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Capers, Valerie Interview 1

Capers, Valerie. Bronx African American History Project
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Transcriber: Laura Kelly

Mark Naison (MN): Hello, this is December 14, 2006 and we are here at the home of the great jazz pianist, composer, professor, Valerie Capers. And we are interviewing her for the Bronx African American History project. The lead interviewer is Maxine Gordon with the assistance of Mark Naison and Dawn Russell. So to begin with, could you spell your whole name?

Valerie Capers (VC): I certainly can. Valerie, of course, is V-A-L-E-R-I-E and Capers is C-A-P (as in Peter)-E-R-S.

MN: Okay. And can you tell us your date of birth?

VC: I really have to tell you that right?

[laughter]

VC: I mean, it's no secret, you could probably find it on the internet. Alright, [pauses] May 24, 1935.

MN: Okay. Thank you.

MG: [laughs] No kidding? Wow.

MN: Now before our interview you told us some remarkable things so could you tell us a little bit about your parents and your family history?

VC: Oh, I would love to because I'm so proud. I had a wonderful family growing up. My mother and father, Julia, she was Julia Auld and Alvin Capers, they grew up in Harlem. And it's very interesting, at the time they grew up in Harlem in like the 20's, the teens, the 20's and into the beginning of the 30's, all of their friends, they all lived within a, like a 2-3 block radius, 139th Street, 140, 141. And it's interesting, my mother and father, my

mother and father got married in 1930 and my mother's home life, I mean it wasn't really, it was not the best. It wasn't abusive or anything like that, I don't mean - - it was an inconvenient living arrangement that my mother had because she lost her mother when she was very, very young, only 3 years old. And grandpa, who was in the post office, he was young and handsome and he had his mother, my great grandma, all taking care of mom. So my mother didn't have a lot of things but she was always industrious, she worked hard. And she and daddy got married, my mother was 19 I think when she and daddy got married and she still lived at home for a year before they made it public that they were married. They didn't live together for that first year. And what is interesting about it is [laughs] that I was telling, I was telling Mark earlier, Maxine, is that when my mother and father announced the fact that they were married, they had a wedding reception and Fats Waller, who was a good friend of my father's, played for the wedding reception and they said it was really wonderful. They had a wonderful time. And after the wedding reception, they spent their early married life in the Bronx. And what's interesting is that they were among, I would say, half a dozen other young couples their age, young married, young marries, and they came to the Bronx and they settled, they settled in apartments and private homes in the Williamsburg section, Williamsbridge section of the Bronx off of White Plains Road like in the 120's or the - -

MN: The 220's.

VC: The 220's, thank you. That's correct. I meant the 220's or the 230's. And it was always - - and several of them wound up living just a few blocks away from one another. But that's where they lived until they ultimately came down to the area where I grew up.

It was first 168th Street between Union Avenue and Prospect Avenue. And it was there, it was there that I lived when I lost my sight. It's funny, before mother and daddy got married, I remember daddy was in the post office, we were all, you know, all the African Americans were post office families. My grandpa was post office, my great aunt, she was post office, daddy's sister was post office, everybody was a post office person. And my father used to tell me that there were more writers and painters and musicians in the post office then you would imagine because that was a solid job for a man to be able to bring, you know, raise his family. So we, as I said, we lived in, we lived in 811 East 168th Street and the Pruitt's - -

MN: Was that an apartment building - -

VC: No - -

MN: - - or a brownstone?

VC: - - it was a brownstone. That's right, a brownstone. One long flight up and we lived on that floor there. And the Pruitts lived at 819 East 168th Street. And that's how I got to know the Pruitt girls, - -

[beeping noise]

VC: - - Betsy and - -

MG: Is that your [inaudible]?

VC: - - Harriet. No that's a little, a little computer there - -

MG: Oh!

VC: - - calculator rather.

MG: Okay.

VC: So they you know, they lived down there, and as I said, I was in 811 when I lost my sight. As a kid growing up, there was lots of music in the home because daddy was a stride pianist and when he was coming along, when he was living in Harlem, he and Fats used to - - and there were a couple of other, there was a Joe Helliard, somebody told me about, who played wonderful jazz piano. So it was Joe Helliard, Fats Waller, and my father and they would go to parties. And daddy said that when he and Fats were at a party, Fats would sit down and play a set and daddy could dance with the girls and cat around and then daddy would sit down and play and Fats would have his chance, you know, to dance and cat around with the ladies and be social and stuff. So they always had a, they always had a very wonderful time. And daddy, as I said, in the house daddy played a lot and my mother and father did the usual thing of, you know, sending me to dancing school so I could learn to tap, so I could learn ballet, which I did, I did both. I was in a couple of - -

MN: Was this in the Bronx or Manhattan?

VC: Bronx, everything Bronx! Everything with me is the Bronx. The school, I remember the lady's name was Miss Mayers but I don't remember - - and it was way up on Prospect, way up on White Plains Road because I remember we used to have to take, I can't remember now, but it must have had to be the number 2 or the number 5 - -

MN: So this was in Williamsbridge area?

VC: No, the dancing school was on White Plains Road way up somewhere. I remember that because we took the elevated train all the way up to that part of the, you know, that part of the Bronx. And so I did the, I took the dancing thing and daddy of course played

and daddy was a wonderful pianist. And then my father and I [laughs], we used to do our own routines, you know. I loved to sing the pop songs of the day and daddy would play them and I would sing, and you know, the sing and play, dance rather. And daddy would play. And we had a lot of records at home, we had - - this, if anything is gonna date me, this will. We had like, my mother loved Connie Boswell, we had Connie Boswell, we had the Duke of course, we had Basie, we had of course like Teddy Wilson, and [inaudible]. We had all these wonderful people. And so it's funny, African Americans, when I was growing up, didn't hang out downtown much. And I, for example, I remember you know, talking to some of my colleagues, Gestel Cassell whose Jewish and her family. Her family were always culture minded and they had taken her to like the Nutcracker Ballet, like when she was 8 or 9 years old. They would save their pennies and they would go downtown to concerts and things. But the African Americans, when my mother and father were growing up in Harlem and even after that, they didn't go downtown to concerts. The music that they had, they created there in their community. Of course, Harlem was thriving with places, but at the same time, there were piano rolls, there were rent parties, and they just didn't go those places and I remember - - I realize that now, how blessed I was because the first time I went to a concert I was, I was 15 and I was taken to that concert by a music teacher at the institute. It was Carnegie Hall to hear [inaudible]. I was thrilled out of my skull. It was so exciting. But you know, I was never musically deprived because I didn't get to go to concerts until I was grown and could go because it wasn't part of our lifestyle from that neighborhood but we had all the recordings. At Christmastime what would I get from daddy? I'd get maybe the Greek

Piano Concerto performed by Arthur Rubenstein. Or I'd get the Nutcracker Suite conducted by Leopold Kowalski of the Philadelphia Orchestra. So I mean, or Rachmaninoff playing the second piano concerto, in addition to the jazz and the pop things, Bing Crosby, and you know, all those people like that, Elvis Presley, so all those things, so I was like never musically deprived because we had our records and things. And then it made me think also about, I remember when, before I lost my sight and I used to go down to 1851 7th Avenue where my great grandmother lived you know, and at that time, this was before I lost my sight, at that time, I remember hearing my parents talk about it, I wasn't really aware of it but Ethel Waters lived in that building - -

MG: Yes she did.

VC: - - and she was in the Zigfield thing, one of the Zigfield things and every night, [laughs] my mother would tell me about it, and they said, oh, she's getting ready to go now. There'd come a limousine in front of the house and she would come out [laughs] and everybody on the block would be hanging out the window just to see it, it was really, it was really something.

MG: She was huge.

VC: Yes, very tall right?

MG: Mmm hmm.

VC: So anyway, it was like that. So, as I said, never musically deprived because I didn't go to concerts. And I was telling, Maxine, I was telling Mark and Dawn how I remember this- I was about 8 or 9 years old, and I was sick, I was at the institute, they had taken me to the infirmary, I had a temperature and I had what they called in those days, the gripe.

MG: Uh huh.

VC: So they decided that they better send me home. So they send me home and my mother finally got the doctor. And I remember I was in my bed and I was not really asleep and my father was working the 4-12 shift at the post office and so that means when he got home - - by that time we were living at 1278 Union Avenue by that time because when I lived at 811, as I said, that's when I lost my sight, and one of my last real vivid memories of being able to see was my father wrapped me up in a little kind of tannish/grayish and he carried me downstairs to a yellow cab and there were just little light snowflakes in the air. And that was really the last - -

MG: How old were you?

VC: I was only six and a half.

MG: What happened?

VC: I had, it's weird, I had something very strange, I had - - I just started 1A at P.S. 99, it was so beautiful, now it was just rubble when I went to see where it was. Anyway, I came home with a slightly sore throat, I told my mother I had a sore throat and stuff like that so she decided she would maybe keep e home for the day. But when I woke up the next day I had a pink eye, the right eye was all, the cornea was all pink. So my mother called up her grandmother and grandma said soak - - this sounds ancient [laughs]- get some gauze and soak it in hot boric acid, warm boric acid and see if it helps the eyes any. It didn't, I was getting worse. So she got the doctor. It was the doctor who lived down the street between where the Pruitts lived and where I lived - -

MN: Was it Dr. Gather's?

VC: Gathings.

MN: Gathings.

VC: Oh yes, that was a sad situation. And Dr. Gathings treated my sore throat for just being a sore throat. The thing is he didn't take a culture of the sore throat. And what happened is that I did have streptococcus germs. Somebody said I had a combination of streptococcus and rheumatic fever. But he didn't take a culture. The germ was then carried, which is very unusual, in my bloodstream and then settled in the optic nerve and I was extremely ill, I was really - - I almost died. And by the time my mother and father decided to - - I remember a neighbor who lived down the street, a Mrs. Yule, she came and brought me a little glass replica of Roosevelt's dog, [inaudible] - -

MG: Mmm hmm.

VC: - - and I remember her leaning over, and she looked shadowy to me, because I couldn't see, and she said I brought you this little doggy and my mother said, this is Mrs. Roosevelt's doggy, and his name is Fala. And she said, don't you want to thank Mrs. Yule for the little doggy? And I tried but I couldn't, you know? I just - - so finally, by the time my father got me to the hospital I was terribly ill and they put me in a contagious ward. I was on that ward for almost 3 months.

MG: Oh!

VC: I wasn't contagious after a certain time but I never got to be - - I was in the hospital for a little over, between 4 or 5 months and I didn't get out of the children's ward until maybe a month before they released me from the hospital. But so the very last thing I do remember was, and its funny how they come back, I remember there were these

shadowy, there were shadowy figures. They didn't have faces, they were like ghosts. And I suddenly realized it must have been about 6 or 8 doctors or nurses around my bed in masks and things, that's why I didn't see a thing. They had masks on them and all robes covering them you know? And that's how I realized they weren't like faces, they were like ghost figures. So anyway, the thing is that while I was in the hospital, you know, my mother and father were just distraught over what had happened. I'd heard about it. And people advised it might be a good idea that when I came out of the hospital we live someplace else, not that house. So that's how they got to 1278 - -

MN: And that was between Ritter and Freeman?

VC: Between Ritter and Freeman, that little, little piece of Union Avenue, that's right, that's right. And there I stayed until I went to, there - - I lived there all my years at Julliard, that's where I lived, and we didn't move from there until, we didn't move from there until I think '67, and then we went to 1818 Anthony Avenue, and then things got impossible there and then finally - -

MN: Anthony Avenue is between where and where?

VC: Well, it's a long Avenue. You can approach Anthony Avenue from the Concourse and it will go way, way across to McClay and Monroe - -

MN: So this was in the Concourse area?

VC: Yeah. Further up, further up, further up north. You'd go uptown to 175th Street and make a right and then just go right down to 175th Street until you can't go any further and that's 1818 Anthony Avenue.

MN: Hmm. Now, when you were describing music in your house, did your family always have a piano?

VC: Always.

MN: And how did they move the piano from apartment to apartment?

VC: God, well I wasn't there when they moved it from 811 to 1278 Union Avenue and to tell you the truth, I don't even remember how it was, how it was - - oh wait a minute, let me see, what happened here, when I was in, let me see 1270 - - oh 1270, 1270, oh this is - - what happened at 1270? Oh I know what happened. While we were at 1278, a friend of my father's who was in the army had a baby grand. And my mother and father struggled and saved up and they wanted me to have the baby, and he sold it to them for a small price. So that meant we had a baby grand in the living room and we had my father's old Horace Waters - -

MG: Oh yeah.

VC: - - you know, the old Horace Waters upright [inaudible] in the bedroom where I slept.

MG: Wow.

