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Capers, Valerie Interview 2

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Transcriber: Laura Kelly

[BEGINNING OF TAPE 1 SIDE A]

Mark Naison (MN): - - the Bronx, New York on January 18, 2007. We're at the home of the great jazz pianist, composer, and educator, Valerie Capers and this is our second interview for the Bronx African American History Project and our lead interviewer will be our jazz researcher, Maxine Gordon.

Maxine Gordon (MG): Okay, thank you very much. The reason that - - oh I won't look into the camera. The reason that we're doing the second interview with you Valerie is that well, you're so fascinating [chuckles].

Valerie Capers (VC): I just talk so much [laughs], last time you didn't get everything.

MG: But also because I'm very interested in your career, you have several careers, but in your career as a musician and composer, but I'm also interested in your brother, - -

VC: Yes.

MG: - - in Bobby Capers.

VC: Oh yes.

MG: And I'm interested in him because he's such an important figure in the history of jazz in the Bronx - -

VC: Yes, yes.

MG: - - and jazz in the world but particularly in the Bronx.

VC: In the Bronx, yes.

MG: His name comes up in every interview - -

VC: Wow.

MG: - - that we do.

VC: I'm thrilled to hear that, I'm really thrilled to hear that.

MG: But, you know, unfortunately, he's not here to speak for himself so we're very lucky to have you to speak for him and to speak about him. And then from that we'll pursue other people, Marty Sheller, other people who were close to him to talk about him because eventually when we write about jazz in the Bronx of course, we want to include you and Bobby, so.

VC: Oh [inaudible].

MG: So we're gonna first start first by talking about you. In the last interview, you mentioned your, one of your early gigs in the Bronx which was in the club called--

VC: Uh, the club called Kenny's.

MG: Kenny's?

VC: Yes, yes.

MG: And Professor Naison put that information up, you know, sent an e-mail to everybody saying did anybody remember Kenny's? Did you get those e-mail's?

VC: I did and not only that - -

MG: [laughs]

VC: - - but when I got an e-mail saying that Antoinette Brown had responded and told him that Kenny's was one of the foremost places. It was at Prospect Avenue and Boston Road, I remember I could walk from 1278 Union Avenue, where I lived, between Freeman Street and Ritter Place, I could walk to the gig from my house. And it's funny that Antoinette Brown, she's a, I know she won't mind me saying this, she's just a couple

of years older than I am, and she used to, her mother and my mother were friends and she used to come up and pick me up on Fridays from the Institute for the Blind to bring me home on the weekends because I lived there during the week. And so she would bring me home because Bobby wasn't quite old enough to talk on that responsibility, he did a little bit later on. But uh, so when Mark mentioned Antoinette, I immediately called her up because - -

MG: Oh!

VC: - - the last time I saw her was recently at some place I played and we were so happy to see each other and she was so happy to hear from me and I said, I said you spoke about Kenny's! She said, of course I did you know? She said Kenny's was one of the places, I remember many a time going to Kenny's and hearing some wonderful music. And then she mentioned this man, Sir Harvel, and I haven't thought about that name in a thousand years, but he was one of the names that was a very busy musician in the Bronx when I was coming along as a teenager.

MG: Yes, his name comes up often because he played at Sylvia's also.

VC: Oh okay.

MN: And at Freddie's.

MG: And at Freddie's.

VC: And at Freddie's! Yes, boy, you talk about a hole in the wall. Now there was a place, very narrow, really dingy and dark and beat up with just a long bar, no amenities or anything, but they were thriving and they were right across the street from the Blue Morocco - -

MG: Oh.

VC: - - which was the other end of the you know, the other end of the night scene. There was a spacious, nice tables, and a nice place for the band to play and they provided a lot of wonderful entertainment on Saturdays.

MG: Do you remember how [clears throat] - - what years did you, or what year did you work in Kenny's, do you recall?

VC: Gosh, yes. It was late, It was around, actually it was around maybe '65 or '66.

MG: Mmm hmm. Do you remember how you got the job?

VC: I don't quite, no. I really don't quite remember. All I remember is going there to play and being scared out of my mind all the time [laughs] you know, and nervous. And if musicians would come in that I knew and respected at all, I was a mess. I was just terrified because I was still in the process of trying to find my way jazz-wise, you know? And all my life I had just been playing Bach and Beethoven and Mozart and all that sort of stuff. And I, you know, I was trying to find my way and it was very hard. And then when I finally got a job to play, I played with two very nice guys, Charlie Hawkins, he played at the Blue Morocco with Artie Jenkins, that was his - -

MG: Oh, mmm hmm.

VC: - - Artie Jenkins and Charlie Hawkins and uh - - Charlie Hawkins was the drums, yeah, and Artie had different bass players. I had a gentleman by the name of John Daley who played bass with me. And so we were there, you know, we were there playing and I was really trying to, as I say, get my wings so to speak, and it was another musical experience totally different from playing a concert, you know, classical music, and I

would practice at home trying to get everything together and [laughs] then when I got out there I was so - - it wasn't like playing for the Four Walls. And the whole pace, the whole rhythm of playing and creating your own music spontaneously was a different kind of life than sitting down and playing the notes that you knew were coming when you were interpreting a piece by Mozart, you know, or Beethoven. You knew what was coming next you know, and so forth and so - - so it was another, it was another thing and that's one of the reasons why John Coltrane will always be my great spiritual mentor because, I don't if I mentioned this to you before, when I was trying to find my way, I would, you know, I put on records with Dizzy and Charlie Parker and Trane and Miles and those people. And you'd listen to Dizzy and Charlie Parker and, as I said, for me they were already on Mount Olympus. I mean, I heard all this stuff and I kept saying, I can't play like that. I can barely, my ear can barely catch all the notes, everything they're doing. Then I started listening to Trane. Trane way back when he was with Miles and when he did other things. And I would listen to Trane-- this was like now 1960 we're talking about. I would listen to Trane and I would listen to Trane through the 50's and low and behold, I was so thrilled because in hearing Trane's playing, not that Trane wasn't great in '53 or '52, because he was, but the thing is that I heard growth in Trane's playing, you know? He had grown tremendously from '53 - -

MG: [inaudible]

VC: That's right and then in 1960 - -

MG: Right.

VC: - - when Giant Steps came out. Now, Dizzy, and I'm not-- of course Dizzy and Charlie Parker, they don't stay still. They develop, they grow. Of course Parker died along the way so forth and so. But the thing is that they were so highly developed in what they did, it was such perfection, it was such a high level that whatever growth there was in their playing, I'm sure there was, I couldn't hear it because everything was just so enormous from the get go you know?

MG: Yeah, by the time they recorded they were already.

