was Central Park, [inaudible] conga, Claremont.

MN: So you travel down to play in Central Park?

AR: I would sneak on the train all the time as a kid.

MN: See what you're saying though, this is still going on today. They're all these kids who don't go to school because their afraid. I mean if you didn't have – if you weren't big and strong and didn't have a crew – you know school was not classes. It was beaten up in the bathroom, beaten up in the gym, beaten up in the halls, beaten up on the stairs.

AR: Yes, if you – when Martin Luther King was shot I was in junior high school 22 167th street and Morris. The principle locked himself in his office, teachers ran home, they left the school, kids rampant running around crazy, because all the black kids were beating anybody that was light skin. They didn't care if you were Latino. If you were light skinned you were getting your ass kicked. You know what saved me? I spoke Spanish, because I had about 10 kids around me ready to pound on me, and I'm going, "No, yo soy Puerto ricano [continuous speaking Spanish]." And then I ran home and I didn't go back to school for 3 weeks. I was so scared because my friends – my Puerto Rican friends that were light skinned, some of them were in critical condition in the hospital. I didn't understand that, you know, when I truly learned about racism. When I joined the military in 1972, that a drill sergeant came to me and said, "you're just another kind of nigger." And when he told me that, that really hit home with me. So this is happening

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with my people. We're struggling with this issue among my own people and now I'm outside of that realm and I see that it's a broader picture now – it's a bigger picture. And at that point I learned my identity and I never forfeited my freedom ever since I kept on going. As a musician, as an advocate, as a revolutionary, whatever the hell you want to call me, I'm going to fight for that right.

MN: So, you didn't have in junior high or high school what we call political consciousness at that point, but was any of it filtering through to your --

AR: Yes, yes, in high school there was a man by the name of Marcinero Rivera because when I came out of the service I went in 17. I came out at 19. My mother, I had access to go back to school, and my mother said no way you got to get a job if you're going to live here. So I went home just for like 6 months, and I stayed in the parks. I stayed on roofs and then finally a man that I had worked for selling shoes, he said, "Angel I got some space in the house come and live with me. I'll give you a job at the store." And he did. He was my roommate and he taught me my first lessons about Che Guevara and [inaudible] campo and he taught me --

MN: Now in the school there were no teachers who connected with you?

AR: No, no.

MN: Not in elementary, not in junior high, not in high school?

AR: No.

MN: What high school did you go to?

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AR: I went to Taft High School, and it was horrible even though we were city champions. I remember that.

MN: Yes, in basketball.

AR: Yes, basketball.

SS: But the teachers weren't connecting to what we were doing at all or couldn't get the sense of it and –

AR: Look, it's always been work competition. Like I said the counselor would come to me like, "College- don't even think about it."

SS: Was there any music lessons?

AR: Our music was Mozart Beethoven and that stuff.

MN: There wasn't a band in the school or there wasn't a Latin combo or there wasn't a jazz band?

AR: No, no, and the music teachers because now the school is black and Latino. And there was one or two white kids and that's because they stayed behind. The family stayed in the Bronx. And I remember Russian Woody my co padre. He's called Russian Woody. But now, you know, the teachers were predominantly white, and these individuals because I can't blame the whole white race, but these individuals that were there were told to follow certain protocol. And certain instructions were given because the Board of Ed still, until today, if you protest and you're a teacher they give you a hard way to go. They'll transfer your ass to Brooklyn and you live in the

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Bronx, you know what I'm saying. So all this protocol and all this stuff – Board of Ed is a very crazy place to work. And these individuals and these people were told to instruct a certain way. And of course my culture wasn't being instructed and I didn't know nothing about Beethoven. I love him now, I listen to him now, but you tell a kid from Puerto Rico, Beethoven.

MN: Now on your own, did you read a lot?

AR: Yes, yes, absolutely I educated myself. Once I met Maxy man, Max Rivera you know the butch.

MN: Ok, but all that is post service, the education, the political conscious. So before that, you just fighting your way through.

AR: I'm just fighting my way through because I'm a kid, right.

MN: And your family?

AR: I took whatever came.

MN: Right, you bounced around from one thing to another, just trying to survive.

AR: From one apartment to another because we lived in so many places, it was crazy. And it was out of necessity, and I didn't have a choice [crosstalk].

MN: It was mostly in the same neighborhood?

AR: No, I lived in Manhattan, I lived in the Bronx. Yes, just Manhattan and the Bronx.

MN: So back and forth.

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AR: And then Puerto Rico.

MN: Now what made you decide to join the service?