VC: Anyway, so when we left Union Avenue, I'm afraid we left the Horace Waters. It broke my heart but daddy figured, he said he just didn't know how we were gonna deal with a - - it's so much easier to move a grand piano or a baby grand because all you is remove the legs and put the body of the piano in a dolly - -

MG: Did you know that?

VC: - - and go in an elevator. That's all.

MG: It's easier to move a grand piano than an upright piano?

VC: That's right.

MN: Now when did you first start actually playing?

VC: Oh, I - - oh, let me see, well I wasn't that interested in playing the piano before I lost my sight because, as I said, I was all involved in trying to be a cute little kid you know, dancing with daddy. I would say it was after I began to just piddle around and I found that I had an ear and I could hear things and pick them up when I was - -

MN: Mmm!

VC: - - but it was still fun and I wasn't even thinking necessarily of moving in that direction - -

MN: So in other words, you basically started fooling around on the piano when you were like 8 years old?

VC: Oh yeah, 7 or 8, but nothing [inaudible] [laughs] - -

MN: But you weren't sent to piano lessons at age three?

VC: No, no, no.

MN: So this is something you picked up on your own before you took formal piano lessons?

VC: Right, but see, that in a sense took its natural course because I was around music all the time. Daddy was playing, I heard records and I liked the records and maybe there was a melody or a song that I liked so I wanted to maybe create that song myself, recreate it myself. So it was just a natural, a natural transition. It was no - - very natural.

MN: Uh huh. Now who're your friends on 168th Street, the playmates that you remember?

VC: Oh the Pruitts, Harriet and Betsy Pruitt. They were - - because you asked me how I got to know them. Harriet had a wonderful daughter, did she ever tell you about Susie?

MN: Oh yes.

VC: And Susie was, she just wonderful. I taught her piano when she became a teenager. And she was just - - my father loved her. She was just the sweetest thing and very different from anybody I've ever known. She had the most wonderful, wonderful personality and she was very different. She was spiritual, she was fun, she was thoughtful, she was intelligent. And I just don't know anybody like her, I've never known anybody like her.

MG: What happened to her?

VC: She had a very rare blood disease.

MN: Yeah.

VC: And very few people in this world have that disease. And she went with it for a long time and she became very deep in the, what is it- the Buddha religion.

MN: Yeah.

VC: And she was quite remarkable and she worked so hard teaching and studying and doing what she could, and somehow she just wasn't beating the disease. And what I thought was extraordinary is there came a point in her life where she called in Harriet and she called in her and she said that she had made up her mind that it was time for her to go. I mean, it's amazing, I mean I'm scared to death thinking about that. And she said she

knew it was time for her to go. And about a day or so before she passed away, she was in the hospital, she saw people, different people came to see her, and she made it a point at that time. She was conscious, she wasn't in any coma or anything like that, and she talked to them and she told them that she just wanted to be able to say that she loved them and wanted to say goodbye to them and to tell them not to worry about her, that she'd be okay. That to me is remarkable.

MG: Mmm, hmm.

VC: It's just remarkable. So that's how I got to know, also, this is a terrible thing, I don't know if you need this in the archives. But I have to tell you about Lightfingers Capers.

MG: [laughs]

VC: I went to their house all the time. And they were, as I said, they were older than I am. And they were, you know, young ladies. I guess they were teenagers and stuff like that and everything in their house I just loved.

MG: [laughs]

VC: They would have me walk in their house and one of them would walk me to school or something, you know? And on the break front, or the buffet, or the table, there'd be the prettiest rings or the prettiest watches, or the prettiest [laughs] earrings or bracelets or whatever. Lightfingers was always going in [laughs] taking something out of there. And I remember the last time it was a watch and I came home, I mean - - [laughs] I think about it. And finally they came and said we think Valerie took a - - and so my mother came and said did you take a - - and of course I told her I had. And I mean it had gotten to the point [laughs] where they couldn't let me in the house anymore for a while.

MG: Oh my God!

MN: [laughs]

VC: I mean, I don't think that lasted too long but I do have memories of that, sometimes it makes me laugh. But that's how I got - - we all lived - - but Dr. Gathings lived on the block.

MN: Yeah.

VC: And what was very sad about the whole thing Mark, my mother and father were so distraught about me being sick, all they wanted me to do was get well and get better, but they never brought any charges against him, they never brought anything. But the Presbyterian hospital got very incensed about the fact that they felt that the least he could have done was take a culture. And I have, I don't know anything about it. I've only heard little bits and pieces. All I know is that there were - - I don't know if there was an inquiry about all the stuff but he did get a lot of professional criticism and problems because of what happened to me. And what's so sad about it is ultimately he committed suicide.

[gasps]

VC: Yeah, because I think that it affected his career or it affected his life and as I said, it wasn't because my mother and father hounded him, they never did anything and I never said anything, I was too little.

MN: Yeah. Now, did your family attend church in - -

VC: Yes.

MN: - - in the Bronx or in Harlem?

VC: Bro - - everything went, from the time they moved from Harlem as young, married people, everything was Bronx. And we went to St. Augustine's Church - -

MN: Ah.

VC: - - on Prospect Avenue.

MN: Do you have any memory of Edler Hawkins?

VC: Let me tell you about Edler Hawkins - -

MG: Ohhhh!

VC: - - yes indeed.

MN: [laughs]

VC: Edler Hawkins was a fantastic man. And I always kidded him, I said, you know, I'm your blood child. Because this is what happened, when I went to the hospital, they discovered that I had AB negative blood, which is the rarest. And I understand at the time that the Harlem community, the Bronx community, even people like Bojangles Bill Robinson, I think went on the radio to ask about people to come - -

MG: Oh really?!

VC: - - to see if they had, to come to see if they had the blood, that there was a little girl who was sick. And I think he even came to the hospital. And I mean it was - - I can't - - I wasn't aware of all these things but people told me about them later on. Now everyday, Reverend Hawkins came to the hospital to give comfort to my parents.

MN: Oh my God.

VC: And people said, he sat, he went every day. And my mother and father, the nurses would come and say no we don't, nobody yet. And my mother and father were just, you

know, just losing heart. And he would sit with them and pray with them and so forth. And this went on for a couple of days. Of course in those days they always talked about having to do something before the illness reached its crisis point, you know, or something? So anyway, finally they had had a group of people and they had tried the taking the blood and nothing. So when the nurse came in and she shook her head no, there was nothing. And Reverend Hawkins just - - my parents were so upset. So he decided, look, just to be doing something, he said, why don't you take me? He had it.

MG: Oh!

VC: And they went and checked it out and he had the AB negative blood. And that's where I got it from, you know?

MG: Wow. So you called him your blood - -

VC: That's why I said, I'm your blood daughter, you know, I'm your daughter.

MG: Wow. That's something right?

MN: That's quite a story. Tell us a little bit about your first encounters with Maxine Sullivan who lived right around the corner with you when you were on Union.

MG: [inaudible]

VC: Yes. I was explaining earlier - -

MG: Wow.

VC: - - that, as I said, 1278 Union Avenue was right smack dab in between Freeman Street and Ritter Place. And Maxine's house was on Ritter Place. And so my cousin Roberta Waters and I, we were kind of like, as I said - -

MN: Was she a Bronx person?

VC: No. She lived in Corona. But we were buddies and a lot of times her grandma and her father would let her come and stay with me, you know, and we had a good time - - we used to go to camp together and we would do a lot of things together. So we were at that age where you're so impressed with movie stars. We'd buy all the music-movie star magazines. I remember Photoplay was a popular one when I was a kid. And we'd read about everybody and so forth and so on. And it's interesting that during that time, this had to be like I'm sure it was the late '40's, maybe the 50's the most, but Maxine Sullivan had a weekly program on WNEW which was a music station.

MN: You know about that?

MG: Mmm mmm. I didn't know.

VC: Yes, it was on Sunday afternoon. And she had, and I remember, you remember her theme song right, [inaudible]?

MG: Right.

VC: She had live musicians accompanying her. I guess it was a trio or whatever. It might have been a quartet. But, and it was every week on WNEW.

MG: Okay.

VC: And it was on Sunday afternoon. And we used to listen and I don't now how we found out because she never said where she lived on the radio [laughs], but I guess maybe neighbors or something like that mentioned that Maxine Sullivan lived around the corner of Ritter Place. And so here we are, two kids 11 or 12 years old, and we were just dying - - so we said, we knew that she had done some movies and she had done some things like that. And I will always remember this as long as I live, one afternoon the two

of us just set out ourselves and went around the corner, didn't even have to cross the streets or anything, just walked to the corner, turned around and went up to her house and rang the bell. And she opened the door - -

MG: Mmmm!

VC: And I said, I'm Valerie Capers and she said, I'm Roberta Waters, we live around the corner and we heard that you lived here and we wanted so much to be able to talk to you and hear about the movies and things that you've done and people that - - you know, like kids [laughs] - - and the people that you've worked with. Well, you know, as I said, who knows what that woman might have been wanting to do - -

[laughter]

VC: She might have been [inaudible], might have been wanting to do any number of things. Oh, but come in! She had us come in, we sat down in her home, - -

MG: Oh!

VC: - - she gave us some juice, we started to talk. And I think, we must have been there at least an hour or more! She was just as nice to these two little girls - -

MG: Wow.

VC: - - you know, who intruded on her afternoon. She was lovely. And I will always remember it. And she treated us with great care and great respect like she was just delighted to answer our questions and to talk to us. I'll never forget that, you know, because people you know, who are accomplished and become this and that sometimes they're not quite as human about, or about things like that. But she was wonderful. And what amazes me is that, well it really doesn't considering how wonderful she was to my

cousin and myself, is that of all the years of her life, I've never heard anybody say anything about her except that she was enormously generous and concerned about people

--

MG: Mmm hmmm.

VC: You know, and that just [inaudible] it to me --

MG: Wow, that's something else.

MN: Umm --

VC: Plus she could sing.

[laughter]

MG: Oh yeah. She sang right?

VC: Yes she certainly did.

MG: You ever hear her at the Cookery?

VC: No.

MG: In her career?

VC: I never got there when she was there or when --

MG: At the end. With -- yeah.

VC: Never got a chance.

MG: That was great.

VC: Wow.

MN: One of the things, you had mentioned that your father's family had some Indian ancestry. They were from Virginia -- was it your mother's family?

VC: My mother's family.

MN: They were from Virginia?

VC: They were from Virginia. And the Powhatans, the Indians, were part of the background - -

MN: Right.

VC: - - of my mother's side of the family, and Scotch, A-U-L-D, Roger Auld who was a white Scotchman, he, I guess, I never met him of course but - - and my mother's maiden name is Auld. So anyway, so it's Scotch, and of course, African American, and Indian on that side. My father's side, I think they were all from South Carolina, but all the Capers are from South Carolina [laughs].

MG: Oh are they?

VC: Yeah, I'm telling you. Virginia Capers, her family, everybody. Somebody - - if it's Capers it's gotta be around Charleston or Monks Corner or - -

MG: Oh yeah?

VC: Yeah, all those places. I've never been there but they, that's where they come from. It's very interesting. So, I'm not sure, I know there was some - - my Grandma Hamilton's maiden name was Devoux, she was my great grandmother. So there may have been some French. Of course - -

MG: That's on your father's side or your mother's side?

VC: My father's side, right. So my Grandma Hamilton's maiden name was Devoux I believe and then Hamilton was her married name. And then my Grandma Capers, I think she was Louise Hamilton and then she became Louise Capers when she married my father's father, yeah.

MN: Was there much conversation about race in your family when you were growing up?

VC: You know, I have to tell you, no. No, not like the kids growing up today. No, not at all. In my household, growing up with my parents, there was talk about politics. My mother was very active in the democratic club here, the Jackson Demo - -

MN: The Jackson Democratic Club.

VC: That's right. That was the most powerful club practically in the city and she was a captain. As a matter of fact - -

MN: Oh, she was a captain?!

VC: Yes, she was. And she helped a lot of people in the community and she loved the work. And she, because of what she did, when they said, Julia we want to do something because of all the work you've done for us, what we would like, my mother said, well I don't need something, but you can do something for my husband. So it was around the time, Eisenhower was in then, it was around the time they were finally going to have some African American postal supervisors and there were 36 to begin with and daddy was one of them.

MG: Oh!

MN: Uh huh.

VC: Yes. So he became a supervisor. So he was one of the early African American supervisors in the post office. But, no, we didn't talk about it. Um, no - -

MN: What about your playmates on 168th Street and at P.S. 99?

VC: Okay.

MN: Was that a multi-racial group?

VC: Well now my play - - remember now, I was only, I was only like 6 years and 4 months when I got into P.S. 99.

MN: Right.

VC: And by - - so I went in there in September but by the time December came I was sick, - -

MN: Right.

VC: - - so I was gone. And I hadn't - - I lost all those young playmates that I had when I was able to see. You know, my playmates didn't become playmates in the traditional sense of the word until I went to the Institute for the Blind.