VC: That's it, that's right. So Trane, I mean, I said, well if I can hear this in this great genius, there must be room for me to improve you know? So that's what really spurred me on. And I'll tell you, I've never experienced anything as exciting as when Giant Steps came out in 1960 because I, you couldn't go down the street - - people stopped you like it was the front page news, you know? Artie Jenkins went walking by, man, did you hear, oh man. So I said, I went to the store, they're all out. John says I know, Bobby says, I put in an order, you know and so forth. They would just stop each other in the street to talk about with such joy and excitement about what Trane had done with Giant Steps, you know? And I remember that and I would be with Bobby a lot and it was, it was just amazing. I've never seen any one particular album, you know, like I know, for example, they say Miles's Birth of the Cool is probably the largest selling jazz album. And, but, and it's wonderful but it was like a revolution when Trane came out with Giant Steps. So that was an exciting time, that was an exciting time. So I, so I forgot the question [laughs].

MG: No, no, no, stay. Let's keep going.

VC: But it was a special time for me and as I said, learning to play jazz and to play it out, I mean I really didn't get to a point where I could handle myself I would say until maybe the nineteen, the 1980's.

MG: Really?

VC: I was still scared. You know, I was working, I was teaching, it was very important to me to be independent financially from my parents and I had my own life and I made a tremendous success with my teaching after school. And, as I said, I went in as an adjunct and when I left I was a full professor and I've been chairman of the department for about 7 or 8 years. So I worked very hard at that and those were the things that I had to put in most of my time. And so the practicing and the gigging and stuff, the kind of thing that I should have been doing maybe 60, 70, 80 percent of my time, I wasn't. So as a result of that, my progress, my progress wasn't, um, wasn't as quick, you know? My maturity in playing took me, I would say, twice as long as it would if I was just playing regularly. And also, the idea of performing and performing jazz with any kind of confidence also was something I didn't get really until the mid '80's and probably the early 90's. Finally by that time I had stuff under my belt, I was more confident, I was really a mature, a mature player by then. But I struggled and suffered with so many insecurities and so many things that pulled me away from developing myself as I might have had I not been concerned about making a living and had I not really been good at teaching and putting my whole self into it, you know?

MG: Did Bobby encourage you to move from classical to jazz?

VC: Oh boy. Yes, yes he did. He encouraged - -

MG: He'd nag you and - -

VC: Oh he wolfed at me, he was so mean and nasty.

MG: [laughs]

VC: And you know, it was unbelievable.

MG: How much younger is he? Four years?

VC: Four years, yes.

MG: Uh huh.

VC: I loved, I tell ya, I loved my brother dearly. I owe him for so many things. I owe him for the fact that I moved out of my parent's home before daddy died. And he was saying, get up, you're a grown woman now, you're 40 years old, you ought to have your own place, you know how brothers do. And I got out and it was a good thing. And I got out before Bobby died and I got out before daddy died. And I was so glad because both of those deaths, my brother was just something that, it's still something with me, you know? And I think about it and I still get tears in my eyes. But, so I was out of the house when Bobby died and that was good. I was out of the house when daddy died. My mother had been going to the hospital everyday and so she was used to being in the house by herself because I just - - my parents and my family were such - - if I stayed there I probably would have wound up, I know this sounds old fashioned, being a spinster or something. I would have felt the obligation not to leave my mother, you know, and do all these things. And that was the same thing with the music. Bobby said, you are an African American woman. We have the most wonderful music, wonderful most contribution to

art and America and you have to get involved and so I said okay. Now mind you, I already graduated from Julliard, I had two degrees - -

MG: [laughs]

VC: - - bachelors and a masters degree. And so he said, and I couldn't play blues worth a damn.

MG: [laughs]

VC: And I would be practicing Bach everyday and I'd be practicing you know, Chopin, Beethoven, all this sort of stuff and maybe spend about half an hour or something on blues [laughs]. So Bobby would come around and says, did you do some practicing today? And I said, yeah I did [inaudible]. What did you do and blah, blah, blah? And what about... I said, well I did practice some blues. And he said, how long did you practice blues? I said, oh maybe about 45 minutes. Oh, you're never gonna make it on that! He said, you gotta make up your mind, you're gonna have to do it, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. And so finally I suddenly realized well maybe he's right. But how am I gonna get started? I'll always be so grateful to Artie Jenkins for example.

MG: Oh!

VC: Because Artie lived right across the street from me and he and Bobby were close and they played a lot together. And so I asked Artie one day and I was always, you know, that's the Julliard system of Bobby Capers you know? So Artie would come over and one afternoon I said, please do me a favor, I said, just play. I said, just play me some tunes. And every time he played, let's say, a chord that I like, because I have good ears you know? And every time he played me a chord I liked I said, stop, let me hear this chord,

and he played this and then he played something else. And we spent a whole afternoon. And I gleaned really a lot of stuff from him. And that started me on my way. And then they, you know, they got a lot of books and tapes and CD's and all minus one type things, all kinds of things now that they didn't have when I was coming along. But even at that, I said, now how am I gonna learn to improvise? Dizzy and Charlie, when they played fast, they played so fast, I can't catch it all. So Artie said to me, well you know what we do, we take the LP and we play it at sixteen and a quarter. And he said, when you do that, he said, you'll hear everything in the same key but a couple of octaves lower, and sure enough that's what happened. Then I began to hear the notes, one following the other, memorized some and then started playing them for exercises and [inaudible] - -

MG: Right.

VC: - - and different things.

MG: That's so good.

VC: But at that point I still couldn't play the blues [laughs]. And so um, I remember one day I was sitting on the, I was so upset, I went to the bathroom, I was practicing and I had the seat down and I was sitting up there just boo-hoo'ing you know, and Bobby came along to see my parents, I was living with them then. And he came along and he said, what's the matter with you? I said I can't play the blues.

MG: [laughs]

VC: He said, well you're not gonna learn playing one when you're sitting in here [laughs]. So anyway, the thing that opened it up for me, for the blues, you would have thought it might be Oscar Peterson or something but - - because I love Oscar and I like

the things that he does, love the things he - - but the person that opened it up for me, the blues was Les McCann.

MG: Oh yeah.

VC: Okay because see, Les Mc, Les McCann, he is what he is so to speak [laughs] you know?

MG: That's right. [inaudible] blues.

VC: That's right. He's blues and funk.

MG: Right.

VC: Straight blues and funk.

MG: Right.

VC: And that's everything he does. So I began to listen and I heard intervals. I heard the blues colors and ornaments that he was playing. Well we call them ornaments in Baroque music. But the blues colors and sounds that he was playing. I said, hey I could, you know, I got that and that's the thing that opened up blues for me.

MG: Good.