AR: At the time we were living in Hell's Kitchen, 52nd street. I was ready to be 17 and I particularly wasn't fond of school. My stepfather, the junkie, had a moving company. He was a working addict if we may [Laughs]. So here we are 52nd street between 8th and 9th Hell's Kitchen – real Hell's Kitchen alright. My older sister was prostituting, alcoholism, this crazy shit, and my siblings were sometimes suffering, so I felt responsible. I felt like I needed to bring in money to the apartment, to the household. So I forgot about being a kid at a very early age, took responsibility. Guys, I don't remember birthdays and celebrations. The earliest picture of myself that I've seen was in the military, because I've never seen myself as a child. So there was a lot of shit going on for this kid, you know what I'm saying. And the music was always present

[End of Side A]

AR: Yes, it was going on but we were pulling out at the time -- we were pulling out. And I had volunteered for Vietnam. Probably would have died out there because I still a little naïve about GI Joe thing, but it just wasn't time for me. Here I am still.

MN: So what was context in which this drill sergeant said you're just another kind of nigger?

AR: Because there was like 17 Rodriguez's in the platoon and every time mail came, he would just throw all the mail up and say, "you fucking sort it out. You're just another kind of nigger."

So that was it. He hated calling Rodriguez – Angel Rodriguez , Jose Rodriguez, Manuel

Rodriguez. Fuck you, boom, he throw them all up in the air [Laughs]. So I guess that was his

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thing, but it gave me a lot to think about Mark. It gave me a lot to think about. It was like, wow, I'm another kind of nigger. I know what that word meant.

MN: Did the Rodriguez's hang out with the black soldiers in your platoon or did you keep-

AR: I was a New York Rican at the time, even though I was born in Puerto Rico. The Puerto Ricans from the island did not want to hang out with me when I was in the [inaudible].

SS: So you would hang out with the black guys?

AR: Yes, I would.

MN: That's what Joe Conso said- the same thing!

SS: Said the same thing! Joe Conso the senior.

MN: Same thing! He said I hung out.

AR: Yes, I hung out with the black guys and among those Blacks I met somebody from the Sepela family. And he was just as black as tar and I loved him because he was Puerto Rican. But yet the white Puerto Ricans, they wouldn't hang out with me. So you know what I did? I brought four congas to the base and I sat in the middle of this giant field – where the barracks – you know because this is the field where we march and did the drills, so it was giant. You can't see who's in the middle of the barracks. You have to get out the barracks and walk almost to the middle to see who this cat is, but you hear the drums [imitates drum sounds]. All of a sudden I see people coming out and it was those same Puerto Ricans, same cats. And as they got closer and they stopped and they saw me – they stopped dead on their tracks and go like, oh shit isn't

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that the guy we told to get the fuck off [Laughter]. You know what I'm saying, but then I looked at them. I waved to them and said come on over. And this is the way my relationship started with them. And I found out there was a bass player and a guitar player and we started to get together then. But before that they didn't want anything to do with me man, and it still happens today with the music.

SS: Yes, that's what you told me.

AR: Yes, I went to Dallas a couple years ago and looked up William Harris's drum ensemble group and the drum circle. And went over there with all these African Americans and stuff and the master drummer who's a student of Chief Bay –I love you Chief – and he would look at me and we shake hands and we hit the solders right? And we hug – no, he pushed me away. He shook my hand and pushed away like this macho bullshit. But once I started playing I play better than all his students: Chepe, Dundun, Chikili. Whatever you want me to play I play it [Laughs]. You know, come on man, and then all of a sudden it was hard to [inaudible] because I still have to prove myself with my hands, always. People can't see past the fucking color, man.

MN: No, no I had the same thing in the basketball court. I'd go down into Harlem and it's like who is this white guy. And so I'd go to the basket and do a double pump in the air and I could jump so I'd go over the rim and put it in – ok.

AR: Right, and now you're accepted. Same thing and still I go through that today, it's amazing.

MN: Now so – are you looking into Puerto Rican history and culture in the service, or it's more just like an awareness that's more like personal rather than like history, or both?

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AR: I think both because I – once the music took my more into depth with who I was, and the more I identified with the surface of music the more I identified with the struggle of being Puerto Rican of having this identity of who am I? So now I find out that, of course, that school in Puerto Rico taught us. You know your Spanish ancestry your African Ancestry, and that was very – damn – so now as an older person I'm like, ok, I'm all these things. I need to embrace everything about me. So, yes, the history was very important to me, because I needed to find out who the hell I was. Another thing that I just remembered was that I played rhythms in the parks of New York City as a kid but never was taught the names of these rhythms. But I played them! I could play Juan Juan [inaudible] and Rumba Columbia – which is a 6 8. You name it Congo cha-cha. All these rhythms, I'm playing all these rhythms.

MN: Now, how – people taught you specific rhythms or-

AR: No. I would learn in the street just picking it up, or going to shows and looking at their hands and listening to the sounds and going home and emulating.