MG: Where is that?

VC: That's on Pelham Parkway between Bronxwood Avenue and Williamsbridge Road. It no longer exists. A big beautiful campus, it's no longer - -

MN: It's not too far from Fordham. It's near Columbus High School.

VC: That's right! The back of the institute is across the street from Columbus High School and it's now called the New York Institute for Special Education. So the school as I knew it is no longer there. And of course, we were guided to that school by Columbia Presbyterian Hospital because from what I understand, my parents were devastated and they told my parents, look, all is not lost. Your youngster can go to school and get a wonderful education and become, and become a useful citizen to society. And this is what any parent would want for their children. It doesn't matter that she can't see; she'll

be able to function, and so forth. So it was very interesting. So they are responsible for alerting my parents to this wonderful school that I went to - -

MG: And was it? I mean, it was?

VC: Oh it was the best.

MG: You went right from the hospital, you went there?

VC: Not quite. I left the hospital a little after, I left the hospital, let's see, I would say in the Spring around April or May and I entered the school the following September.

MG: Uh huh.

VC: Yes. Yes.

MG: After your parents moved?

VC: That's right. And I, you know, I was in that school for 12 years.

MG: Oh!

VC: I graduated from around say, maybe, yeah - - I graduated from high school in '53, I was valedictorian - -

MG: Of course!

MN: [laughs]

MG: Valerie was valedictorian.

VC: I just, you know, it was funny, when I was a freshman I said, I wanna be valedictorian, I wanna make a speech [laughs]. But anyway, I stayed one extra year. All of my buddies who graduated then went on to the college or went on to a job after grad - - I stayed an extra year because, I'll have to tell you about her afterwards Mark, my musical guidance and inspiration as a teacher. She felt, and she knew I wanted to go to

Julliard, and she felt that I should take a year between graduating and going to Julliard so that I could practice and prepare for the entrances.

MG: Oh.

MN: Mmm.

VC: You know? And it was one of the most wonderful years of my life because I wasn't a student anymore. I was kind of semi-grown up, I loved it. I stayed after school like I always did when I was going to school like 5 days a week, come home on the weekend - -

MN: Oh, so it was a live-in?

VC: Yes it was.

MN: Oh!

VC: I had, Mark, I had a rich, white girl's education.

[laughter]

VC: That's what I had. An education that my mother and father would never be able to afford. Everything was there for me. And it took me a long time to keep remem - - there was never any emphasis on the fact until my sophomore year in the school and I'll tell you about that. There was never any big emphasis on the fact that I was, quote, colored, unquote. I never thought about being colored. I never - - I mean, it's a really crazy thing. I got to school, I was smart, I did everything, I loved going to school, I loved learning. And so, here I was in the school and I - - we didn't have, we didn't have - - it's kind of another generation, we didn't have the burning racial questions. My mother and father grew up in that time when, you know, it was important for colored folks to be civil and cultured and maybe not make waves. I don't mean to say they were cowards. By no

means, they were not. They were very strong people. But I think, my mother and father were concerned with the everyday living and bringing up their families. Bobby wanted to be a musician. We lived in the ghettos of - - we didn't think we lived in the ghettos. We lived in the South Bronx. He had to have instruments, he had to have money for insurance, he had to have money for lessons. He studied piano and he studied saxophone. I was at the Institute and I was always involved in concerts, in putting on productions. I had to have clothes. I had to have this and that. The thing that my parents concerned themselves with was bringing up their children and making it possible for them to develop their talents. They were totally devoted to what Bobby and I needed as their children, you know? That was all. My mother, I remember, sitting up there at night sometimes with my father, she would have a civil service exam and then when she realized she needed more money, you know, and so forth, she'd work on preparing for the next grade, you know? And daddy would be there at the kitchen table testing her and preparing her - -

MG: Wow.

VC: - - they were just concerned with their family, you know? That's what it was. It sounds, I mean, I hope it doesn't sound terrible to you, but they were - - it wasn't - - there are two things in my lifetime that I could tell you about, my mother's brother, Uncle David, he was a person, for the first time in my life that I realized there were problems [laughs], you know? He was a child protégé, he played violin, he played piano, he was at the Julliard School for a short time when it wasn't the Julliard School, when it was the Institute-- Musical-- Institute of Music, before the Julliard people bought it and changed

it. He was a close associate of Paul Johnson. Paul Johnson was a member of the first Harlem string quartet. And Uncle David was told by Walter Demerosh, he said, you're a wonderful violinist but you can forget making a living in the United States of America as a colored violinist - -

MG: Wow.

VC: - - it ain't gonna happen, that's what he told him, it ain't gonna happen. Then my uncle was also very creative artistically and he got very angry with things that were going on, so he started traveling. He wanted to go to Africa and the government wouldn't let him go. Then finally he went around the Caribbean, traveling around the Caribbean, he decided that he wanted to live and settle someplace else other than living in New York or the United States. He wound up in Haiti - -

MG: Oh!

VC: And he moved my cousins, my four cousins. He moved them out off to Haiti. They were living in a house with no running water [laughs], no electricity. He started out from scratch and built himself up a fantastic home, a business in woodenware where he had contracts with Neiman Marcus and Jensen's, and goblets, and trays, and plates, dishes and all sorts of things like that. And he was a very, very, very successful man. But I, from time to time, would hear him talk about, um, would hear him talk about some of the problems and some of his frustrations as a colored man.

MN: What was his last name?

VC: Auld, A-U-L-D. David Auld, yes.

MN: David Auld.

VC: Mm hmm. So, I mean, that was, and then my - - but you know what? In spite of the fact that we weren't potential militants or involved in that sense, because mother and daddy grew up in Harlem when Adam Clayton Powell Jr. was there, and he was like Kennedy for them. And they were aware. They knew they couldn't go to Bloomstein's to shop. And they knew they couldn't get a job in the phone company. But, and they marched on lines with him, also in Harlem, also like that. But it was, how can I say it, it wasn't, the things, it wasn't quite intense as it is now. The demonstrations and the things that go on now and let's say in the past 20 years, were far more energetic, you know what I mean Maxine?

MG: Mmm hmm.

VC: It wasn't the - - it was far more energetic than the kind of thing that my mother and father went through, you know, as making a protest or something like that. But when I was a sophomore in high school, we got an invitation, the school got an invitation to go to Washington, and to perform for congress and so forth and so on, and to do a couple of concerts in addition to that. And since I was a pianist, I was gonna play, I was gonna play a Mozart concerto and I was one of the star alto singers in the chorus and so forth. And I'll never forget it, Dr. Frampton called us up, we were in assembly, and he said, now we have a bit of a problem, he said. This is 1951 and he said, you know, he said, that Washington is a segregated city.

MG: Oh my god.

VC: And he said, and he said, we have a wonderful invitation, he said, and it's an invitation I believe the school should avail itself of. He said, and I want to open the

assembly to discussion. He said, and I should say at the outset and I strongly feel, and I think this was trying to coerce, he said, I strongly feel that if there is a colored person who said they didn't want to go than maybe that wouldn't nix the whole program for everybody.

MG: Oh.

VC: Now sitting upstairs in the balcony was Miss Thode, who I adored. She was my inspiration, Elizabeth Thode, my teacher who took me over - -

MG: How do you spell her last - - ?

VC: T-H-O-D-E.

MG: T-H-O - -

VC: It's like Thode, but has a German - - she'll be a hundred next year.

MG: She's living?

VC: She is. And she's still - - my grandma Capers used to say, you're more Miss Thode's child than you are your mother's and father's [laughs], but musically - -

MG: Oh!

VC: And she took over the direction of my career. I owe her for being able to read Braille music as well as I do because when I first studied with her she was very strict and very stern, when I came up from the lower school at one end of the campus, the Bronx [inaudible] and to Williamsbridge road, the high school, elementary school and high school, I was 11 and she heard that I had a good ear, she would give me a piece of music and I'd say, would you play it for me, and she'd say no, period, end of report. And I was forced to have to learn to read. Because they told her from the lower school, she has a

very good ear, if you play something for her, she won't learn to read, you know. So she did that. She guided me through. She prepared me for Julliard. Even the years that I had my own teacher at the Julliard School, she talked to him and made suggestions and she's carried me through all the way, all my life.

MG: Wow.

VC: So anyway, she was from Valhalla, South Carolina, and not the most tolerant and not the most open-minded lady, thank you. And, so there it was - - so I was sitting there. And Annie Laurie who, Annie Laurie Ellis who grew up in the South and she got up and she said, well I grew up in the South and this is a way of life in the South - -

MG: Uh oh.

VC: - - and I wouldn't, you know, and I wouldn't, she said, and I would certainly go. This wouldn't keep me from going.

MG: Uh huh.

VC: You know? This wouldn't keep me. He said, thank you very much, would anybody else like to say something? And then it got real quiet. And I tell you, I was scared as hell. And I said, I stood up and said, I would like to say something. And I'll never forget. I remember I was digging my fingernails into the seat in front of me and I said, I said, I didn't grow up in the South, I said, I hate that system down there, I said, my best friend is Mary [inaudible], she's Italian, and I said, and we have beds next to each other in the dormitory, - -

MG: [laughs]

VC: - - and I said, I will not go down to Washington if I have to be housed separately from the rest of my friends on the basis of race. He said, alright thank you very much. I went [sighs] boy! That's one of the hardest things I ever had to do in my life. And as a result, needless to say, they did go to Washington.

MG: Oh!

VC: I didn't. And all the kids, when they got down to Washington, it poured the whole time they were there. Everybody sent me a postcard and said they were, they were so proud of me, they thought - - you know, I miss my buddies, you know, they just thought it was - - Miss Thode though, she wanted to be mean. She, you know, when school is over like at 4 o'clock, you have a lot of free time between 4 and 6, which is supper, to practice, and I looked forward to that. And then after supper I could go to study hall and then practice after that. She said, there'd be no practicing after hours on the 3rd floor for the time that the chorus was away.

MG: Oh!

VC: So she denied me access of being able to practice as part punishment for not going.

MG: Wow.

VC: And at first she refused. We had the Easter break and then we were coming back and the chorus was going the second day after the Easter break. And she came - - I think she wouldn't allow herself to believe I wouldn't go and she came into the room and she said, now I think we'll have a lesson next period and I'll go over the Mozart with you and we'll check - - and I said, but Miss Thode, but she kept going. And finally, when she finished, I said, and I was scared to death and I loved her for saying it, I said, I'm not

going. And with that, she turned, she turned away and closed the door and it took about a month after we got back before she started speaking to me. I used to be scared - -

MG: Were you the only black child in - -

VC: Uhh, no, - -

MG: - - chorus?

VC: - - there were a couple of others. There were a couple of others.

MG: That didn't go?

VC: They went! They all went! I was the only one that didn't.

MG: You were the only one that didn't go?

VC: That's right, that's right.

MG: They went and they stayed in separate - -

VC: That's right, that's right. Yes they did. And they went and what was interesting is my mother and father backed me up all the way. When I came back - - see, they did things in their own quiet sort of way. And I said, its happening and I don't wanna go, that's what I told them. I don't want to go there under the circumstances. So my father said and my mother said to me, well you know what? We support you a - -

[END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A] [BEGINNING OF TAPE 1 SIDE B]

MN: - - better quality.

MG: Okay [chuckles].

MN: [chuckles]

MG: Someone was asking me about what were you - - um, what year was Bobby born?

VC: Bobby was born in 1939.

MG: Uh huh.

VC: July 28, 1939.

MG: Uh huh. So he was there when you got sick?

VC: Yes but he was only 2 years old. And you know, my mother, from what I heard, daddy and mom, my mother were so distracted and all, then daddy had to go to work and so forth. They said my mother used to sit at the window when the kids would come in at 3 o'clock from school, my friends, my playmates would be out on the street and she'd just stare outside and cry you know? And daddy - - and finally, my, I call her Aunt Ruth, she was my brother's godmother and one of the Harlem piano players, she played the hell out of the piano. Ruth Upshur was her name - -

MN: Ruth Upshur?

VC: Upshur, Upshur. I think U-P-S-H-U-R. Ruth Upshur. And she played the hell out of it. She could keep pace with Waller and daddy any day of the week.

MG: Wow.

VC: She was really good. And so she finally, I understand, sat down with my mother and father and really gave them [inaudible] and told them look, you still have a child, you have a little boy and you gonna have to give him some attention and you're gonna have to pull yourself together because ultimately you're gonna have a daughter whose gonna come home and she can't see and you're gonna have to deal with it, you know? But it was interesting [laughs], when I first came home from the hospital, my mother had a friend, a German lady, her name was Frida and she was married to a colored person, African American, Charles what was his, I can't remember his name. Anyway, they used

to baby-sit a lot for Bobby, you know Bobby, when I was in the hospital until I got home.

And when I got home [laughs] Bobby would say my name with a slightly German accent.