VC: All of a sudden. I'll always be grateful to Les McCann for that because it did, it opened me up. It opened me up. And then um, so I started working on that and Bobby, Bobby would come in and he once gave me a gig with him. And uh, [laughs], that was a mistake. So he gave me a gig with him and I didn't know the art of [inaudible] and playing behind musicians and you know, that's a great thing to be able to do. You can't get in the way and you've got to mesh with the other rhythm guys and so forth and so on and I mean I was just everywhere when he was trying to play a solo. And he was playing

and he took a breath and he just turned his head to me and says lay out [laughs]. So I laid out. But it was a rough - - and he always knew and felt I could do it. I remember one day he came in and I was looking at, "Around Midnight," and I don't know, maybe this is my classical mentality but you know, when you're studying classical music, singers will tell you and also pianists too unless they are child prodigies and I wasn't, I was really smart and I loved to study and I loved to work and that's what got me over. I didn't mind pushing and studying and all this stuff. Um, some pieces, some compositions and some or let's, let's say, in opera, people won't tackle until they really musically seasoned and mature enough to do it. And every once in a while I would take a look "Around Midnight" at Monk's and two things [inaudible] that really, that really kept me doing anything about it for a while was E flat minor, six flats. So that was, I said, my god E flat minor. So then, the other thing was that I recognized in this composition of Monk's which is quite, you know, "Around Midnight" and let's say Stray Horn's "Lush Light."

MG: Yeah.

VC: There's nothing like them in all of music. There's nothing like those compositions. They're extraordinary, they're unique and very special. So I was working on, I said, oh my god. So Bobby came in. I was living at 18, I had my own apartment by then and he came in and wanted to know how I was doing. I said, I'm working on Midnight. He said, you are? And I said, yes. He said, it sounds to me like you're playing it in F minor. I said, well I am, that's 4 flats, I said, you know, that's a nice comfortable key. So he said, mm hmm [laughs]. So I said - - because you know, there are lots of tunes you can play in any key.

MG: Uh huh!

VC: Whatever sounds good. That's one of the ones - -

MG: You have to play in [inaudible], right.

VC: - - [laughs] and I know you know what I'm talking about.

MG: [inaudible] have to learn that for the movie right?

VC: Right. That's right. So I said, so I said, well what's the matter with that. He said, well the key, it's written in E flat. I said, E flat minor, I said I know that, that's six flats. He said, so what? I said that's a hard key! He said, so what. So I said, do I have to play it? This is how he left me that day. So he opens the front door. And I said, Bobby do I have to play it in E flat minor? He said, no, but everybody else does! And with that he shut the door [laughs].

MG: [laughs]

VC: That was the end of that you know? But Bobby, Bobby was a very gifted and talented musician. Um, when he was at P.S. 63, Mark probably knows whether it still exists.

MN: Yep, it certainly does on Boston Road and 168th Street.

VC: And he was there. Oh, that's right, that's right, near McKinley Square.

MN: McKinley Square.

VC: So he, he was there and one of the teachers called my mother and father over and they said, your son is very bright and is extremely intelligent and very talented and I think that you should get him out of this school and get him into another area. So because, you know, getting into those schools depends on where you live. So my mother

had a very dear, dear friend with whom she grew up and they lived in Williamsbridge and so they worked out Bobby giving them that address you know, for going to school. And at that time, where he went, and it's not the school that it is now, he went to Olinville Junior High. And that was one of the cream of the crop, you know the cream of the crop in the Bronx at that time when Bobby went. We're talking about like you know, late '40's, early '50's. It was a wonderful school. And there Bobby had an opportunity to really to blossom and to develop out. He was studying with one of the local piano teachers, he was taking, um, taking clarinet, I forgot this guy, oh Bobby loved this clarinet teacher. He was taking clarinet and it was at Olinville Junior High that Bobby, um, that Bobby got you know, took the exam and got accepted to the High School of Music and Art. And Bobby was a freshman in high school, music and art, and he was first clarinetists, that's how good he was. He was really extraordinary. And, um, he, you know, there he met a lot of the guys that he subsequently played with later. He was an excellent student, he was wonderful. And while he was at the High School of Music and Art, Bobby was playing classical music, both classical piano and classical clarinet. And then he discovered the saxophone and thanks to the generosity of people like Lou Donaldson and Frank Foster who always had time to spend - -

MG: Oh really?

VC: - - with these young guys, showing them things and encouraging things and he used to drive my parents crazy because - -

MN: Where did he meet Lou Donaldson?

VC: That I don't know Mark.

MG: Maybe at Freddie's.

VC: Maybe at Freddie's or maybe at some club you know?

MG: Uh huh.

VC: And when they would talk he would come get - - probably some club because he would come home and say I met Lou Donaldson and we talked and we do this sort of - - and he was telling me about this and he showed me stuff and he was so excited. And the thing about it - - and he used to drive my parents crazy because he was a teenager, now we're talking about maybe 13, 14, going down to places to hang out that my parents felt he had no business hanging out and they didn't want him to get in trouble and stuff and he was always running down to hear somebody or to do something and Bobby - - one interesting that happened that I'll finish telling you about Bobby, one interesting thing that happened with Bobby when he was in the High School of Music and Art, um, there was a man by the name of Richter, Mr. Richter there, and he has quite a reputation. The kids still turn up their nose at him when you talk about him now. He had no use for jazz and not too much use for African American students. And he was a toughie. I mean he was a toughie. He's just, I mean, I had, the people I know, I know there must be people that loved him, but I never heard anybody say [laughs] - -

MG: [laughs]

VC: - - a kind word about Richter. And so what happened, what happened here one time, I'll tell you two stories, what happened. Richter decided there was somebody else he wanted to be first clarinet chair and it happened to be somebody who was Caucasian, not African American. And Bobby fussed about it and so he told Bobby, he told Bobby, he

said I want this young man to take first chair and I want you to show him things and to break him in. And Bobby said I'm not gonna do it, I'm not gonna do it. So he went home and he told his parents, he told mother and daddy about it and they were very upset about it and daddy decided to go to school and to talk to Mr. Richter about it. So he went to the high school, he went to the High School of Music and Art and he got an appointment with Mr. Richter and when he walked in, the first thing Mr. Richter said was, and what do you do for a living?

MG: Oh.

VC: [laughs] You can get the picture. So my father said, well I'm here to talk about my son but if you wanna know what I do for a living, I'm a supervisor in the general post office downtown. And so, he said that your son, I had asked your son to, he said but my son feels that you were taking the first seat away from him which he deserves and which he's played well and you wanted him to train somebody else because you didn't want him to do it and he said that he didn't want to do it, that he told you he didn't want to do it, and I just wanted you to know that I support my son in his feeling about it, you know? So that was one of the things. And then do you know Lyle Atkinson?

MG: Sure! I just saw him Sunday.

VC: Okay, well let me tell you, okay, well Lyle, Lyle is, Lyle and Bobby were best of friends.

MG: No kidding!

VC: Yes, when Lyle, when Bobby died Lyle couldn't go to the service because he said he couldn't take it and he came to the house that night and told my mother and father,

you know, I loved Bobby. And Lyle calls me his step-brother because when I got sick and when I fell down the steps and then I had the back trouble and I was on disability and all, Lyle came over to see me one day, I'll never forget, and I started crying. You know, people think he's a toughie, but he's a softy.