SS: Where did you see the shows?

AR: Lincoln Center. Outdoors, I guess, as a young person Outdoor shows, you know, outdoor concerts.

MN: So there was enough free stuff in New York so you never had to – you could see everything without paying?

AR: And still today, we got a lot of free stuff out there.

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SS: Did you know anything about what was going on in the class – in ballrooms in the Bronx?

Where they still there or were they already gone at that time?

AR: Ok, I started in Quincirici scene. That's the scene that goes out to little dumps and parks plugs into the pole. Just like the Hip-Hop did, right. With a little truck selling fuchi fritos and beer under the table. And there's this little band with guitar and [inaudible] drum and now this is my scene.

MN: So even before the Hip-Hop people were plugging into the lamppost there were other people doing that in the Bronx?

AR: Of course. It was called – in Tiffany pier, that's where my mother would take me. Tiffany pier all the way down. Tiffany pier that [inaudible] point park there now. It's beautiful, but before [inaudible] point park that was abandoned, it was department of sanitation territory, city territory. And it been abandoned and dumped on for years. Hunts Point, you know, garbage place. So now among all that garbage and all that stuff these people set up along the trees there. They made their own little benches, just like in Puerto Rico, man. It was like look for places that take us back to our origin.

MN: So this would be – they plug their amplifiers into the lamppost and then what would be in the instrumentation of this band?

AR: Usually bass and a guitar and maybe timbale player.

MN: And what would the name of these bands.

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AR: I call them Kikiriki bands for the rooster for the hebaro [inaudible].

MN: Could you spell?

AR: Kikiriki? K-I-K-I-R-I-K-I.

MN: Kikiriki bands?

AR: Yes, it's like Kikiriki! The rooster.

MN: So these were around the Bronx before the Hip-Hop artist. And this is in the 60's?

AR: Absolutely.

MN: The Kikiriki bands these little combos plugging into –

AR: Plugging in and jamming outside and drinking and eating and going home really happy because they had this time outside. It was a form of rumba, gathering of people. It was a formidable thing and it was also a school for me, see because I watch Rigo [inaudible] and it was just lessons for me. I watched these guys play, and then after that it was the cuchí frito scene.

MN: Explain what Cuchi Fritos are.

AR: Yes, cuchí frito, fried pieces of pork. You know, it was a tradition of food of the island that comes from the Diyinos but the Europeans added the meat, you what I'm saying. The pork and the beef and stuff and made out of platanos and potatoes, you know. Mashed up and fried, and most of it is fried. When you say cuchí friots everything is fried and lard, you know. What I'm saying, it's all these kinds of foods that I don't eat anymore.

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MN: So it's a lot of Cuchi Fritos. A lot of different types of fried foods?

AR: Yes. Fried foods picallaras like Hors'd orderves and stuff, you know

SS: And what was the Cuchi Fritos scene?

AR: Well the Cuchi Fritos scene was this. In every little hole and nook and cranny of the Bronx, every little social club, every little – I remember doing a gig for the Shingaling, the gang members, motorcycle gang they had this little club you know. So we go in every little hall, every little place that we could go in. We would play the salsa music now you know and it was like 5 sets for 50 bucks, 10 dollars a set. We'd be there till 5, 6 in the morning, you know, really crazy gigs. And then from there I graduated into the salsa scene and then that's when I started to experience television, experience bands like Paquito Human, Malo Rodriquez, the Apollo theater. Matter of fact I was at the Apollo theater way before I played Latin music with the major names, and I quit that scene because I found myself surrounded by a bunch of cocaine addicts that I didn't want any connections with, you know. I also do admit that I did have a bad cocaine habit at one time within the music circles and I realized that wasn't good for me and I threw my brakes on, and got the hell out of there. And one of things we do is you know – people, places, and things and I learned that very quick, if you surround yourself by cocaine addicts you're going to end up doing the same thing.

MN: Now how long did it take – once you got out of the service before you were playing professionally?

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AR: I would say even at an earlier age because people would pay me already at 15, 16 years. So earlier I was getting paid. I would get paid just to watch a kid play.

MN: So sometimes people would play in the park.

AR: Yes, and they'd pay me just to – and Victor Ballion, Cuba, he would push all the big guys out the way. Let the kid play and he would scream “Chagu Chagu!”

MN: So even in Claremont Park people would –

AR: because it's cute to see a kid play like an adult.

MN: So this was – you realized early that this could also be a source of income as well as connection?

AR: Absolutely, absolutely.

MN: Now, what other work did you do, you know, after you got out of the service?