[laughter]

VC: Vaaalerie, Vaaalerie [laughs]. You know, he was only 2 years old, he was calling me Vaaalerie.

MG: [laughs]

MN: Could this family have been named Cunningham?

VC: I'm not sure. You know, I know the last name began with a C.

MN: The reason I say is because we interviewed this psychiatrist in Schenectady, Dr. James Cunningham who was one of 5 children born to an African American man and a German American woman who lived in Morisannia.

VC: Oh, for goodness sake.

MN: And - -

MG: Well check the address.

MN: So we have to go over our files.

VC: Yes.

MG: That's so interesting.

MN: But they met as a chauffeur and a maid in an estate in Long Island and then moved to Morisannia.

VC: Oh my goodness.

MN: So it could be. And there were two of the sons became doctors.

VC: Oh my goodness.

MG: Well that's interesting [laughs] [inaudible].

VC: Oh my heavens.

MG: Could we just go back to this Fats Waller, this is fabulous.

VC: I mean is this really what you want?

MN: Yes, yes.

MG: This is, Valerie, this is it. But also, what we didn't say at the beginning is that when we started making a list of people to interview for the Bronx African American History Project, your name was always at the top of everybody's list.

VC: Oh, I'm happy to hear that. [inaudible].

MG: And - - but what happened was, we would ask people about contacting you and they would say, I have to do it, you can't call her directly. I have to do it.

VC: Ohhh!

MG: I'll talk to her for you, remember? Right? You see, we have to follow the protocol, and I was like, oh no, I'm going to her gig and talk to her [laughs].

VC: I'm glad you did. You see, she was very tenacious.

[crosstalk]

MG: You see, because your name was always - -

MN: Always.

MG: - - also, which we have, we will get to, but your work at Bronx Community and all that - -

VC: Yes, I'm so proud of that.

MG: - - too, and all your accomplishments. But also, that you were born in the Bronx, I mean, you're a Bronx girl, and Bobby too, and you know, his name, which is a whole separate interview, we'll talk about her brother who is deceased so she'll have to speak for him. His name comes up everywhere, Hugo Dickens Band [inaudible].

VC: Oh right.

MG: Who's that? That's Bobby Capers. I have pictures of him - -

VC: Oh!?

MG: - - with Hugo, Mongo Santamaria - - you know he played with Mongo right? You know she wrote music for Mongo, that they recorded?

VC: Because of Bobby, that's right. Mongo and I were very close.

MG: And I saw Warren Smith - -

VC: Oh! Warren Smith!

MG: - - [inaudible]

VC: The picture of Bobby over there was in Warren Smith's studio, you know?

MG: Right. And he was like - - oh people - - I mean, he was one of the greatest musicians.

VC: He was. It's a shame [inaudible].

MG: Was he married to Sharon [inaudible]?

VC: That was his second wife, that's right.

MG: Ohhh.

VC: That was his second wife.

MG: Right. Wow.

VC: Yup.

MG: So, okay, well wait, there's a reason for this, I wanna go back to the great grand - - the early family history because I think that's very interesting.

VC: Yes.

MG: You know, this black family. Your great-grandmother, she lived in Harlem at this same address [inaudible]?

VC: That's right, 1851, that's right.

MG: That's a very famous address.

VC: Yes it is. It certainly is.

MN: its 7th Avenue and where?

VC: 113th Street. Right at the corner of 7th Avenue and 113th Street. On the downtown side.

MN: Right.

VC: On the downtown side.

MG: But it's famous well, you know, because of Ethel Waters.

MN: Right.

VC: That's right.

MG: And other people lived in that building too. Other famous people.

VC: That's right. And I remember it was beautiful building [inaudible].

MG: Beautiful building.

VC: They had like, I remember pastel tiles on the floor and wall. And a man in livery, who ran the elevator, he had a red suit with gold braiding and it was something.

MG: A great building. I mean, a historic building.

VC: Yes.

MG: But how did she - - where did she come from, your great-grandmother?

VC: She came from Virginia.

MG: Uh huh. Do you know when she would have come to Harlem?

VC: I would say, let me see, I would say um, probably late, late 19th century. You know I may be able to pinpoint it even better for you because I did a week's thing in Utah last year. They have the world's greatest genealogy cuz - -

MG: You did the family research?

VC: Yes. Well I wasn't - - I was never into that and then they started talking to me about this stuff. And they said, we don't do this but we're gonna do this as a special - - so I did get some information, so I can look it up - -

MG: Oh, good!

VC: - - and tell you a little bit. Yes, I can.

MN: Now did your Virginia family - -

VC: Yes.

MN: - - go to college?

VC: No, nobody went to college. Nobody went to college. I, um, let me see, let me think - -

MN: So - -

VC: - - Uncle David didn't go to college, mother didn't, I mean she went to high school of course, like that. So daddy went to [inaudible]. I'm not sure whether it was a private

school or beginning of a college in Maryland. His father sent him there for a year but that was it. And daddy was very good. I have a gold medal, as a matter of fact, that daddy won as an orator in 1927 - -

MN: Mmm!

VC: - - you know, it's one of my treasures. But no, nobody went to college. Nobody on my mother's side, nobody on my father's side went to college either - -

MG: So you were the first?

VC: I was the first, yes. I was the first - - well I have a cousin, a first cousin, Ralph, who was the son of my father's sister. He was the, um, he was the first college person in the family, I was the second. But no, there were no college people, you know?

MG: Who would have the family archive photos of you, like when you were a little girl and - -

VC: Well, you know what, I will get one of my friends to help me look through that unfortunate bag I told you about - -

MG: Oh the box.

VC: - - that I was going through when my mother - - Mark, my mother didn't seem to have any sense of, uh, I guess this is what I'm thinking about, sense of keeping stuff. She had pieces of albums and things stuck on papers that she just kept in bags and when my mother passed a year and a half ago, I was pulling out stuff and the papers, you know, had been dried out. They would crumble to the touch. There were loads and loads of pictures, I'm sure some with my mother and politicians, some of them with friends, so

forth and so - - nobody around, I couldn't see them, there was nobody. And the people in the family who might say, oh, this was grandma, this was grandpa - -

MN: Yeah.

VC: - - they're all gone. It's, it's - - and I said to Maxine - -

MN: Do you still have the materials?

VC: I think I do, you know, so I could pull 'em out and see.

MG: Because we could have - -

MN: Because we have professional archivists who could work with this.

VC: Okay, and I said to myself, Mary, I said, it's a shame, there's nothing, there's no pictures to even show that any of these people existed. And look at them, it's just crumbling and cracking. I mean, it's just unbelievable.

MN: Yeah, because this is, uh, this type of material is exactly what we're trying to locate and preserve - -

VC: Yes.

MN: - - so, we'll send a professional archivist to look at them.

VC: Okay. I will - -

MG: When you - -

VC: - - pull them out. Okay.

MG: - - uh huh. Because that way, [clears throat] then as part of your archival, which we'll talk about also, of all your accomplishments and your life, it's very good to have the family archives.

VC: I see, okay.

MG: And scan everything - -

VC: I see.

MG: - - and you know, try to identify - - well you can identify a lot of stuff by the clothes and the years and the [inaudible] - -

MN: Yeah. And the other thing is, we can also bring in Harriet to work with this because Harriet works with us on the archival project. She's on the committee.

VC: Yes, yes.

MG: And for the older stuff, there's people - - maybe with your mother with the democratic - -

VC: Oh yes!

MG: That would be great.

VC: Oh, that would be in the politics [inaudible] - -

MN: Yeah, you know, does the name Jesse Davidson ring a bell? Him and his brother Frasier, their parents were very active in the neighborhood. And in fact, I think that there's a housing project on 167th between Union and Prospect named after their parents. They were in the Lincoln Republican Club.

VC: Oh, the Lincoln Republican. Okay. Alright.

MN: And they also put out a newspaper called the Listener. Does that name, does that - -

VC: No. No, I remember the Bronx Home News [laughs]. That's the paper I remember when growing up, you know? I had a teacher from North Carolina, she loves, she was my history and social studies teacher, and I would walk in and say, well, I seen your mother's faces in the newspapers again. You know [laughs]?

MG: [laughs]

VC: Needless to say, she was a Republican, and she had - -

MN: This was at the institute?

VC: This was at the institute, yes. But let me just, maybe this is off the beaten end, if you don't want me to do this, I'll - -

MN: No, please.

MG: No, no, anything.

VC: - - but when you were talking about the archives, let me tell you, my mother - - I remember, my mother said that - - she always told me that she lost her mother when she was young, you know, little, very young child. She never could bring herself to talk about it at all. Now friends of the family used to say, oh it's a shame, such a tragedy when Julia, her mother was killed, her mother was shot. Like, her mother had a friend who had man trouble and the friend came over to the apartment, then the man followed her and he came and then he shot up the place.

MG: Wow.

VC: Now I got this from members of the, like, you know, grandparents or uncles or something. My mother couldn't talk about it at all. Friends of the family mentioned and said it was just so sad. When I went to genealogical center, I was telling the man about it. I said, you know, I was always very curious. Do you know that man - - and of course, then finding out this stuff I guess is like a detective story.

MG: Uh huh, it is.

VC: Well, he - - its amaz...it's amazing - - now, my mother's, my mother's um, my mother always talked about her Grandma Moore. And Grandma Moore was her grandmother, she would have been my great-grandmother, but Grandma, she said that Grandma Moore died a few years after her, after her mother did. And she once said to me, when Grandma Moore died, I lost the one person in my life who really loved me.

MN: Mmm!

VC: And that, I tell you, when she told me that, that just broke my heart. But the interesting thing about it is that what they did, what they found out, I said I always wanted to know exactly what happened. Well, to make a long story short, it encompassed doing some things with the computers and checking some things, testing this out, testing that out, going to census, finding out all this business. Her mother's name was Fanny, Fanny Moore. And I found out in the research that her mother's name was Julia. I had no idea my mother was named after her grandma.

MG: Oh!

VC: So then, the interesting thing is, it turns out, my mother was born in 1910. Now we even went upstairs, he got me my mother's birth certif...my mother's mother's birth certificate, and my mother's mother's death certificate.

MG: Wow.

VC: And the death certificate was on microfilm. He said eventually, you know, everything would be put on video and stuff, mp3 or whatever they do, he went upstairs, got a copy of that for me, showed me where they had that stored. And the interesting thing about it is, that I finally got the story on this, and I'm sure that if I got newspapers

of the day - - it turns out, my mother was born in 1910. Her mother was shot, oh god, I can't remember the date now, but Mar - - oh! Maybe March something, 1913. Now you realize, my mother was born in 1910 in July - -

MG: Yeah.

VC: She was no more than three years old, she was a little baby! So she's a little baby, she's in that house - -

MG: Right.

VC: - - the man comes in, shoots up the - - the only thing that she did say once, I remember something, her mother pushing her behind a couch - -

MG: Wow.

VC: - - to keep her protected from this man's, the guns. So her mother pushes her behind a couch. It broke my heart to think about. So her mother pushes her behind the couch, ran for the bathroom to see if she could get to the bathroom and shut the door on them, got shot in running to the bathroom. And can you imagine what must have happened after with neighbors and police - -

MG: Right.

VC: And this is a little 3 year old girl who doesn't really understand what happened but knows something terrible. That's what happened to my mother when she was 3 years old. And then it turns out that her mother died three days later, early in the morning from the gunshot wounds.

MG: Wow.

VC: And that was fascinating to me, you know, because it was something my mother really didn't understand and maybe didn't want to understand, you know?

MN: Right.

VC: Didn't want to know about.

MG: You went to Utah and they had - -

VC: They had the most, they had the most state of the art - - it's a whole building, you wouldn't believe it, five or six floors with everything. It's just unbelievable because that genealogy stuff is very important to me, more than my religion you know?

MN: Right, now - -

MG: They have - - yeah, but they do African American [inaudible].

VC: They do everything. Yeah, they do everything. But that's where people go when they really wanna get, you know, the stuff - -

MN: Now I wanna just - -

Dawn Russell (DR): Okay, can we just cut a second so I could change tapes?

MN: Okay sure.

[Pause in tape]

[Tape resumes]

MN: What was the form of the formal music training you had at the institute?

VC: Okay. Uh, my form, what do you mean Mark, by that?

MN: I mean what style did they train - -

VC: Oh! Okay.

MN: - - you in? What sort of pieces were you playing?

VC: I had the traditional training at the Institute. First of all, the Institute had marvelous musical facilities. The third floor of the main building, which was Schermerhorn Hall - -

MG: Oh, Schermerhorn?

VC: Yes, Schermerhorn Hall.

MG: Who is that? Because Columbia has a Schermerhorn Hall.

VC: We gotta find out because - - and Brooklyn has a street named Schermerhorn.