MG: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

VC: Yeah. And I started crying and I said, Lyle, I just feel my whole life is over, I can't walk, my back, I said, Bobby's not here anymore, I just feel awful. And he said, he said, listen, he said, I'm your brother. He said, as long as I'm alive, he said, you have a brother so don't you dare worry about.

MG: Awww.

MN: wow.

MG: So sweet.

VC: I'll never forget that, I was so touched, you know, I was so touched.

MG: He played Sunday with an 11 piece band, he has a bass ensemble.

VC: Oh my goodness.

MG: And he basses.

VC: Oh my god.

MG: Yeah.

VC: So he, so he, um, - -

MG: I'll talk to him.

VC: Okay. Now he, he was first violinist in the High School of Music and Art band.

MG: Oh. Did he ever live in the Bronx?

VC: Um, you know, he might have.

MG: Okay.

VC: He might have, yes.

MG: Okay.

VC: But he was first violinist, first chair. And Bobby, Bobby always tells me this story [laughs], he was sitting in the woodwind section of the orchestra one afternoon and all of a sudden, he saw Lyle's head, there was this big fight going on in the string section. I don't remember what happened but somebody had said something that had really, honestly, and truly upset Lyle. And of course, Bobby, being so close to him, he went over there and broke it up. I wish I could remember what the thing was, but it was terrible. You know, it was just a, not a very, very kind thing so. But so the kids, some of these talented kids, did have problems in those days.

MG: [inaudible]

VC: But now Bobby, Bobby was very active in the Bronx scene and there was a guy, I forgot whether they lived in the Bronx or not, George Brathwaite?

MG: Oh yeah, sure!

VC: Bobby and George - -

MG: Yeah.

VC: Bobby and George were rivals.

MG: Oh!

VC: If Bobby came home on a Friday - -

MG: George Brath, they called him Brath later - -

VC: Right, Brathwaite, that's right.

MG: He played multiple instruments [inaudible].

VC: Yes, well, when Bobby, if Bobby came home from school and found out that George Brathwaite had a gig that he didn't get for the weekend, boy he was upset!

MG: Oh, no kidding!

VC: Or vice versa. But they were kinda like rivals, you know?

MG: Uh huh.

VC: And Bobby - -

MG: Was he the same age?

VC: They probably are, you know, about.

MG: Oh okay.

VC: So, unless he's a little older or a little younger. I don't - - contemporaries, like, you know? And so, but Bobby, Bobby was playing, Bobby did a lot of playing with a lot of the groups in the Bronx, as I said. He and Artie often played. And they played with Pucho, you know? And they played - -

MG: Yeah. I have a photo of that.

VC: Oh! And just general ensembles with the guys and one thing, I met somebody, I remember when Lonnie Gales was playing bass in the Bronx - -

MN: How did Bobby get exposed to Latin music?

VC: You know, it's um, I would say, I would say that before Mongo, Bobby getting exposed to Latin music was simply being in the scene in the Bronx because Pucho, Pucho was a very, Pucho was very prominent. He was the Latin scene in the Bronx. And Pucho

was always hiring the best musicians he could get for his group. So and Bobby played with him very often and so did Artie for that matter.

MG: And Phil Newsom was in that same group.

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

MG: Uh huh. He's the one that gave me the pictures - -

VC: Ah! Oh my gosh.

MG: - - of Bobby and Pucho.

VC: Oh my gosh. That's right. So that's probably how he did it because - -

MG: And remember, Pucho is Henry Brown from Harlem, you know?

MN: Right.

VC: Yeah, right.

MG: Pucho is not Latin.

MN: Right, now is the age difference mean a different exposure? Was Bobby being younger meant he would have been more exposed to Latin music than you were?

VC: No, no, no. What made it different, what different is that we're talking about like the early '50's, okay?

MN: Right.

VC: So, and that was before I went to Julliard. I'm talking about, let's say, '50-'54, okay?

MN: Right.

MG: Mmm, hmm.

VC: And I didn't go into Julliard until 1954.

MN: Oh so you were in this, you were in the school?

VC: I was in the Institute.

MN: Right.

VC: Now Bobby, Bobby was there in the streets with the guys okay? I was in this fabulous school where I lived there Monday through Friday and came home on the weekends, okay?

MN: Right.

VC: Bobby was there all the time, you know?

MN: Uh huh.

VC: And of course, I was home in the summer and all that sort of stuff. So I laugh, I talk to my contemporaries and they talk about, you know, my age and a just a little bit younger, having when they were teenagers, running down to the Palladium, and hanging out here and hanging out there. Didn't you do all that stuff? I said, no [laughs] I didn't. I said, I was up at the Institute for the blind. So anyway, learning all this, you know, the waspy education you know? Getting that education, which I'm not knocking. I got a fabulous education at that school. But the thing is that, Bobby, Bobby was just exposed more to the streets - -

MG: Right.

MN: Right.

VC: - - to the streets and to the musicians and that's how all that happened. That's how that all happened.

MG: Uh huh. Did he finish at Music and Art?

VC: Oh yes, he graduated in '57 and then he went on to Hunter.

MN: Mmm.

VC: And but he didn't graduate there. I - -

MN: Hunter, Bronx?

VC: Hunter, Manhattan.

MN: Manhattan.

VC: Yes, yes. So he went on to Hunter [laughs]. I'll never forget the first week he came home. He came home with, he told my father he's gonna [laughs] get on the Hunter football team. Daddy said, are you crazy?

MG: [laughs]

VC: You know, Bobby was hardly the type for the Hunter football team. So he said, yeah, that'd be cool daddy, I'd love to do it. Well I think he came to his senses [laughs] before he did that. But he went there and he went there for about 6 months and then he decided that he didn't wanna do that, he just wanted to be out to play. So that's what really happened. And he played locally, he played locally on the scene, did some teaching, some private teaching and then I think he even taught at the lighthouse there and worked with a couple of the blind saxophone players there. He did that. And he did a couple of things. I asked him to assist me, oh no, yeah, this was much later though, um yeah, so that's not in the '50's but he um, I asked him later on when I did the workshop, the jazz workshop at Manhattan School when they didn't have anything at all, I asked him would he be my assistant. So he did that with me also. But he was like one of the

neighborhood musicians like Artie was. They played with everybody there, you know, the Blue Morocco, Freddie's, Kenny's, what is it, 85 - -

MG: 845.

VC: 845, that's right. All these. They just played all around and there was enough places for everybody to play. There was so much music going on then you know?

MN: This is late '50's, early '60's?

VC: Yes, particularly, I just remembered, yeah, you're right, exactly. Exactly.

MG: Mid to late '50's.

VC: Mid to late '50's and then the '60's.

MN: Now in the Bronx at that time, did people come up from Manhattan to go to the Bronx clubs?

VC: Yes they did, sure. Absolutely.

MN: And was it partly because of the 3rd Avenue L? How did you get to Boston Road from Manhattan?