AR: Well, I started working at a hospital as a maintenance person, you know, mopping floors, cleaning. And by the age of 20 or 21 I already had my oldest son and, you know, Maggie was pregnant when I started working for Calvary hospital [inaudible].

MN: Right. Now, where were you living at that time?

AR: I was living at Valentine Avenue and 181st street. My apartment was robbed there and I moved over to Cedric Ave and 197th street and my ex wife is still there you know. So I worked in the hospital and I basically, I got a crate, resumes in health administration. Mark, I can work in

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hospitals as far as outpatient clinic and clerical work and all that stuff and I did insurance. I worked for Presbyterian hospital for 5 years did insurance for them. I worked for the nursing homes and –

MN: Now did you go back to get more like schooling?

AR: Yes, yes. I took – like I said Frankie Malabel was one of my first teachers. I went to school myself I wanted to learn more about rhythms and of course how to read some music and, you know. So the right things to make my career just a lot more comfortable, I guess, as far as income was concerned. At at the same time I knew in my heart that Latin musicians weren't making that much money and there was a limit to what we could make so I had to hold a 9 to 5 in order to support my family.

MN: So, in Latin music basically except for maybe at the very top like Tito Puente you had to have a day job?

AR: Absolutely.

MN: And this was even during the height of [inaudible] and all that?

AR: Absolutely, because the [inaudible] was making the money. If you was part of those cliques, you know what I mean. Tito Puente helped musicians for 25 years. You join Tito Puente's band to hell with everybody else. That was the most working band in the world in Latin music. He worked 325 days a year. So if you were in Tito Puente's band you're not going to worry about everybody else, but you still – you wouldn't get rich either.

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MN: Now in the 70's you're working in the hospital, you have a family, you're playing music you're doing all these different things. Tell me a little bit about each of these mentors you had both politically and musically. Who was your first real mentor in terms of you know – other than the guy Cuba?

AR: I would have to say and go back to Maximo Rivera. Maxy, even today, he runs a place [inaudible] and helps kids.

MN: Maximo Rivera?

AR: Maximo Rivera.

MN: How did you meet him for the first time?

AR: I was homeless and in fact I remember living on Morris Avenue when I met him. I was in the army and I went up to him. And he had just come back from Vietnam and he looked at me and I said, "Oh, I'm thinking of re-enlisting." And he said, "yes, sure you're going to re-enlist." So that's when I first met him and then I went to the service and I was there for a couple of years and then miraculously I bump into him. I was homeless in the street and he says, "look I got a place. Come live with me."

MN: He owned the store?

AR: No, he worked for National Shoes, he was the manager for National Shoes.

MN: Ok, and where was his place?

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AR: Right on 170th street and his apartment was right on the Grand Concourse and 170th street.

SS: What was National Shoes?

AR: National shoes was a women's store – shoe store.

SS: Ah! Shoes, shoes.

MN: It was in the Bronx or Manhattan?

AR: It was in the Bronx 170th.

MN: And he introduced you to Che Guevara? [crosstalk]

AR: And all the revolutionary nationalist independentistas or Puerto Rico. And of course through these circles there was all this culture: Bomba, Plaina, [inaudible] all these groups from Puerto Rico because mark I remember Cuba [inaudible].

MN: So through him there were all these people you met as well. Now explain what Bomba and Plaina are.

AR: Well, Bomba is the African based music of Puerto Rico and Plaina is Taino based from the Tainos in [inaudible].

MN: Now were you exposed to this before you met Maximo?

AR: No, I was exposed to Afro Cuban music alone, I was listening to [inaudible] I was listening to [inaudible] I mean I can go on and on you know the people that I was listening to, you know

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Montigo [inaudible] the American drummers, I was into the drum thing, but I was into the Afro Cuban genre, that intrigued me

MN: Now Bomba and Plaina are

AR: Puerto Rican folklore

MN: So there not as much adaptable to big band situations

AR: Absolutely and one of the biggest Bomba and Plaina was [inaudible] was [inaudible] and when they were famous and when they were out there bigger than anybody else, this is what they played, they played Bomba and Plaina

SS: And is it the call and response thing

AR: Absolutely

SS: Communication thing right?

AR: Yes yes all of it, I think all tradition –

Did you have any contact with the young lords?

AR: Yes yes absolutely see I was exposed to all this other side of Puerto Ricans I didn't know, you know, I was too busy chasing that big chicken remember [Laughter] that American chicken so now I'm exposed to all this stuff you know, I went to protests I marched to Albany I marched to Washington went in the buses you do what you do when you're young but eventually the music is the most important thing to me because at this point in my life Mark, I feel that anti

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protesting is good and that's a freedom that we have in this country and we can go for it but I also feel that that fuels the fire and if we stop thinking of the things we don't need and don't want and just go like – you know what – I think as a child I was already practicing that because I – I just wanted to drum and that what was going to save me from this whole crazy shit and this chaos

MN: Now were you aware of these early parties of Herc and people like that, the people that became the hip hop people -- was that whole world something that was visible to you and those Bronx neighborhoods?