MG: Yeah, who is that? [inaudible] - -

MN: I'll tell you about them later.

MG: Oh, he knows. Okay, good.

VC: Alright. So the music department ran almost, literally from the Williamsbridge side of the thing almost to, almost to the lower school, which would be the Bronxwood side, it wasn't quite that long. But in that, that music department had a very music library, Braille books and print books, wonderful record collection. Every room had a Steinway piano in it.

MG: Wow.

VC: And some rooms had two Steinway pianos. The school had one of the finest organs. The pipes were all in the walls of the third floor and fourth floor because the organ itself was in the assembly hall in the second floor, one of the finest organs in the country. And I had the traditional, classical piano training, okay? And I, you know, at that time I was not interested in playing jazz or pop music in the sense that I became interested in playing later. I really wanted to play classical music and that's what I devoted myself to. So I was playing, you know, playing Bach inventions and Bach suites, Mozart sonatas, Mozart

concertos, Beethoven sonatas, Chopin pieces, Brahms's, you know, the traditional, you know the traditional training. That's what I studied, that's what I did.

MN: And when did you first begin performing before any sort of public audience?

VC: See, this is what I'm saying when you talk about memoirs. This is - - I'm not telling you anything very exciting at all. Um, I actually started performing for audiences when we were at institute and we had programs, the Spring concert, you know, the Winter concert [beeping noise] - - don't mind me, that's that stupid thing - - and Spring concerts, the Winter concerts are special things like that. That's where it was, you know? I didn't really do my big first concert probably attached to the school like until my, let me see, until I think maybe my second year, no, it was longer than - - I don't know, maybe my 3rd or 4th year at the Julliard school. And that concert was sponsored by St. Anthony's Church which is just a couple of blocks from St. Augustine - -

MN: St. Anthony of Padua?

VC: That's right, St. Anthony of Padua, that's right.

MN: So you did a public performance when you were at Julliard?

VC: That's right. That's right. That was my first concert. That's right. And they came out in droves and - -

MN: Now was this a classical performance?

VC: Yes, yes it was, yes it was.

MN: Do you remember what you played?

VC: The only thing I do remember that I played was I ended the concert with a concerto for piano and orchestra by Mozart and one of my fellow students from the Julliard School played the orchestral part of the second piano, I remember that.

MG: Oh!

MN: And this was at St. Anthony of Padua - -

VC: That's right. That's right.

MN: - - and the neighborhood turned out?

VC: They turned out in droves. Salem turned out, St. Mark's turned out, I mean - -

MN: So Harlem came to the Bronx?

VC: That's right, they certainly did. And see, I got to know, I had some close friends who were Catholic and of course, when I left the institute, we used to, at Christmastime, get together because we used to carol on campus and stuff like that. And we loved doing that. And so one Christmas, I had a little party up at the house and we went around the neighborhood through Ritter Place and we caroled for the neighborhood. And then some of my friends who were Catholic and went to the St. Anthony School and knew the nuns there, we went down there and we started caroling outside the convent.

MN: Okay, this actually brings up an interesting...because this is something - - was Christmas caroling in Morisannia a common phenomenon?

VC: No, no, not at all. Are you kidding?

MG: [laughs]

VC: We just did that because we did it at the Institute and we hadn't been that long from being in high school at the Institute - -

MN: So this wasn't, this wasn't a Morisannia thing?

VC: No, we just got together at the party and said, let's go caroling. So we, you know, we sat and went over [inaudible] and we sang in wonderful harmony, you know, and stuff like that. And then we did it in the house, in the halls of 1278. Then we went around the corner to Ritter Place and we sang there and then we walked down Union Avenue to the convent which is behind the church, you know?

MN: Right.

VC: And we sang there and the nuns were out of their minds and they invited us in and we had cookies and hot chocolate and from then on in I was friends of the nuns of St. Anthony's you know, and so - -

MN: Right. Now that brings up another issue because you, when you were at the Institute it was at the height of the doo wop days. Was that something that passed you by?

VC: That's interesting [laughs].

MN: Because in Morisannia they were all singing on the street corners.

VC: Yes. Yes and no is the answer because - - and now, see, it's amazing, I have to tell you. It semi-passed me by, but not quite. I have to be honest with you, I know you want me to give you the honest answer - -

MN: No, [laughs] - -

VC: I, and I laugh about it. You know, being African American and understanding my tradition and all the wonderful things that I have to be proud of. You know, those are things I didn't hook into until I was grown, you know?

MG: Uh huh.

MN: Right.

VC: I didn't get it at home. And this is not a criticism of my parents. I did not get it at home. I certainly didn't get it where I went to school because those white folks were not teaching me anything - -

MG: [laughs]

VC: - - about anybody who was black who did everything. You know, or Africans. Ms. Butler said, African, the dark cat and then period, end of report, you know? And even in Julliard. I mean, I was out of Julliard before somebody told me about the fact that, oh what's his name, you know, the literary guy, um, Russian - -

MN: Pushkin.

VC: Pushkin! Yeah. Pushkin. I mean, my goodness, nobody said anything about anything.

MN: So this was - -

MG: [laughs]

MN: So this was high culture, sanitized whiteness?

VC: Yes, but, yeah, what you said, but in a sense that's almost, just in defense, that's almost unkind Mark, you know [laughs]. It's not quite that - - it just was what it was, you know?

MN: It was what it was.

VC: That's right. And the thing is that when I was a teenager, like you're talking about the doo wops like '51, '52, you know?

MN: It started '54.

VC: Oh, '54, okay. No, for the most part in those days, for me it was still basically, but I wasn't unaware of it, for me it was still Perry Como, you know, Tony Bennett, Rosemary Clooney, Bing Crosby, Kay Star, Georgia Gibbs, I mean [laughs] you know, this kind of stuff. Um, um, um, that sort of - - now, the thing was though, that at the same time in that popular Patty Page, you know [laughs] and stuff - -

MG: Uh huh.

MN: Okay.

VC: - - at the same time though, by that time, and we're getting into '53, '52-'53, and '54, I was into bebop than.

MG: Uh huh.

MN: Ah!

VC: So you know, by that - - so that was my pop music area and my area with my friends at school. You know they used to have a show on WINS when it was a musical show and Murray the, Murray the K I think had it, and it was the battle of the baritones and every week you could vote for your famous baritone, you see? And it was always like we were voting for Perry Como or Frank Sinatra, I remember this girl Kitty [inaudible], she looved Frank Sinatra. Frank Sinatra, Bing Crosby. So we always wanted to beat Sinatra out. So the Perry Como'ers and the Bing Crosby folk. So I mean, that was the kind of thing. But as I said, then I moved on I was into, then I was into, you know, by that time, you know, Bud Powell and Dizzy and all those folks. You know, Dexter from the Billy Epstein recordings with the band and all those. So I mean, I wasn't a total loss.

MN: But see you didn't get into like the work with Meannie stuff or the real gutbucket -

-

VC: I heard it. Yeah, I heard it but now Johnny grew up in that - - now also, but at the same time, there were groups all around my neighborhood that were singing. So I did hear it. But you know, I'm ashamed to tell you, I didn't realize until years later for example, I often wondered why, for example, you remember when there, what... The Chords was it - -

MN: The Chords.

VC: - - who did Sha Boom Sha Boom, and that awful guy, that Pat Boone.

MN: Pat Boone.

VC: I thought that when I heard, and Tumie once talked about, and he was talking about, and I must admit when I heard him talk about it about 10 years ago, I wasn't even aware of the fact that they had the white and the black, you know - - imagine Fats Domino singing Blueberry Hill and Pat Boone singing - -

MG: Yeah right.

VC: And I had no idea that there was this paralleling of these things that the black guys were singing that the white guys picked up to do, you know? I mean, so it was amazing. So I wasn't totally unaware Mark. But that wasn't part of my, you know, that wasn't part of my culture.

MN: Right. Now one other thing, this is - - was the institute both men and women?

VC: Yes, yes.

MN: Now what - - when it came - - were people dating there - -

VC: [laughs]

MN: - - and how did race affect that when people started dating?

VC: Gee [laughs]. Um, this is - - I'm telling you, I'm so dull. People, people were dating then, of course, under very careful scrutiny. There was a social hour where they were allowed to spend maybe an hour together and then back to the girls' side, back to the boys' side. Um, the dating, the dating for the most part I would say, I would say really wasn't mixed. Like, you'd have a, you know, Jewish people who would date Italians, that sort of thing, but they were white, this sort of thing. You had, I remember once that Lucille Genata dating a guy named Jose Perez and of course her family - -

MG: [laughs]

VC: - - the Italians loathed the Puerto Ricans and what was so sad about it, she ultimately married him, had 2 wonderful children, the family disowned them. To this day, she's an older woman now and the family's never - - what a shame to miss out on they're grandchildren and so - -

MG: You're still friends with people from the school?

VC: Not really, no. No, we just kind of drifted apart. I have two friends. One passed away recently and the other one, I'm gonna spend Saturday with them, you know, as a get together. So we've known each other since fifth grade, you know? So, but the thing is that the African American students, and there were a couple of guys and gals that dated. Now, Sylvester Bradley who wrote Tears on My Pillow - -

MG: Ohhh!

MN: Oh, I love that song.

VC: - - he went to the institute. Yes, [sings] you don't remember me, but I remember - -

MN: [sings] But I remember you.

VC: He got rich on that thing. He used to date Annie Laurielis. That's the one that stood up and said that she grew up in the South and that she didn't mind going. Anyway, so it was that kind of thing. I dated no one even though I had a horrendous crush on Tony Santiago. That's his family I'm spending the time with Saturday.

MG: Oh! That's so great.

VC: I had a horrendous crush on him but he wasn't paying me any mind at all. All I wanted to do [laughs] Mark, was practice.

MN: [laughs]

VC: So I'm afraid I was out of the loop of the romance. See I'm dull, I'm telling you that.

MN: [laughs]

MG: No!

VC: So I didn't practice. I mean, I did practice but I didn't date. There wasn't anybody I was really interested in.

MG: Was your idea to be a concert pianist?

VC: Yeah, I thought I loved to be a concert pianist when I first started.

MG: So did you have a career as a concert pianist?

VC: No, never did, never did. When I got out of school I went on to Julliard and then, uh, when I left Julliard, I think the main thing I was concerned with when I left Julliard was making a living, you know?

MG: Uh huh.

VC: I knew that somehow I had to make myself financially independent which took a number of years to do. And it's only that when I really got into [inaudible] and made my [inaudible] that I could begin to do some of thing I wanted to do. And then my delay in developing as a jazz musician was horrendous because when I started teaching, I really believed in being very thorough about teaching. And I loved teaching and I'm really good at it and I - - every year I'd go back and I'd say, well I won't give so much of myself this year, maybe I'll do - - so I would do that which meant there was very little time left to hone my craft, and then you know, Maxine, from dealing with musicians and all that sort of thing, you could practice and you could woodshed at home, but the proof of the pudding is when you get out there with the audience you know?

MG: right.

VC: You gotta be able to cut the mustard when you get out there with the audience. And playing the jazz music and that sort of thing was very different from sitting down and getting in front of an audience and playing a Beethoven sonata.

MN: So - -

VC: and I didn't do well for years. I didn't do well for years.

MG: Uh huh.

MN: What was the progression from Julliard to work? You know, how did that proceed?

VC: Okay. Alright. When I left Julliard after my master's year, I didn't have a job and - -

MN: Were you living at Julliard?

VC: No, no, they didn't have dorms then.

MN: So you were commuting from the Bronx to Julliard?

VC: That's correct. That's correct.

MN: From Union Avenue?

VC: That's right. That's right. Oh yeah. It cost me a dollar sixty five to go from Union Avenue to the Julliard School which [inaudible] [laughs] - -

MG: You'd go by yourself?

VC: Yes, I went in a cab. And I didn't start traveling by myself until way later when I was an adult because my, Miss Thode, I told you, my musical mentor, she objected to me traveling by myself back and forth to school at that particular time because, you know, when a blind person is out on the street traveling, it takes an enormous amount of energy and concentration.

MG: Uh huh.

VC: You know, she was afraid that since I was going to Julliard and this was a whole new situation, it wasn't like being at the Institute, she was afraid that the traveling back and forth would take it's toll on me as far as being able to work after school - -

MG: Wow. That's good right?

VC: - - and do all those things, you know? She said, I don't think it's - - you need your energy and you need to be able to concentrate. Plus, as a student, you're carrying books and things like that and it's very hard, let's say to maneuver a cane, let's say, if you're gonna travel, when you have a briefcase full of stuff.

MN: Right.

VC: It's hard to travel. And I wasn't going to get a dog because I loved dogs but I felt I didn't have time to deal with a dog the way you should. So, my, the thing about working, Mark, after I got out of Julliard was I didn't have a job and I didn't know what I was gonna do so I went around to the neighborhood, St. Anthony's, St. Augustine, and I talked about wanting to teach and blah, blah, blah. And the neighborhood responded so I began teaching students at home.