VC: Oh, um, well, you know, what happens is, and a lot of musicians would come up too because, and then I'll try to answer your question, a lot of musicians would come up too because if they knew that their buddies or friends were playing there or if they knew that somebody good was playing there or singing there that they wanted to hear, they came up. So there wasn't no question about coming up. And of course, they came up too hoping that maybe they would [laughs] get a gig or something like that.

MG: Right.

VC: So, Mark, the transportation wouldn't really be such a problem getting there. Um, let me see, Boston Road and Prospect Avenue. Um, Boston Road and Prospect Ave. The Prospect Avenue station was too far down. Um, I don't know, probably many of them came by car. Um, many of them might have taken the D train to 167th Street and then the cross town bus to Union Avenue or to Prospect Avenue and then walk up Prospect Avenue to Boston Road.

MN: Right.

VC: They would do something like that.

MG: You know, I don't think it was a big deal.

VC: No, it wasn't.

MN: Right.

MG: Especially to come to the 845 where [inaudible].

VC: That's the subway right there.

MN: That's right, the subway. But to get to Sylvia's.

MG: But I know, but whenever you ask people, you know, did people come from Manhattan, they were like, it's not that far from Harlem.

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

MG: I mean, the Bronx - - but do you recall that certain musicians had a reputation for being the best players in the Bronx, that there was like a local Bronx scene?

VC: Yeah, there was. Artie Jenkins was one of them because Artie could play anything. He could play the jazz and he could play the Latin. And Lonnie Gales was another - -

MG: Right.

VC: - - bass player. Um, Vinnie McEwen.

MG: Right.

VC: Yes, he was considered one of the important Bronx musicians. Um, let me see uh, oh, Rogers!

MG: Barry Rogers.

VC: Rogers, that's what I was gonna say. Barry Rogers was another one. I mean, these guys - -

MG: Was he close to Bobby?

VC: Yes, yes he was. Yeah, these are all guys that were considered like cream of the crop for the Bronx and they were good. Of course you know, Lonnie later, of course, played with Monk for a while. I remember that.

MG: Yeah. Did you know, um, um...wait a minute - -

MN: Oliver Beener?

MG: Yes.

VC: Oh my god, yes!

MG: Thank you Mark.

VC: Thank you Mark. Oliver Beener, of course! We were all buddies. Oh god, I haven't thought about Oliver. Is he still alive?

MG: No, he's not alive. But would he be around the same age as Bobby? A little older.

VC: Let me see. How old do you think Oliver Beener would be?

MG: I don't know, he might be a little older.

VC: Yeah. Bobby now would be, oh god let me see, Bobby, born in '39 so Bobby, let's see - -

MG: He'd only be 68.

VC: That's right.

MG: That's not too old.

VC: That's right.

MG: Oliver Beener was a little older. What about Tina Brooks?

VC: Of course! There's another one. I know all these guys.

MG: You did?

VC: Yes.

MG: And would they like come around Kenny's and all those places?

VC: All the places.

MG: Okay.

VC: All the places. They'd come around and they'd play around, both.

MG: And did they have jam sessions late after the gig, do you recall?

VC: Well - -

MG: Or did they just go home?

VC: - - well, at Kenny's for example, they didn't. But at Blue Morocco they did. You know, there'd be times when they'd finish their last set, some of the guys who would come in, they would play. Freddie's also I believe, you know - -

MG: Did you see the e-mail that Mark got that said, from somebody that said that they went somewhere else after Kenny's and that they used some build - - oh I think it's Joe Orange.

MN: Yeah.

MG: Joe Orange, you remember him?

MN: There's - -

VC: No - -

MG: Joe Orange?

VC: No, that's the name - -

MG: He grew up with - -

MN: With Jimmy Owens.

MG: - - Jimmy Owens. You're a little younger.

VC: Okay. Okay.

MG: Uh huh. But he said he recalls - - is it snowing? Excuse me.

VC: They said it was going to a little bit.

MN: Yeah.

VC: But nothing to be too upset about they say.

MG: It's snowing.

MN: It's snowing.

VC: [laughs] Okay.

MG: I didn't know - -

MN: But we have ribs.

MG: - - we had snow.

VC: [laughs] Yeah.

MG: I didn't check on that. Excuse me.

VC: [laughs] Okay.

MG: Because Joe Orange said in his e-mail to Mark that they used to go to Kenny's and then they went in some building where there was an after hours scene.

VC: Could be.

MG: That could be a little later.

VC: Yes, yes. But that I didn't know about.

MG: Did you, because you were so protected, - -

VC: Tina Brooks and Oliver Beener.

MG: - - because you had your brother watching you and protecting you - -

VC: Yes [laughs].

MG: - - did you know anything about drugs? [inaudible]

VC: Interesting you would ask me that. Um, you know, drugs wasn't even a thing I thought about when I was growing up.

MG: Mmm, hmm [inaudible].

VC: Now, hey, I don't wanna leave this, now let me think about this.

MG: That can happen that you can - - because even I as a teenager, now they were like, oh my god, the people you knew, they were all using drugs. I was like, but I didn't know that.

VC: No.

MG: Later I found out but I didn't, we didn't know.

VC: Do you know what? The only time, this sounds so square, but the only time - -

MG: [laughs]

VC: - - that I became, now this is not to say that Artie, Artie probably smoked pot and stuff like that, I don't know, but all I know is that, um, the only time I really became conscious of drugs and musicians, you're gonna laugh, is when I started to listening to bee bop and heard all the talk about Charlie Parker and all that stuff. Now I'm sure there was stuff going on around me but the guys were, the guys were very nice when they were around me. I didn't find any kind of uncool stuff going on.

MG: Right.

VC: And whatever they may have been involved with, I was never, it never touched me, you know?

MG: Right, right.

VC: That's an interesting question you ask me because - -

MG: But that's a you know, recurring story, that people around the scene and in the scene, aren't involved in that and nobody ever pulls you in it or even talks about it.

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

MG: you know, they'd go to dinner, I mean there was like - -

MN: No but it's like - -

MG: - - there was so many other things to talk about, why would they talk about that?

VC: Right.

MN: Maxine, there were friends of mine in college who were gay and I had no idea.

MG: Uh huh.

MN: Until gay liberation.

VC: Right, right.

MG: Uh huh, right.

VC: And the gay scene of course, is something else again [chuckles]. I didn't know about that for a long, long time.

MG: No. They still won't admit that.

VC: No.

MG: Ask musicians.

VC: There you go.

MG: They're the last to come out.

VC: There you go. That's right.

MG: Okay? Even when somebody outs them, you know, they wanna kill them.

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

MG: So, you know, we don't care.

VC: No, same, exactly.

MG: Jazz musicians, they don't care. They don't notice and they don't care [laughs].

VC: That's right. Just play you acts, right?

MG: Uh huh. If you could play, we don't care [laughs].

VC: Exactly.

MN: Did you have any contact with Elmo Hope or Bertha Hope?