AR: It was visible but I didn't participate in them because I was participating more in the rumbas and I was participating more with the Afro Cuban, and I identify more with the Latino thing, and it was going on and I saw it but it just wasn't my thing, as a child I saw the evolution of hip hop and coming up you know, and of course I was still listening to American music a lot Sly and The Family Stone when that was coming I was buying man, because I'm in the New York region I need to listen to this black music, but basically you know I leaned towards the [inaudible] because I was on 52nd street when [inaudible] I lived down the block when they did – this is historical stuff – I was sneaking into the Cheetah at 15, we would go through the back we had to walk this long metal thing above the dance floor to sneak in, in the back window and we'd just stand at the top and listen to the bands

MN: Now did you take any formal drumming training from anybody after you returned from the service, did you study with anybody?

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AR: I studied actually you know, I don't think I did – the only group that I remember was the Jazz Mobile and we would take classes under the tutelage of Pablo Landrum, we used to call him Richie he was a chamber drummer but he was also one of the Blacks who played with [inaudible] he was this Conga player we would Sambas we would do all these stuff so then the only person, what I did was, I had a family already so if I was able to play music it was a big thing, as far as going to back to school I could not afford it any school that you had to pay for anything, so I just depended on videos I depended on records I depended on Rumbas still, I depended on other people, oral tradition if you may you know there's also a lot of secrecy going in the drumming world too, you know back in the day people didn't want to teach that much [inaudible] you know especially a white kid like me, so I got my education from where I could you know what I'm saying

MN: Now was there anything in terms of Puerto Rican history and culture going on at colleges and university in those days

AR: No way no way, I was part of the take over at Hostos community college we chained those doors

MN: What year was that

AR: That was 76 I think, and we chained those doors and we went over there and took over why? Because they wanted to close the only bilingual college in the east coast of the United States, that taught some kind of culture and it gave opportunity for people to continue there education that didn't know English and learn English at the same time, look at Hostos today, my

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picture should be up there somewhere, but that's not the important thing, the important thing is that jazz just recently got into the universities of this country I think what 20 years ago

MN: And hip hop has just infiltrated

AR: You know what I'm saying, so there wasn't, you know what I'm saying, and if there was it was very miniscule

SS: But you were not exposed to people rapping in the streets were there connections between [crosstalk] and spoken word and rapping, or there was no connection, this was a total different scene

AR: Right this is Africa, drumming, black, you know, black circles were drummers man, with the hip hop and the turn tables, the speakers, the electronic stuff, the kids, it was a form of protest.

MN: What about The Last Poets? Did you have any contact with them?

AR: Yes yes of course and Filipe [inaudible], you ask him who is Angel Rodriguez you know, but I knew about him at a very young age too he's a little older than me I think, yes yes because The Young Lords were the ones that were able to stop a lot of the discrimination that was going on in the neighborhoods as far as services were concerned, even at Hunts Point he was picking up garbage at Hunts Point for 3 weeks, not because they were strike or anything, to hell with those people, and that was a true thing, so this is what the Young Lords were fighting for, there fighting for services for the community – I was four pages in my house of a list of police brutality and deaths at the hands of the police that never hit the news, these are reports and stuff

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that are still in there of cases you know even today look at Mt. Kisco there's [inaudible] there's 3 cops under investigation right now for murder, some Latino guy and boom boom look what they did, but there was so much going on in the neighborhood as far as politics,

MN: Now do you every go back to Simpson street during the days that it was burning, and the abandonment and all of that, do you have memories of the Bronx burning?

AR: Yes yes I do, I think at the time I might have been on Morris Ave and 167th you know in high school the burning of the Bronx, but as I kid you don't pay attention to a lot of the stuff, it's like 9/11 when I was on the E train ready to get off at 840 under the world trade center and for reason I get off at church so I walk out, and all of a sudden all the chaos starts happening and I'm running to a place, and I thought I was hearing bombs, but what I was hearing was the pieces of the plane hitting the ground, but now when I go out, the brain has such a defense mechanism, that I still ask the FBI agent, excuse me, where's liberty street at?, I knew where the hell it was, and that's right across from the north tour [inaudible] I was supposed to meet with 50 artist from Arts Connection that morning, most of my colleagues were already there, thank god all of us survived, but the brain said, I got to go to my meeting, I looked at the fire, eh firemen will take care of it, so as I kid that's how I looked at the South Bronx, you know, but then I got used to my playground being rubble and burned down buildings, I got used to it, this is my play ground this is where I play you know, so what I would do I would get a wet rag knock out some flies, throw them in spider webs and watch the spiders eat them, just stupid little things that we found to do as kids but most of the time I was on the drums, you know just hitting something, my mother would tell me as a kid I would just bang on the floor

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MN: Now when did you start seeing yourself as a teacher as well as an artist

AR: The Point's CBC I want to say 10 years ago

MN: So up until that time the kinds of – you were not – it was the Point that got you going in that direction?