MN: At home. At Union Avenue.

VC: That's right, Union Avenue. That's right.

MN: And you went through the churches to recruit students?

VC: That's right, I certainly did, in the neighborhood. That's right. And then, and then what happened is I got a chance, this Elias Tannenbaum was one of America's great sort of avant garde American composers. He was on the staff of Manhattan School of Music. He was also on the staff of this little school called the Neighborhood Music School. And Maxine, it was on Cruger Avenue in the Bronx - -

MG: Ohh.

VC: - - and that's off of White Plains Road.

MN: Do you remember the exact address?

VC: Yes. 2814 - -

MN: We'll write it down. 2814 Cruger Avenue. I'll mapquest it.

VC: That's right. That's right.

MG: Okay.

VC: And what happened is Elias said - - and Elias's teacher was my theory teacher in high school and so - -

MG: What's his name? I'm sorry.

VC: Elias Tannenbaum.

MG: Okay.

VC: Mmm hmm, Elias Tannenbaum. They live in New Rochelle as a matter of fact. And he, he said, you know, I think you ought a, I think you ought a come to this school and teach. He said, I'm gonna talk to the people. And I was explaining to Dawn and Mark earlier that this was really an act of courage for this little neighborhood music school because Esther Kleinfeld, who was the director of the school, she, you know, a lot of people thought maybe it wouldn't be a good idea for me to teach because my being blind might be upsetting to students - -

MG: Oh!

VC: - - or the parents might be a little upset or something like that. And so, but she thought like she'd like to take a chance. And I told her, and Eli told her, you have a wonderful teacher and I think you should do it. And of course my brother, before I went to the school, when I left the Julliard School, my brother sat down with me one day, he said, I have to talk to you about something that I don't want you to feel bad about but I want you to consider - - because I used to like to go around and I never wore glasses or anything like that. So Bobby said to me, look, you're eyes are not grotesque, eh said, they're not grotesque looking, but they're not normal looking. He said, you have like a film covering [inaudible]. He said, I'm gonna tell you, he said, the eyes are very often a

very important contact for people. He said, I remember performing in Las Vegas, he said, and I could be way in the back of a performing place and watching Red Skeleton or anything like that, he said, and I could be very responsive to his eyes, see his eyes and be very responsive to what he's doing.

MG: Oh!

VC: He said, I think that if you wanna start working with people, he said, I think that you should have - - see, and I went to check out, 'cuz I had checked out at one time to see if I could get like a, you know, a prosthesis glass eye that would look normal, something like that.

MG: Oh!

VC: My right eye, where I first got sick with the pink eye and everything, that's dead, there wasn't anything they could do. My left eye is where I have the light perception, I said. The doctors said they would not do it because they said to give me something that would look normal in the left eye, they said, for you putting it and out you would irritate your cornea which is very weak and you possibly could destroy your light perception.

MG: Oh!

VC: So you know, I said so that would be out. So Bobby said, I think you should wear glasses, he said, because you have, he said you wanna be able to sell yourself to anybody and you don't want anybody distracted over your eyes so that they can't pay attention to you.

MG: Ha!

VC: He said, so you wanna remove that distraction. So I said, so that's what started me wearing the glasses and stuff like that. So - -

MG: And you picked the glamorous glasses [laughs].

VC: I tried. That's right [laughs]. I tried to do that. So anyway the thing is that - -

MG: I told her that my friend, when we went to see her in the Lenox Lounge, when she got up to sing, it was a microphone and so she kind of bumped the microphone. So Diedra said, didn't she see the microphone. And I was like oh, she's not sighted. And she was like, what?

VC: [laughs]

MG: I thought she was just wearing these dark glasses to look glamorous. She didn't have any clue until you got up.

[crosstalk]

MN: Now, did you get, did you have voice training at the institute or Julliard?

VC: No, I was a piano major and I didn't study voice. I only started studying voice about maybe, I would say maybe ten or eleven years ago when I dec - -

MG: Really? Is that when you started singing?

VC: That's when I started. Because everybody said, gee, you have a nice voice. I didn't know how to sing. I didn't know how to support my voice. I didn't know anything.

MN: That's amazing, so - -

VC: So, um, that's when I decided. You know, and everybody said, well, we'd like to hear you sing a little bit. So I, that's when I really started studying conscientiously.

MN: Jesus.

VC: I'm a late bloomer with everything, Mark.

MG: Right. But the late bloomers do just fine.

VC: [laughs]

MN: So what am I, what am I gonna learn to do now?

[crosstalk]

VC: So Mark, here's what happened. I got Eli to put in a good word for me. I got the job, okay? I got the job at the school. I did very well. And I was telling them earlier Maxine that I was making \$2.50 an hour - -

MG: Mmm!

VC: - - with two degrees from the Julliard School and damn glad to have it. And it was only a part-time job and no medical coverage or anything like that. And they were so pleased with my work at the school that Esther Kleinfeld wrote a letter to Helen Keller about my work at the school.

MG: Oh, get out of here!

VC: And Helen Keller wrote her back. You know, I have the letter somewhere, somewhere - -

MN: Jesus!

MG: [inaudible]

VC: And she wrote it and wanted to congratulate me for being, for doing such a wonderful job and congratulating the school for giving me the opportunity for doing - - it was wild.

MG: [laughs] Right?

VC: So anyway. So that's what happened. But it was later that, as I said, when we were in the pitch fever of the affirmative action business in the early '70's, and as I said to the guys earlier, like somebody who was at Bronx Community College said, you know, we'd like to try to get you in on affirmative action. So I knew that if I had the chance to teach at college or something like that it would be wonderful financial independence for me, plus the fact I knew I could do it, you know, there wasn't any question. So, as I said, I fit the bill. I was a woman, I was African American, I was physically disabled, quote, unquote - -

MN: Now this is the - -

MG: And you have better degrees than all the other people teaching there, thank you.

VC: [laughs] Thank you.

MN: But, but, so this is the early '70's?

VC: Yes.

MN: Now, had you started playing jazz by that time?

VC: Oh yeah! I was working all along and trying to get gigs but I was terrible.

MG: [laughs]

VC: I was awful. I was awf - - listen, anytime - -

MN: When was [laughs] - -

VC: Anytime you can play a gig with your brother, I'm talking about the early days - -

MG: [laughs]

VC: That's right. Anytime you play a gig with your brother, and Bobby's taking a solo and he's going [inaudible], and he takes his mouth off the horn and says, Val! Val! You know?

MG: [laughs]

VC: He wouldn't be laughing. I was all over his solo. Stumbled, mumbled, getting the way. I didn't know. I was terrible.

MG: [laughs]

MN: When was the first time you played with your brother?

VC: I don't remember Mark.

MN: Was it in the '60's?

VC: No, it was, it might have been late '60's, yeah, maybe late '60's.

MN: Okay. Right. Um, okay, one of the things, Maxine you want to do Bobby in a separate interview?

MG: Well, I have other things to say, go ahead.

MN: Okay go ahead. I'm, I've got my, I'm through for the moment.

MG: Uh huh. Okay, since we are the Bronx African American History Project, the school that you went to, the institute, what was it?

VC: The New York Institute for the Education of the Blind.

MG: Okay. That, was it [inaudible]?

VC: [inaudible].

MG: But was there one in Manhattan also - -

VC: No, no.

MG: - - that was the school.

VC: That was the school. Now there are a couple of schools for blind children. Lavelle, for example, that's a Catholic school. I don't quite remember where Lavelle is. I don't remember whether it's Westchester or further uptown in the Bronx. But those were the two schools.

MG: Uh huh.

MN: Right. And - -

MN: would you say that the other students, you know, in your class, the ones that you came up with, came out as independent and as committed?

VC: Yeah, I would say, yes they were. They all went in different directions. I - - there was only 10 people in my senior graduating class.

MG: I see.

VC: Five boys and five girls which was nice for marching down the aisle [laughs] you know? So, but yes. Anthony Santiago, for example, my friend, I've known him since we were 10 years old in fifth grade, he has 3 children and I'm spending Saturday with him because he, he was very smart. He went to the New School then he went to Columbia, he got - - he delved into social work, you know? And he was brilliant at it and he was for a very tiny, tiny, short time, an interim president of Hostos College.

MG: Wow.

VC: And I was so excited. I was out of town at the time and somebody sent me this paper. I was visiting Uncle David in Haiti and somebody sent me this letter with this article about the first time a blind person being President of a college in New York City. I

don't know why it lasted, it was interim, but very intelligent man, very intelligent. Well read, world experience traveling, a really wonderful guy. Richard Miller, he went into social work also. My best friend, Mary Anaratto, she wasn't college material, but she was a smart girl. We graduated on a Friday and the Monday she started a job at Equitable Life Insurance.

MG: wow.

VC: So these people all worked and had jobs and did very well for themselves.

MG: But they taught Braille there?

VC: Yes, yes!

MG: And they emphasized music?

VC: Well, let me say, they insisted that music had to be part of an overall well-rounded education, just like athletics, just like gym. Oh I hated gym.

MG: [laughs]

VC: Just like running, we had a track for runners and we had you know, squat thrusts and push ups, god! I hated the person that taught it. I hated it!

MN: [laughs]

VC: And so they [inaudible]. We had gym, music, everybody had to be in chorus, you know, they had to have a chorus. Many people, of course, didn't study instruments. But music was definitely - - somebody, everybody had some way of being in touch with music. Basically the chorus served that vehicle, you know? Or maybe a little jazz band, dance band [inaudible] - -

MG: Did any other professional musicians come out?

VC: Um, none of them that did what I did. There were some very good ones. A wonderful gentleman by the name of Patrick Peppy, Patrick Pep - - he got, I remember he got an award from President Kennedy for something. His work was teaching at Harvard Univeristy. And he was a very good pianist, didn't want to go into it as a career or anything like that, but there were some people who did very well, you know?

MN: Um, one question I wanted to ask you was, we talked a lot about the deter...you know, when Morrisania, the neighborhood started to deteriorate. Was that the reason your family moved from Union Avenue to Anthony Avenue, close to the Concourse? Do you remember conversations about things happening in your immediate neighborhood or?

VC: Yeah, I think that - - well, I'm gonna tell you the truth, Union Avenue, with all the things that was going around in the city, that was probably one of the safest places I ever lived in until I came here.

MN: Wow.

VC: You know, because it was a community. I could have white people coming to visit me. I remember Helena Zipkavitch, a wonderful lady. She taught at the Institute after I left. She was from Poland and lovely. And I remember something, somebody one day went up to her car or something like that, and was gonna do something, said, no you leave that alone because she's a friend of ours and she's visiting upstairs, you just leave that alone. Everybody, everybody looked out for each other in that neighborhood.

MN: That little - -

VC: That's the way it was. That's right, that whole block. We were family, you know?

MN: and that's interesting because there's been almost no abandonment in that little section.

VC: That's right.

MN: Ritter Place, all those little houses are still there.

VC: That's right. I went back there this summer just for nostalgia's sake. I had been in the hospital for a day and I went back there with my girlfriend. And I was so upset because I couldn't get into 1278 because they had like a door you had to, it was locked you know, and I just wanted to show Mary where my mailbox was and walk up to apartment 304 you know? But I couldn't do it. And I even went to 811 and I stood outside that door and I said this is the staircase that daddy carried me over and I was almost was gonna ring the bell but you know, in this day and age there's so many cooks, they wouldn't - - yeah, you lived here, listen get out of here, you know [laughs]?

MG: Yeah, right, right, right.

VC: Like that, so I didn't do that. So Mark, no. The thing that made us, the thing that was a must move for us was the 1818 Anthony Avenue. That was a very, very tough time for us because it began like my father had been, my father had been ill and he had a prostate operation, then there were some things and he had to have follow-up treatments and stuff and my mother, I would say, she um, she was, she was maybe about 3 or 4 years off from starting a downslide on dementia, you know?

MN: Oh boy.

MG: Mmm hmm.

VC: She wasn't that bad off yet but one of the things, one of the things that was bad is that there used to be a Jewish home for aged that was across the street from our thing and then they moved everybody out and then that became like a haven for junkies. And then across the street from that, and that's what you would see when you look out the window. And across the street from that was an abandoned apartment house where garbage was - -

MN: That was on Anthony Avenue?

VC: That's right, on 175th Street itself, just as you get to the corner of 175th Street and Anthony Avenue, you know? So you'd go up here to 175th Street and make a right turn - -

MN: So why did they move from Union to Anthony in the first place?

VC: Well, because we felt that maybe we wanted to upgrade our surroundings
[inaudible] - -

MN: Ah! So the idea was you're gonna move closer to the Concourse and that was a step up?

VC: No, just get a better apartment - -

MN: A better, a nicer, bigger apartment.