VC: No, by contact, no, not in those days. My contact with Bertha Hope has been in recent years because of [inaudible] and doing programs - -

MG: Uh huh, the women's [inaudible].

VC: - - that's right. And meeting with her and talking with her and sharing stories and things like that. She's always been very nice.

MG: Uh huh, and Elmo died early if I remember.

VC: Yes, yes, that's right.

MG: And you know they come from, what's the name of the street?

MN: Uh, Lyman Place.

MG: Lyman Place.

VC: Lyman!

MG: Elmo's mother and the family lived on Lyman Place so - -

VC: You're kidding me!

MG: - - when Monk used to come up there - -

MN: And Monk used to come up there.

VC: I know - -

MG: - - because Nellie's family lived there - -

VC: Let me tell you what Bobby did.

MG: Okay.

VC: One day - - yes, I was, yes, Lyman Place! God, that was only a block and a half away! Yeah, it was Ritter Place then it was Lyman Place. So anyway, okay, and Monk used to come up there all the time and one afternoon Monk met my brother, and he came

up to my house, I wasn't there. And so he came up to my house and they stayed up there quite a while and I guess they must have been playing or whatever else [laughs] you know? But anyway, Monk was up there playing on my baby grand piano which my mother and father bought from a close friend of the families who was a veteran and he had bought the piano and he was so excited about me being interested in music he sold my mother and father the piano for next to nothing, you know? So I had a little baby grand piano. And Monk was upstairs in my house at 1278 Union Avenue playing the piano and Bobby was there.

MG: Great.

VC: and I came, where was I, I was someplace and I don't remember with who, the person with whom I was, uh anyway, we got there and we get downstairs, inevitably the person I was with wasn't a jazz person and didn't know, notice that hey that's Monk. So we're standing there and this guy who looked kinda grimy, not too well kept and kinda you know, goofy maybe, a little bit of something and Bobby is with him and Bobby's talking to me and so forth and so on, and off they went. Never introduced me. Never said anything. And then later on said, you know, that was Monk I was with. And I said, well why didn't you introduce me? And he said, nah, I didn't want to introduce you so. I said well thanks a lot Bobby.

MG: [laughs]

MN: [laughs]

MG: Wow.

MN: Now another person from the neighborhood people spoke about was Henry Red

Allen. Does that...?

VC: Henry Red Allen, uh, that - -

MN: He was more a Dixie Land kind of player?

MG: Uh, he was older, but he's you know, very famous.

VC: Yes he is but I'm trying to remember where I heard about him in the neighborhood.

MG: [inaudible] but he lived, where did he live exactly?

MN: I think near 168th and Prospect.

MG: when you go off of Lyman - -

VC: Oh, yes!

MG: - - and he was on, is that the big street?

MN: Yeah.

VC: Yes, Prospect, that's Prospect Avenue, that's right.

MG: Uh huh, because - -

VC: Was he a composer as well?

MG: No I think more like a player in the '30's you know?

VC: Okay, then the only reason why I'm thinking about it is I remember somebody telling me once that the man who composed Moonlight Serenade, the one that Glen Miller had [inaudible], his theme song, was somebody who lived on our street. I don't if it might have been 168th Street between Union Avenue and Prospect Avenue or what. Um, McFeeters might know something about it.

MN: There was a composer named Burleigh, named B-U-R-L-E-I-G-H who lived in, who was there, very light-skinned, who was there on 166th Street even before Harriet's family moved there.

MG: Oh, uh huh.

VC: Okay.

MN: Harry Burleigh.

MG: Have you spoken with Harriet McFeeters?

VC: Not recently. Not recently. She would always call me and say you gotta get in touch with Mark Naison - -

MG: Oh please, we know.

VC: - - and I said, yeah, yeah [laughs].

MG: So why don't you have Natasha let her know that we - -

MN: Yeah, I'll have Natasha.

VC: I should, I really should.

MG: - - that we interviewed Valerie so she doesn't find out from someone else.

VC: Yes. No, you know what, let me do it.

MG: Oh, you do it.

VC: I'll do it. Yes I'll do it, yes, I'll do it since she's - -

MN: Right.

MG: [inaudible]

VC: She called me four times about you Mark.

MN: Right.

VC: And I said, they're doing something about the Bronx. I haven't heard from anybody.

Well why don't you call Mark and I said, okay [laughs].

MG: Okay, what I wanted to ask more about, Bobby.

VC: Yes, yes.

MG: Did Bobby stay living at home or did he - -

VC: Um - -

MG: Didn't he marry - -

VC: Yes, yes.

MG: - - eventually?

VC: Bobby married a girl named Benita Tatum, okay? And he had 2 daughters.

MG: Oh! He was young when he married right?

VC: Yes, yes. And he had two - -

MG: In the Bronx?

VC: In the Bronx, that's right. And they lived in the Bronx. And his two daughters are Roxanna and Pilar, were the two daughters. Roxanna is the oldest and Pilar was the, is the youngest. So um, and it was when he was married to Benita, it was shortly after he was married to Benita that the whole business with the Mongo Santamaria band came up. And I remember telling you last time about he was so anxious about getting those rhythms - -

MG: Yeah, so tell the story again though, how he got the job with Mongo and how - -

[video camera loses balance]

DR: What the heck, sorry.

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

MG: Why does it keep falling [laughs]?

DR: Um, because I refuse to put it up properly, steadily and it's [inaudible].

VC: You want or anything?

DR: Yeah.

MG: Let's wait a minute, her camera - -

[pause in tape]

[tape resumes]

MG: [talking in background]

MN: So we're now talking about bobby and Mongo Santamaria.

[crosstalk between Maxine and Valerie]

MG: Okay, so tell the bobby, how Bobby went to work with Mongo story.

VC: Oh, yes, well I'm a little fuzzy. I've been trying to think about who got him in the first place to - -

MG: Was Marty there already?

VC: Uh, Marty was there already. And did I ever tell you, did you know that before Marty played trumpet with um, before Marty played trumpet with Mongo it was Chick Correa who played.

MG: Yeah I did know that.

VC: Isn't that interesting?

MG: I did know that.

MN: Chick Correa?

VC: Chick Correa. The Chick Correa, right. But anyway - -

MG: Because Marty Shallot's from Newark, you know, and he grew up - -

VC: Oh [inaudible].

MG: Yeah, you didn't know that?

VC: No, I didn't know Marty was from Newark.

MG: Yeah, yeah, so he grew up with all those guys.

MN: So where did Chick Correa grow up? Where's Chick Correa from originally?

MG: I think he's from - -

MN: Is he a city guy?

MG: Is he from Boston?

VC: I have know idea.

MG: He's not from here - -

VC: Because I knew these guys, I just never - -

MG: He came here but he's not from here.

VC: Yeah.

MG: I think he's somewhere in Massachusetts, somehow I have that feeling right? He's

Italian right?

VC: Uh, [inaudible].

MN: Yeah.

MG: [inaudible].

VC: Right, right.