AR: Yes yes, because when I went to the Point I went with the idea of setting up a school, a program and the directors at the time, they were like ok we got the space and I set it up, and I did every instrument I had at home every drum every bell every shaker, everything I had I brought it up to the point, and I started this program called all America's drummer, because the idea of it was all America every country has a drum in it, and I wanted my school to be little pieces of all of that, because I am a multi world drummer, I've played with a Brazilian group I played with Afro Cuban, I've played with the [inaudible] I played with some drummers from [inaudible] whatever I was playing because I needed –

MN: So all those years the 70s 80s 90s you're playing wherever you can play

AR: Whatever gigs I can get and then the Point came through and I set up this program and still very active in music, I still am very active in music but the program in the Point gave me a chance to take some of this experience and all these stories and pass them down to kids, and teach them the mistakes I made, to make their career a lot better and a lot easier and you know, what wasn't done for me I'm doing for children today, you see what I'm saying, what wasn't done for me, what the adult didn't do for me that were around me – when I see a kid like me that their little eyes sparkle and all of a sudden I teach them a [inaudible] and they learn it in 2

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lessons, and I'm going this kid is me, that's me again from a poor kid family, like I've met kids their mothers a crack head, you know what I'm saying all those crazy stuff and so you know

MN: When did you reach a point where I mean you know, after all this turmoil you had been through you said ok, now I know who I am, I know what my path is

AR: I think when I joined the [inaudible]

MN: So that's when all the different pieces came together?

AR: Yes yes it all came together and you know I know what the plan is now yes a person that is very much respected in the music world now I have apparently local celebrity status which is a lot of fun, I got a lot of respect even outside of New York city, I can go to California people talk about me, I have been interviewed around the world from Australia to Mexico to wherever and all this stuff and it's great it's beautiful, I feel really great about it

MN: But that's interesting, all these things happen to you after you are 40 years old

AR: Yes, because I dedicated myself to my family Mark, I turned down tours, I turned down tours to Japan for 3 months, I turned down major gigs outside New York city because I wanted to raise my kids, and my kids will tell you today they're 29, 24 and 22 and they will tell you, you're the best dad in the world, this is the best dad in the world, and there great kids, but I took that from experience and music that will tell me Angel, I've been with [inaudible] Santa Maria for 9 years and I just never saw my kids grow because I've worked 300 days a year when I'm on the road, and I never saw my kids – my kids don't know who I am, I was like whoa I don't want that to happen to me because when I'm an old fart man you know I need these kids [Laughter]

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you know I was smart in a way too, but so now that there grown the last 13 years of my life I stopped the 9 to 5's and now if I get this U mascot gig, it's at the New World theater there's a program called [inaudible] it's right up my alley but

MN: Now did you ever do any theatrical work as well as musical work

AR: Absolutely my opportunities with [inaudible] a famous director from Poland who did theater for many many years, and his little [inaudible] was big gush, and he came over to the United States and had this plan of getting a cast in the United States together and a cast in Poland and then bring them together in Poland to do this play on Alfred [inaudible] who lived during the late 1800's, he died very young at 32 I'm sure you're familiar with his work, he mocked governments and he mocked the word freedom in all his plays, and the [inaudible] was a story about this dictator – a polish dictator that was exiled in [inaudible] --

MN: Hi Princess

Princess: O hi, sorry

AR: It's ok Princess

MN: Come on in if you want to join us

AR: So you know here we are rehearsing [inaudible] but were not rehearsing the text we are rehearsing visual moves and excerpt of this play we read the play in English the translation, you know but we weren't going to use the text out there, it was the polish cast that was using the text

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for the audience and we did the visual and we came together, it was a crazy crazy play we went 6 city tour, we were famous out there in Poland you know

MN: And what years were these?

AR: '97

MN: This was before the Point or

AR: That was during the beginning of the Point, yes '96 we started programming

MN: Now how did you find the point or how did the point find you?

AR: Mildres and Steve Sapp, and Maria Torres, were just graduated barred in Cornell and they were working for Bronx Net as camera men, you know of course camera -- camera -- you know what I mean I can't say the damn word [Laughter] any way so here are these kids and I'm recording in the Bronx with a Latin jazz band called Puchi

MN: Puchi?