VC: - - a nicer apartment, that's what that was. But now Anthony Avenue, what was happening here is that my mother, of course, she went through a terribly depressing - - she would look out the window, she would get depressed, you know? And it was just not good. I had friends who would come up to see me, my friend [inaudible] who would come up in the morning on a Sunday to help me maybe with papers for school, who got stopped at the corner of Clay and Anthony by a guy with a knife in his hand in the

daylight, you know, and stuff, which made her nervous about coming up to the house.

And it just got worse and worse and with my mother looking out at the garbage piled up in that abandoned apartment house and the vacant Jewish home for the aged - -

MN: This is pretty near Claremont Park?

VC: No, no, this is on the - - I think Claremont Park is more West isn't it, in the Bronx?

MN: Um, Claremont Park is down by Webster Avenue.

VC: No, this is uh, this is further, this is just really close to the Concourse.

MN: Concourse, okay that's further West - -

VC: Oh, yeah - -

MN: Near the hospital, near Mount Lebanon?

VC: Well, Mount, let me see, Mount, let me see, Mount Lebanon, it's not quite there but it's close, it's only a couple of blocks.

MN: Okay, right.

VC: But it's further down. You walk down Anthony Avenue and it comes out on Tremont Avenue - -

MN: Okay.

VC: - - you know, Anthony and Tremont. So, you know what it is, it's up there - - if you go to Anthony Avenue and 175th and walk straight down to the, that's the apartment house, 1818.

MN: Right 1818, write that down.

MG: I wrote it down.

VC: That's right. If you make a left and walk to the corner, that's 176th. If you walk down there to the bottom, you're gonna be Webster Avenue and Tremont where the famous White Castle is - -

MN: Right.

MG: Uh huh.

VC: - - in the Bronx. That's, that gives you a pinpoint.

MN: Now, okay, now how long did your family live on Anthony Avenue?

VC: We lived on Anthony Avenue from - - we always lived long places [laughs] where, let me see, [mumbles and thinks to herself] um - -

[END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B] [BEGINNING OF TAPE 2 SIDE A]

MN: So we're talking, now, okay Maxine - -

MG: No, no go, I was just teasing you [laughs].

MN: No, so you were - -

MG: You know he does this right?

MN: So you're living on Anthony Avenue, you're teaching at the music school on Cruger Avenue - -

VC: I was- - Cruger was over by then.

MN: By then? Okay.

VC: Yeah, way, way over by then.

MN: So how were you, when you were living on Anthony Avenue when you first moved there, were you mainly supporting yourself through private lessons?

VC: No, by the time I was on Anthony Avenue I was at the college.

MN: Oh you were out the college?

MG: When did you begin?

VC: I began the college in the, I began the Fall of '71.

MN: Okay, sp you moved to Anthony - - when you started at the college you were still in Union Avenue?

VC: That's, no, let me see. I went - - when I started at the college I was on Anthony.

Remember, I left Union Avenue in 1967.

MN: Okay, so what were you doing, how were you supporting yourself in 1967?

VC: Good question. Nineteen - - oh, uh, let me see, was that the - - oh, I was teaching, let me see, oh, I was teaching, I had a couple of private students but then I was called in by the former director of the little neighborhood music school where I was who was now dean of the Manhattan School of Music and it turns out that they took about six, to their credit, six visually impaired students. Some were partially sighted, some were blind. And they were kind of running the game on the professors - -

MG: [laughs]

VC: - - about what they could do and couldn't do. And David remembered me and that's how I got on the faculty of the Manhattan School of Music.

MN: Oh!

MG: Oh!

MN: In 1967?

VC: That's right. In nineteen sixty, actually '67 and then into '68.

MN: Right.

VC: That's right. And these kids, I was there as a faculty advisor for them. So that's how I first got me foot in the door for the Manhattan School of Music and then, then I tried to see if I could do something about establishing, establishing a workshop, you know, a jazz workshop which I ultimately did. I was like the first to bring the jazz to the Manhattan School.

MG: Oh no kidding?

MN: Really?

VC: That's right. And so then I was doing that. So I was making a few pennies, not a lot, you know, because it was a part time job, just a couple of hours a week. So I was doing that and that's how that kind of kept me going until this partic - - and then, and then, while I was on the, while I was at the Manhattan School of Music I had an opportunity to take some Ed courses, um, because I thought it would be very important to get a New York City license to teach in the public schools. I just felt that anything that I had that would enable me to make a living was important. Maxine, this is why all those things I did took precedence to develop my piano playing.

MG: Right, right, right.

VC: you can't do it all, you know?

MG: Right, you can't do all of it, mm hmm.

VC: So anyway, that's why I was so bad for so long [laughs].

MG: [laughs]

VC: Anyway, so what happened here is that I being on the faculty now, teaching the jazz thing and still working with the visually impaired students as an advisor, I could take the Ed courses for free.

MG: Oh!

VC: And you can't apply for a license without having had the Ed courses and they didn't teach them at Julliard because Julliard said we don't teach teachers, we teach performers. So you couldn't get anybody with whom I graduated with at Julliard school had to go to Columbia Teachers College to get their Ed courses in order to make themselves eligible to teach in the public schools and get a license. So I said, let me take advantage of this. So I did and I got the credits and then I did all the things that I had to do and I wound up, for a semester, teaching at the High School of Music and Art.

MG: Oh!

MN: Wow!

VC: So I was there. So at the time I was teaching at the High School of Music and Art which was the Fall of '72, I was teaching at the High School of Music and Art everyday, I was teaching at the Manhattan School part-time and I was teaching in the evenings at Bronx Community College [laughs].

MG: Wow.

VC: So I was teaching all, all 3, I was working at all 3 schools that semester.

MN: And you would go by cab mainly from one place to another?

VC: Well, I would um, let me say that I would, um, how did - - because I was traveling with a cane by then. I would probably, I'd probably, I think what I might have done was

to go down to the Music and Art by cab from 1818 Anthony Avenue and from there I went to the Manhattan School of Music because that's an easy route. By then I had had my cane travel. And then from the - - so I would go to the Manhattan School of Music and then after the Manhattan School of Music I would then take a cab up to Bronx.

MG: Fabulous right?

MN: Mmm hmm.

MG: The, uh, how long did you stay at Bronx Community?

VC: I was at Bronx Community College from 1971 until 1995.

MG: Wow.

VC: Yeah, never thought I would be there that long because when I first went there I said, well, you know, this will be good because I'll be playing and I'll be performing and I won't - - but it turns out that I did wind up, and the thing that I'm so proud of at the school, I did good work there and they were very proud and very supportive of the things I did and I was happy I had an opportunity to advance there because I went in as an adjunct. And then I was an adjunct from the Fall of '71 until Spring of, until the end of the Spring of '78. In 19 - - let me, oh, I'm sorry, until Spring of 1979. No, let me do this again. I was an adjunct and then, I was an adjunct for a year, that's right. And then because of my, the work I'd done outside the school they made me assistant professor. Okay, so then I was assistant professor from about 1972 until the Fall of '79, the Fall of '7 - - Spring, oh! The Spring semester, the first semester of '79. And what brought that about is that Ween, George Ween produced, produced my Sing About Love Christmas Cantata at Carnegie Hall - -

MG: Oh!

VC: - - which was a big work, it's about a 3 hour work. I'm trying, I need lots of money to do it, trying to see what we can do this year. Max Roach, I remember he came, he was in the audience standing, [inaudible] and Max said, if you ever do this again I want a piece of the [inaudible].

MG: Oh!

VC: But we got rave reviews from every newspaper.

MG: Who commissioned the Cantata?

VC: Um, to tell you the truth, let me see now, I gotta really answer this. You know what, nobody commissioned it.

MG: You just [inaudible]?

VC: I knew, see I [inaudible] and I knew that I had something exciting that I could do with the Christmas story. And so, I started working on it - -

MG: Wow.

VC: - - and I'm gonna tell you something, it was a little after I'd been commissioned by the National Endowment to do Sojourner. And I did a thing on Sojourner Truth. This was in my revelation, when I suddenly discovered what it was to be an African American and all the great people.

MG: [laughs]

MN: [laughs]

VC: [laughs] And she was my beginning, in the personal contact, you know? But anyway, the thing is, I did get a couple of little grants from the National Endowment to

help me with expenses for Sing About Love, but I'll tell you one thing, the Sing about Love premier was December 22, 1924 - - [laughs] 1972, '74, '74! I'm sorry. And my brother had passed away just that Spring.

MN: No.

MG: [sighs]

VC: Yeah, passed away just that Spring and I had this wonderful saxophone thing that Bobby was gonna play and he wasn't there to do it. And I have to tell you something, my brother Bobby and my cousin Tommy and I, we used to get together Thanksgiving time and when we got to be, this is kind of grim but when we got to be in our teens and we'd get together down the house and the grandparents and stuff, there'd be less and less people each year, you know?

MG: Uh huh.

VC: So we'd started talking about, we'd laugh, you know, it wasn't funny funny but, and then I remember Bobby said, well I'll tell you this much, whenever, when I go or when you go, let's see, we are not going to worry about tears about each other or something, we're gonna take that energy and put it into something positive, you know? So now, my brother and I were very, very close - -

MG: Yeah.

VC: - - and so Bobby died February 25, 1974. And I knew I was going to be doing Sing about Love. And Sing about Love was actually first performed at the Central Presbyterian Church because St. Peter's was getting a renovation - -

MG: Oh! Uh huh.

VC: - - and they couldn't do it there. And we - - it was magic. It was in the church and the whole place was fired up. And it was with a band and everything. I'm so proud of that and I - -

MG: do you have a recording?

VC: I have the lousiest - - listen, I never have any money to do anything and do any - - if I had a decent recording, like you know, things would be so different. It's one of the reasons why I was so grateful when I asked George and I begged George, I said look, I worked with him for four years, I would like to do this at Carnegie, please give me the opportunity to do this. Because I had done some things for the Newport Jazz thing and gotten good reviews and so I said, please, look, I'll sell the tickets and I'll have advance sales on it during the summer, you know - - well he did go - - well every newspaper, the Times, the Post, the Daily News, they said, "wonderful Christmas fair to be done every year." They talked about so forth and so on. And so that was exciting in '78. So on that basis of that success I got the promotion to associate professor with the work that I'd been doing. Now meanwhile, going back to Bobby, when he passed away, I was really, I was very sad. Thanks to Bobby, I wasn't living with my parents, we were in 18. I was living with my parents in apartment 7H, no, 7M, 7M. And my brother said, you're grown, you should have your own apartment, you can afford your own apartment. Get and apartment, you know, you don't need to be living with your parents. So anyway, my parents were in Haiti visiting my uncle and I got this apartment on the fifth floor, I was in 5H, really not - - well when my parents came home [laughs] and found out that I had

gotten an apartment, I was only on 2 floors below them, you'd think I moved to Washington state or something like that - -

MG: [laughs]

VC: - - why did you do that when we were away? Do you think that would - - I said, I thought it was easier. Well I'm grateful to Bobby for doing that because it means that it would have been tough for me to be living up there with them at the time my brother died, you know? And then it would have been tough for me living there with my mother at the time my father died.

[phone rings]

VC: you know, it was just, it was kind of tough. So she was used to being in that apartment by herself.

[phone continues to ring]

VC: And I had my own private grief with Bobby because it was terrible to see how they suffered when their son died. You know, it was just - - I remember the [inaudible].

Sharon was in the bed, we had seen him the day before, he was in intensive care. We had hoped he was getting a little better. And when they said, you know, that Bobby, I had to go upstairs to tell my mother. And I went up to the - -

[answering machine goes off]

[beeping noise]

VC: - - Dawn, Mark, could you grab that for me?

MN: Oh, where is it?

VC: It's in the kitchen, that's alright, in the - -

[pause in tape]

[tape resumes]

VC: - - my entire life.

MG: and you only did it two times?

VC: We, well we did, it was done in Cleveland - -

MG: Oh!

VC: - - a couple of years later with rave reviews again.

MN: Sing about Love this is called.

VC: Sing about Love, the Christmas cantata, that's right. It starts with the visitation of Gabriel to Mary, you know, and that's kind of like a prologue, and then - - anyway!

MG: [chuckles]

VC: The thing is that - - and it's eclectic because it's not like all gospel, there was gospel in it when I needed it for color you know? And then there's the jazz, big jazz band and anyway.

MG: How many pieces in it?

VC: Well the band was about um, I would say, the band maybe when we added the Latin instruments, the band basically was like the 19 piece jazz band, you know, then we had congas, bongos - -

MN: Congas! Oh!

VC: Mmm hmm. And Mongo, Mongo played the uh congas in the 1978 performance and Sly Hampton performed it and Donald Byrd - -

MG: Oh!