MG: I could check.

VC: But anyway, so Bobby - - so we were living at 1278 Union Avenue, that's my, that's where we lived all those years. I actually went to Julliard from 1278 Union Avenue, as I said, between Freeman Street and Ritter Place, and so I was in bed and Bobby came in, it was late. And he woke me up and he said, c'mon, I need your help, I need your Julliard expertise [laughs] he would say to me when he wanted to be nasty.

MG: [laughs]

VC: So I said okay. I said okay. So we went in the bathroom. And in the bathroom was this old fashioned tub that had this sort of rounded rim and then - - so I sat on the tub and then Bobby sat on the toilet seat with the top down of course and he said, I really want this job. He said, this is gonna - - I really, really want this job. I said, okay. So people were beginning to talk about Mongo then and it was just a little before they did "Watermelon Man," you know? So anyway, he said, now these rhythms, you gotta help me. These Latin rhythms are so, you know, so - - they've got ties over the bar and he says, and I'm just - - so we sat there and a lot of the Latin rhythms are in, it's interesting, are in two bar phrases. And so we sat there, we go, you know, I go, he said, dotted chord, and I said okay "Bam," followed by an eighth tied to a, "bam, bam, ba bam," you know, we'd just be doing this. And we'd do it a little slowly and then once we got the rhythm we'd start picking it up. You know, I said, there it is! That's what it is! Bobby said, okay, now let's take another one. So we went through these rhythms and of course once we got through the rhythms, it just became second nature to him, you know? You never have to think about how to count out a rhythm like that anymore. So, but it was so cute because he wanted that job - -

[END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A]

[BEGINNING OF TAPE 1 SIDE B]

VC: Yeah, it becomes second nature. You don't have to - - you know, you sit down and you're gonna do a, you hear the piano and the bass player, they play a certain montuno and then right away you fall right in. You get to know it. It's just natural, you know? But to see it on paper, I mean - -

MG: Who had, who had written it out? He had written it out?

VC: No I think Mongo had arrangements and they had gotten arrangements [inaudible]. And so Bobby, he, you know, he just, you know, he said we've gotta, I've gotta get these and they've got to work and I've got to be able to do these without thinking about them, which he did. And, as I said, it just eventually became, it became second nature. And we always used to laugh about it. But, um, it was exciting. It was just thrilling to sit there and do these - - oh, and I know what I was gonna say. People, they don't realize. Like these rhythms that they play, of course, are folk rhythms, you know? And when you see these folk rhythms written down on paper with notes tied across the bar, the funny other little things, and the ballads as we know it, like in Eurocentric music, being very different, it's extremely complicated. And for something that just comes naturally out of a people without a fancy education or something, this natural musical expression, to find out how beautiful and how beautifully complex it is when you break it down, to put it on paper, it's an extraordinary thing, you know? It's really extraordinary.

MG: Mmm, hmm. When did he go with Mongo?

VC: He went with Mongo, I would guess, I'm thinking it's about '60, '61, somewhere around there. Yeah, maybe '59, '60.

MN: Watermelon Man may be I think '62.

VC: Okay, so he was - -

MG: That was the hit.

VC: Okay, that's right. And his tune I told you - -

MG: Is on there.

VC: - - his song was on the backside.

MG: Right!

VC: So he made all that money. So about '61.

MG: He's still, somebody's still making money.

VC: I know it, I know it.

MG: Mmm, hmm, on that tune.

VC: And then we got so excited because he wrote a tune called, "Fat Back" and the, what is it, the Spandex, Spandex Watch Company used that for a commercial - -

MG: Oh good.

VC: You know, so that was a lot of fun. And it was a fun time in my family's life because when, you know, we couldn't believe it, you couldn't go down the street anywhere without hearing Watermelon Man. Like it was, like it was in the top 10 on the pop charts you know?

MG: Uh huh, uh huh.

VC: And my mother and father, if - -

MG: [laughs]

VC: - - I remember a couple of times we were on a bus. You'd get on the bus and it was summer time and the windows were open and you'd pass in the street and somebody'd be playing Watermelon Man and my mother became hysterical.

MG: [laughs]

VC: Alvin, Alvin! And she starts laughing and daddy just quietly chuckles. She can't get herself together you know? And then when she gets herself together, we travel a few more blocks and hear it comes again [laughs]. It was exciting. We were so proud and we were so excited. And one of the things I remember when Bobby introduced me to Hubert and to Marty, we all became very close friends and we still are very close - -

MG: That's so nice.

VC: - - and to Mongo, and what happened is that, because of bobby and because of Mongo, they gave me my first opportunity to compose something.

MN: Mmm!

VC: I always knew I could compose. I never thought about being a composer, what I always thought about being is a performer and an educator. But I could always compose. It was no big deal. I knew I could compose. I didn't think about it - - so Mongo asked if I would compose something for them. Bobby said, Mongo would like you to compose something. I said, okay. And I did, and of course the first thing that I composed for them was El Toro which became one of their biggest hits.

MN: What does it sound like, El Toro.

VC: Oh, oh, it's actually it's on that tape as a matter of fact. They had a big - - they recorded it at Mongo at the Village Gate.

MG: Yeah. Do you have that, Mongo at the Village Gate? Oh I have that!

VC: I have it too.

MG: I love that. I play it all the time.

VC: And Symphony Syd announces it, you know?

MG: It's so great.

MN: Mongo at the Village Gate?

VC: Mongo, and it was live. Live at the Village, it was - -

MG: Very popular.

VC: It was - -

MG: Get the CD.

VC: That's right. It was September, it was labor day in September. And it was so funny because Mongo, Mongo with his broken English, he said, [with Spanish accent] and now we're gonna do a song written by Bobby Capers's sister, [laughs] you know, El Toro. So anyway. So you know, I wrote for Mongo and then a couple of other things come up, people started hearing I did things and I was asked occasionally to write something. Mongo asked me to write something else. And then so I wrote about maybe half a dozen things for Mongo. The other day I listened, Marty Shellers sent me an album where they did the rhythm and blues of the '60's and about 3 of my tunes are in the album and I listened to them.

MG: Mmm!

VC: I had to laugh though [laughs] because it sounded so '60's and so dated in comparison [inaudible]. But - -

MN: Wow.

VC: - - I did um - -

MG: Can you, on your computer, can you play MP3?

VC: Yes.

MG: Can you get the file?

VC: Yes, yes. Yes I can. And so, see you're all ahead of me. I'm just studying computers and learning how to do all this stuff.

MG: [inaudible] They share music files you know?

VC: Yes, yes. So what I did was another song, which I thought was so nice, that I wrote was a bassinova called Sabayee . I have a friend who has a daughter and he named her Sabayee and I thought that was such a pretty name. So I wrote a bassinova called Sabayee. And Mongo recorded it and Bobby and Hubert did wonderful flute solos on this bassinova. Hubert played the alto flute. He did his solo on the alto flute.