AR: Yes you know Puchi the [inaudible] player right and I'm recording for Bronx net with Puchi's band and these kids are recording us, so now here comes these [inaudible] kids you know these fat cheeked kids, yes were going to take this place over and were going to do this, and were going to do that, but you know in my career so many people come and talk to me so much stuff and so much information and I would sya yes yes that's great great beautiful beautiful -- ok see ya. A year later, I am invited to 102nd street to a festival outdoors, whose doing the festival? The same kids, so now there saying we got the place [Laughs] and I'm going like oh shit

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man, oh alright ok, let's go see it, and I went into the space and I fell in love with it and I never left

MN: Now where were you living at the time?

AR: Sedgwick Ave still and I was still with my ex wife Maggie, and I was working a 9 to 5 still too

MN: Still in the health care

AR: Yes still in healthcare and I would go after work, and spend many hours until 11, 12 – I volunteered for the 1st year and a half

MN: Oh so it started as a volunteer

AR: Absolutely, I put the program together free for kids, I didn't want to charge anybody, free for kids, I told Paul you're the [inaudible] the fund raiser, the business developer, these are my visions, and I got visions to the Point and that's when the music started to come in, I think once a month concerts, I did – you know the music just took over man because at first, they were trying to put in the Apollo feel, the black Apollo – but it wasn't working this is Hunts Point this is Puerto Ricans living there you know, you got to bring in the hip hop culture – yes – not Reggie E. Gains, he's a famous poet and a beautiful black man, you couldn't bring in Gladys Knight and the Pips [Laughs] you know what I'm saying it wasn't that. So when I started to bring in the Latin thing and once a month concerts the Point just started to grow and grow and I gave the Point identity according to the guys, I'm not saying this – but you know Paul would put his arm around me and say Angel you paid our rent god damn it, so I never left, and still I haven't had a

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salary at the Point in 4 years and not because I was fired or quit it's just scraping the bottom of the barrel, I just made a choice like ok well don't pay me, keep the literacy program going for the kids –

MN: --- Wow

SS: Wow

AR: Keep the stuff going for the kids, do the mambo tours, the Mambo to Hip hop tours, and I told the girls, if my face or my name helps this and proposals and stuff still helps the place

SS: So you were one of the fellows that put this From Mambo to Hip hop tours together, you established the connection that people only draw nowadays, but after From Mambo to Hip hop

AR: Right, I started the conscious, from the conscious came in Henry Medina, the archivers and then Henry and I – you see Henry lived 37 years in Hunts Point, and his building burned down, so he moved out, so Henry came through and I said Henry man I don't this thing, once a month concerts can I use some of your archives to show on the screen, he said no problem Angel, and boom we started! And we started to collect, and of course go back into the neighborhood and talk to people and stuff, and then right after that City Lord came in Roberta [inaudible], and they came in and collaborated with the Point and started South Bronx music project, but Roberta Singer, Steve and all them cats had to come to me first, because I had already started doing this thing. And the program started as a salsa tour, the 1st tours I did were completely salsa tours, through el barrio and into the Bronx, I did a 3 hour tour you know, it was a crazy tour, and then after that it just started to fall apart because of monies and who's going to take the most and the

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grants and you know how it is with non profits, all this internal bullshit, so you know what important here to keep the past part of the present and how for the future, and kids can see the reason for this interview, you know what I'm saying, like when I'm dead and gone some fucking kid is going to listen to this Mark [Laughs]

MN: That's the idea, that's exactly right

AR: 20 years down my grandchildren go like, man this was my granddad, you know click listen to this man, so you know, it's up and down with non profit's and stuff like that, but the Point is still alive that's important, I don't give a damn about the head butting and the all this stuff, even with groups – musical groups – I say look there's a thin line, the music and all the bullshit, and if you can deal with all the bullshit then the music stays alive, if you cant deal with the bullshit, then the music dies

MN: Now in terms of your spiritual evolution, now you eventually became involved in Santaria, now how did that evolution take place from the Christian you know upbringing to the Santaria?

AR: Because of the drum, my 1st introduction to it was kid Ray Suave, he passed away from asthma at age 32 unfortunately, great drummer man, prodigy man, and then he [inaudible] to Babaiilla, who was already Santaria who had learned from Totico and Patato and all these Cubans, and my 1st gigs with Santaria was with Senor El Heno Totico [inaudible] and he has been you know just my inspiration in that world and that folklore, why? Because Totico always hired Puerto Ricans and never hired Cubans in his groups for Santaria, [Laughs] he said he didn't

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want to deal with his own people for certain reasons I don't know but that was very true, and until today you we say it was because we were on time we never drank we never did drugs, because it's a religion dammit, you don't come in there and do a couple of blows, a hit, and then pray to god, even if it is an African god you know [Laughs]

SS: And you were introduced to it in Puerto Rico or in New York?