VC: - - and I was saying that Dizzy was going to do it. He was in Europe and I had asked him to do it and he called me and he said, listen, I will do it - - no, I asked him would he do it and he said yes. He went over to Europe and then he called me and he said, I won't get there in time. But he has committed himself to do it because there were areas where they could do blues and things like that where he wouldn't have to worry about - -

MN: Is there any recording of this anywhere?

VC: Yes, there's some terrible stuff but I can let you hear some of it. Sure. And I'm gonna work very hard enough to get a performance [inaudible].

MN: We gotta get this done.

MG: Mmm hmm.

MN: Angela O'Donnell.

MG: Yeah, yeah.

MN: We gotta talk to her about it.

MG: It would be perfect at Fordham, don't you think?

VC: Wonderful, it would be wonderful because - -

MG: Are there voices too?

VC: Of course, yes. Chorus and soloists and everything, yeah.

MG: Did you ever know Mary Lou Williams?

VC: I never met her, can you imagine? But I feel close to her because I did go down and perform at the Mary, the Kennedy Center. And it was funny, I was the only one on stage that had not met Mary Lou, you know? But it was wonderful. You know, I have great admiration for that woman and so forth and so on, so, and her musicianship - -

MN: When did you start composing for the first time?

VC: Okay, that's an easy, that's an easy answer and um, I always knew I could compose but I was interested in playing the piano, okay? So the first thing, the first time that I really composed that meant something, I mean if I - - when I was in Julliard, if we had a composition assignment, it was a snap, you know? I could do that, do it in my sleep. And I was - - so I, you know, so I mean I knew it was something I could do so I just took it for granted. But the first time that I started moving in an area where I was doing something seriously like as a composer was because of Bobby. Bobby, when he [laughs], when he first got the job with Mongo Santamaria, back in the '60's, just a little before Watermelon Man, okay, he was on that recording, and - -

MN: He's on Watermelon Man?

VC: Yes is he is, and I was - -

MN: Jesus Christ.

VC: - - and I was, I was um, I was in bed. We were living at Union Avenue, 1278 Union Avenue, I was in bed, and Bobby wakes me up. He says, come on, I need your Julliard head, you know?

MG: [chuckles]

VC: So we went into the bathroom. And in the bathroom he pulled the toilet seat down, sat on top of it and we had one of those old fashioned tubs with the kind of rounded edge, you know, on it?

MG: Uh huh.

VC: And I sat on that. He said, I can't get these Latin rhythms. He said, I see them written down here, he said, I gotta have this job, I gotta have this job! Let's, I'm gonna give you the rhythms and the - - he said, this is - - you know, the Latin Rhythms are - - I mean those folk rhythms that those people play naturally, the notation is a ball buster. You know, it's a mind blower. So he said, okay, now this is an eighth that's tied over to a dotted eighth and then it's followed by a dotted quarter. And we're going, [imitates rhythms of notes] - -

MG: [laughs]

VC: [laughs] You know, we're doing like this, yeah that's it! [imitates rhythm of notes] And then we take another one and we do it and we'd be doing this, we must have been in the bathroom for about 2 hours - -

MG: Wow.

VC: - - going, oh he's like, I gotta get this job. Well, of course, once he got that, we did that then, he had it. And once he played it it was nothing anymore because it was just natural. It was like breathing. But to see those rhythms on paper blew his mind. So he played with Mongo for several, several years. Oooo, I have a piece of a tape from an Andy Williams show that Marty Shellers sent me that they did in nineteen, oh god - - they were flown out by the guy Dave Gruson who directed the Andy Williams show. They were flown out there to do the show on a Monday night and they were opening the next night at [inaudible]. You can see how - - and there was Bobby and Hubert and Mongo and Rogers Grant and all that sort of stuff. And they were there and they performed with Andy Williams and I have the video of it.

MG: Oh great.

VC: Yeah, I have the video. And they played - - and of course, of all things that they felt would be the best for people around the country to hear, they El Torro, my piece, you know? So Bobby said, write something for Mongo. I said, okay. So I wrote something [laughs] for Mongo and it was El Torro. It was one of Mongo's biggest hits. They played it everywhere.

MG: Yeah.

VC: Other people recorded it. George Shearing once called me from California and said, they're playing El Torro everywhere.

MN: Do we have, do you have a copy here?

VC: Somewhere, but I can get them for you.

MG: Oh I have it. I have it.

VC: Maxine will give it to you.

MG: Sure, sure.

VC: No in the mean - -

MG: We know that tune right Dawn?

DR: Yeah, I do.

MG: Yeah, sure.

VC: It's kind of bluesy type to it.

MG: Uh huh.

VC: I've even thinking about re-defining it for my next CD, you know, maybe bring it up to - -

MG: Good.

VC: - - 2006 or something. But now Bobby - -

DR: I heard it on [inaudible] a couple of days ago.

VC: Oh! Oh!

DR: And what's her name, Awilda Rivera - -

VC: Awilda Rivera, yes.

DR: - - because somebody requested it.

VC: Really?

DR: Yes.

VC: Get out of here! So Bobby, so now Bobby, on the 45, the Watermelon 45, Bobby's tune, "Don't Bother Me No More" - -

MG: Uh huh, right.

VC: - - is on the backside, okay? He wrote it because [laughs] Benita, his first wife, caught them one day when they were in a compromising situation and she was always fussing at him so he wrote this tune, "Don't Bother Me No More." [laughs]

MG: [laughs]

VC: Anyway, it was on the backside of "Watermelon Man" and he made a pile because every time somebody bought a 45 - -

MG: Yeah, he got paid.

VC: - - he got paid you know?

MG: Right, right.

VC: And uh, so that was um, you know, so that was um - - and my parents. My mother and father, they were just so proud of anything that their children did and “Watermelon Man” was so popular we could be on a bus and it was summertime and the windows would be open and you’d hear “Watermelon Man” coming from everywhere. My mother just got hysterical. She would start laughing and she couldn’t stop.

[laughter]

VC: Alvin, Alvin there it is! And then Daddy would start, I said, c’mon you guys. And then they would just - - it’s like one night we were at Birdland and Bobby was playing with Mongo opposite of Herbie Hancock and Daddy came down. And so we were sitting at a table and what happened is that Daddy and Bobby for some reason got eye contact.

And Daddy would always be so proud of anything we do that he’d just kind of smile and chuckle, you know? Well when he got eye contact with Bobby on stage there, Bobby started laughing, then Daddy started laughing. And Bobby was upset he couldn’t play

[laughs].

MG: [laughs]

VC: You know they were in the midst of playing. And mother said, Alvin you two ought to be ashamed of yourselves [laughs]. I said, daddy stop looking at him he’s got to play [laughs] you know, so anyway. But it was a very exciting time for us because he did that.

But Bobby is the reason for that. And then after that I would arrange and write for other people and I don’t know if you’ve ever heard of John Motley, for example, who handled the All City Chorus for many, many years in their heyday, and he had me writing and commissioning - -

[phone rings]

VC: Oh! Commissioning many times to - -

[pause in tape]

[tape resumes]

VC: [inaudible] is probably much more interesting. I mean this is kind of - -

MG: No, no, no.

MN: Uh - -

MG: No Valerie, this is not true. Let me ask you something, you remember Bobby talking about Hugo Dickens?

VC: Yes.

MG: Did you ever meet him, do you recall?

VC: I'm sure I did.

MG: You don't recall.

VC: I'm sure I did. I don't remember the moment but I met all the guy that they were - -

MG: Because Rogers Grant - -

VC: Yes of course.

MG: - - was there. Phil Newsum - -

VC: Of course!

MG: You remember Phil?

VC: Yes! Yes. I do specifically remember him and I'm sure Hugo - -

MG: He loves Bobby.

VC: Ohh, yes.

MG: I mean everybody you know, would rave about Bobby.

VC: Yes, yes.

MG: And did you know Pete LaRocca?

VC: Oh! Of course, of course. Pete did a couple of workshops for me when I first started teaching, you know, when I was doing some - - yes, all those [inaudible].

MG: See this is very interesting because this connection, even though Hugo Dickens is not from the Bronx, they're from Harlem - -

VC: Yes, yes.

MG: - - there's a Bronx connection because - -

VC: That's correct.

MG: - - of the musicians who crossed from the - -

VC: That's correct.

MG: - - Barry Rogers.

VC: Barry Rogers, of course!

MG: You remember him?

VC: Of course.

MG: Because he was from the Bronx and - -

VC: There you go.

MG: - - [inaudible].

VC: You remember somebody like, Sir Harvel?

MG: Yeah!

VC: I haven't thought about him in years and - -

MN: He had lined at - -

MG: At the Blue Morocco.

MN: But also at Goodson's.

VC: Oh.

MG: Oh. Well I knew he was in the Morocco.

VC: He used to play at Freddy's. Didn't he play organ and [inaudible] piano?

MN: I mean at Freddy's. I'm sorry, at Freddy's.

MG: Uh huh, organ and piano.

VC: Yeah because Kenny's had an organ and he used to play in there.

MN: Okay, where was Kenny's?

VC: Kenny's was around Prospect and uh, Prospect Avenue and Crotona Parkway so - -

MN: Okay, so that was all the way up. Now when did Kenny's open?

VC: I have no idea but when I lived at Union Avenue I used to be able to walk to that gig.

MN: Okay because nobody, you're the first person who mentioned Kenny's as a jazz venue.

VC: Oh yes, absolutely!

MN: And this was, this was near Crotona Park?

VC: Yeah, Prospect Avenue, absolutely.

MN: Right by the park. Was it north of Boston Road?

VC: Let me think, was it north of Boston Road? Uh - -

MN: Or at the corner of Boston Road?

VC: Maybe not too far from Boston Road.

MN: Okay.

MG: Did you play there?

VC: Yeah! That was my first jazz gig [laughs].

MG: Oh!

VC: Kenny's.

MN: Did it have another name?

VC: No, it was Kenny's.

MN: It was called Kenny's.

VC: Kenny's, Freddy's, you know, they were all there.

MG: What kind of piano did they have?

VC: They had a grand piano. I don't remember what variety it was but they had a grand piano, and they had an organ, you know?

MN: This is, so this is - - and how many people roughly could sit, would be held in Kenny's?

VC: Oh god, um, they would probably be able to hold a little more than the Morocco. Morocco was a little more spacious, you know, it was kind of open more. Kenny's, I would say - - but that was not bad, they used to serve dinner there I think too, or something. Um, Mark, you know, I'm not sure, but more than 25 [inaudible]. More than 50 I'm sure.

MN: Okay, okay because I'm - -

MG: And when would you play there, on weekends?

VC: Weekends, that's right, Fridays and Saturdays, that's right.

MN: Now would you play solo there or - -

VC: No, I was playing with a trio.

MN: With a trio?

VC: That's right.

MN: Your own trio?

VC: That's right.

MN: Now when did you first play with your own trio?

VC: That was the time.

MN: And this was when you were still at Union Avenue since the mid '60's?

VC: That's right, that's right.

MN: So you were playing jazz gigs in the neighborhood and anywhere else at that time?

VC: I was playing here or there, pretty much there, pretty much there.

MN: So Kenny's was - -

VC: [inaudible] because you remember I told you, I really honestly really wasn't that good at that time.

MG: [laughs]

VC: I was struggling. I was struggling to find - - I was happy that they would let me play there because a lot of the jazz musicians did play. And the guys would come in to hear me and the moment I found out that a Larry Willis or somebody was in the house then I'd fall apart because I was so nervous and so scared and felt so insecure.

MN: So that - -

MG: Larry Willis lived in the Bronx?

VC: I don't think so. I heard he might have for a little while, I don't know. But - -

MN: So that, Kenny's was your spot when you started performing?

VC: That's correct.

MN: Okay.

MG: Who played with you?

VC: Oh, a gentleman by the name of Charlie Hawkins. Arnie, I'm sure Arnie might have mentioned Charlie because Charlie Hawkins was the drummer all the time at the Blue Morocco with Artie.

MG: Okay. I think he did mention him.

MN: This is with Arthur Jenkins?

VC: Yes he played with Arthur.

MN: He was also a Union Avenue person.

VC: Right across the street from me! Artie, I was 1278 and Artie was, what is it, 1290.

MN: That was Union Avenue.

[crosstalk]

VC: That's right, that's right.

MN: Now he remembers - -

MG: Wait, who was the bass player?

VC: Oh, the bass player was a guy named John Daley.

MN: [laughs]

MG: Okay. Okay.

MN: Now do you remember the sounds coming out of the Royal Mansion?

VC: No. I was never there.

MN: Uh huh, because that influenced Arthur a lot.

VC: Well I wouldn't be surprised because Artie just went everywhere and checked out everything there. Remember, those were still my classical days, you know, yeah.

MN: Ah, okay. Um, okay, um - -

MG: You wanna stop now?

MN: Yeah.

MG: When we do the second interview - -

[END OF INTERVIEW]