AR: No here, here in New York, in the circles in New York underground, you know and Santaria is still very much underground still and then later on 20 years ago I decided to go into a ceremony myself a paro [inaudible] which is from a Congolese religion, from the Congo, and I got initiated myself into the religion because I figured you got to be one to know one, and you go to be part of – I just can't go around being a drummer and not know what this means, because everything I do is physical spiritual and emotional at the same time

MN: Now have you kept your ties to that original Christian tradition?

AR: Absolutely and I have group of friends like Demetrius [inaudible] some great musicians and some great artists Memo and Toronto was bringing Tito Puente all that stuff, and yes they have a Christian prayer group that I might join sometimes, you know I need all the blessings I can get

MN: That makes sense

AR: You know there all my friends and I respect them but there not the type of Christians that are on your ass about repenting and you know, Oh your living out there you're not living how

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God – and I have a shrine in my house and they come to my house and respect my shrine, you know what I'm saying – you seen it

SS: Yes beautiful

AR: You know and they don't say nothing, it might be whatever to them –

SS: I like it

AR: But they're looking at me like the person I am, I'm Angel Rodriguez, I've been a good person, a kind person and I've been some of there right hand man in there families never missed a rehearsal never missed a gig, you know, I am who I am. Now I am a Christian, Catholic, [inaudible] and sometimes [inaudible], you know. But I believe in all of them like for example, Christianity, [sings] and catholic, [inaudible], you know [inaudible] [sings] and Santaria, [inaudible], you know all this stuff is happening in my life so I just embrace it all man, I'm just all of it, I am as much as in love – sometimes I say I am an atheist too, because I think these adolescent gods are letting this world go to shit, there's about 5 different gods? Major gods right? 95% of the people in the United States believe in Jesus and Christians, but damn you know, but then again I say – like people say, Oh man why me God, and God is up there going like, I didn't do that shit you did it [Laughter]. You know, that's your fucking problem, I'm too busy with famine and war over here, you know so my aspect of religion is a big fat tree that's lived 200 years on this campus is your god and you hug it every morning and you love it and you pray it – I'm with you, I believe in nature, I believe in the spirit of the earth, that connects with the spirit of the trees, and the beautiful environment that we have, that were polluting so much,

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and then the drum is made out of the tree man, and the skin of the animal is another spirit and the spirit of the human spirit is the most important and also for me nature, law of attraction is very important to me, if you're going to think like a thug you're going to be a thug, you think like an asshole you're going to be an asshole, I don't care how talented you are. I met some very very great musicians that are great! But they're asshole, Tito Puente, he was a lovable teddy bear, the greatest man in the world in Latin music but he's lovable he was great he was cool with the people, you what I'm saying, it's like I believe in you see the goodness in somebody and then that's what you know, and then you can see the dark and shit in people too man you know?

MN: Given all the things you've done and seen and experienced, when you're dealing with children what is the – what are the things you most want to get across to them when you're you know when you're teaching young people?

AR: That at this point in my life Mark my theme is Global community because I think flag waving separates us, I think corporations love flag waving so my theme now with kids is global community because I think these generations that are coming up are the ones that are going to save humanity from – you know I taught that even to my kindergarten kids you I – I got kids from Mali and Ghana and Columbia and Venezuela and everywhere [Laughs] black kids white kids I be like oh shit – so what I do here – do I – multi cultural education is all bullshit additives, ethic additives with celebrations, which are worthy, but are these kids reading and writing and all these stuff, so the leaders of the next world the – the next generation of leaders have to take global community man. World industries , world industries today, arms dealing is number one,

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number 2, drugs, number 3 jails, and foil, garbage and then oil [Laughs] you know were not doing that good

MN: Review that list again, 1 is arms

AR: Arms

MN: 2 is drugs

AR: Drugs

MN: 3 is garbage

AR: Jails

MN: Jails, 4 is garbage

AR: Garbage and 5 is oil

MN: And those are the 5

AR: But oil brings all the rest of the stuff see, oil should be number 1 really, because oil is at the bottom of the list as far as money making is concerned, because all these other things make a lot of money – people think – the United States we produce 25% of the world's resources, I mean we consume 25% of the worlds resources, and other people around the world suffer because of the lifestyles that we live, and that's very true so. My whole thing through music and art is to teach that this is a global community and were just a little dot in this great universe of ours, that

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because we don't think out of the line man, we don't think out of the box sometimes, were boxed
in on earth

MN: Do kids respond to that?

AR: Yes they do, because a child is a child, and a child is going to learn what you teach them.