MN: So Bobby played flute also?

VC: Yes, and Bobby said everything he learned about playing a flute he learned from Hubert.

MG: Wow.

VC: He couldn't learn from better, you know, the master. And Buddy Williams who plays drums - -

MG: Oh yeah!

VC: You know Buddy Williams?

MG: I saw Buddy Williams Sunday!

VC: From Brooklyn?

MG: Yeah.

VC: That Buddy Williams?

MG: Buddy Williams the drummer.

VC: Yes.

MG: Yeah, yeah.

VC: Who plays in The Color Purple?

MG: Yeah.

VC: Uh huh. Oh Buddy and Bobby were like that [snaps].

MG: No kidding?

VC: And Buddy's younger than I am, but he's my older brother.

MG: That is so funny.

VC: If I have to cry on somebody's shoulder and I'm upset, who do I call, Buddy. And he's called, he's had to call me from Japan and all sorts of places when I'm really depressed you know?

MG: Yeah!

VC: But Buddy told me about playing in Cali, playing in California with Herbie Mann.

And of course - -

MG: Yeah, he played with Herbie.

VC: Yes, right, for a while. And so they were having supper and they were talking about musicians and all and Herbie Mann said well you know, he said, my favorite flute player's probably somebody you never even heard of. And Buddy said, who's that? And he said, Bobby Capers [laughs]. He said, to hell I haven't, you know [laughs]? Bobby and --

MG: He didn't live in the Bronx Buddy?

VC: No, no. But he was part of the music and arts scene.

MG: Right. Oh!

VC: And that's how -- they're all, Buddy, Lyle, all of them, Andy Gonzales, everybody went to Music and Art. John Mona --

MG: Because you know, Buddy Williams, they have that group Natural Essence.

VC: Oh okay.

MG: So you know, they were all there at Walter Booker's memorial.

VC: Of course, he was very close to Walter Booker.

MG: [inaudible] Jr.

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

MG: And all that.

VC: There you go.

MG: Mmm, hmm. They were all there.

VC: There you go.

MG: Alex Blade.

VC: Blade, that's right, that's right. So anyway --

MG: Wow.

VC: - - so Buddy - -

MG: So that would be Bobby's, that would be Bobby's friends right?

VC: Yes, yes. So Buddy said, Buddy always said, he said listen, I always got the street stuff from Bobby, I got my street education from Bobby and I got my la di da education from you [laughs].

MG: [laughs]

VC: And he would, and it's wonderful because he still talks about Bobby.

MG: He has a good gig, that Color Purple.

VC: I know! And he, and it's his first Broadway gig.

MG: I know, he told me.

VC: Yeah, so - -

MG: That's so funny. I just talked to him.

VC: So he, so he, he said that, he got all that stuff. So he was, um, I mean, he was wonderful. He would often give me good advice. And as I said, he's younger than I am but as I said, I could talk about bobby to Buddy because, and I could talk about Bobby with Lyle because I couldn't talk about him with my mother. When Bobby died, and then when daddy died, we never talked about either one of them.

MG & MN: Mmm!

VC: And it was very sad. Like I would love to have said to mother, you know, this is Bobby's birthday or this is daddy's birthday, or this is the anniversary of when Bobby passed, you know, and then maybe we could talk about some of the happy times we had.

When it came to losing my brother and my father she closed it off. She absolutely never never talked about them again at all. And it just hurt me and it, I felt so bad about it, I was kinda hurting about it. And then Lyle sat me down and he said look, people deal with grief in their own particular ways. And my mother and my father, everything that was important to them was bobby and myself. And she loved daddy very much and she loved daddy very much. So Lyle said, look, you wanna talk about bobby, you talk about him to me. He said, and Buddy said the same thing. He said, but your mother evidently cannot deal with it. And he said, so leave it alone.

MG: Mmm, hmm. When did he die, what year?

VC: He died, he died February 25, 1974, and he wasn't even 35 years old.

MN: Now, when - -

MG: What happened to him.

VC: Bobby was a victim, ultimately a victim of alcohol.

MG: Mmm, hmm. Mmm, hmm.

VC: I remember once - -

MG: That's what I had heard but I wasn't sure.

VC: Yes, yes, yes. I remember once about a year before he died he had been to Dr.

Mistretta and Dr. Mistretta said look, if you can't take this kind of work you're in and this kind of life, get out of it. He said, because you're gonna kill yourself because you're gradually getting to a point of no return. He said, and if you do you're gonna die. It didn't help.

MN: Now one of the things - -

MG: He had remarried though, didn't he marry Sharon?

VC: Yes he married Sharon Freeman, that's right.

MG: You know who I worked with in Gail Evans' big band and I was the [inaudible] manager.

VC: Oh, yes!

MG: Because she was in that band.

VC: That's right she was.

MG: But I didn't realize that she was married to Bobby.

MN: Was she a musician or a singer?

MG: She's a - -

VC: A singer, musician, excuse me.

MG: She's a French horn player.

VC: French horn and piano.

MG: She's a very good musician.

VC: French horn and piano. She was my student - -

MG: No kidding? Is that how she met Bobby?

VC: Yes.

MG: Oh!

VC: She was my student at the Manhattan School of Music.

MG: You know who just told me about this was Warren Smith.

VC: Oh, Warren, yes!

MG: I was like, Warren, I want to talk to Valerie about Bobby because I know Warren is very fond of Bobby.

VC: Yes, yes.

MG: He still thinks Bobby was like, there's no musician as good as Bobby Capers.

VC: Oh Warren was something and Warren and all the guys came down and played at Bobby's memorial and it was something.

MG: Right. But I was, so I was asking him about Bobby and then he said, but you remember Sharon and I was like, and I never put that together.

VC: Yes, that's right. That's right. She married Bobby in 1972. So they weren't married quite, they married April 9th of '72 and Bobby died February 25th of '74 so they weren't quite 2 years, you know?

MG: Wow.

MN: Now in terms of - - a lot of people, once we started getting into the Morisannia research, did say that there was a lot of alcoholism around that neighborhood. Were you aware of this before Bobby's situation? You know, people like, you know, in the neighborhood having drinking problems?

VC: you know, I guess I'm a dull interviewer - -

MG: [laughs]

VC: - - but no, I was not aware. Again - -

MG: Did you know he had a problem?

VC: I found - - when I knew he had a problem, I was at that point, not at the institute, but I was, I was out of school. I had finished, then I knew. About my last year at Julliard,

getting out of Julliard, then I began to know that bobby had a serious problem. I mean, a serious problem. I, for example, I had, I couldn't keep bottles of alcohol in the house. I would have them there so if I was going to entertain there'd be something like that. And I remember going up to Massachusetts with a friend of mine and I brought back, at that time, they were the only ones that sold like the half gallons of alcohol and stuff like that. And I would buy the things and Bobby would come in and drink up all the stuff and then fill the bottles with water.

MG: Oh!

VC: And it was just, it was a terrible thing. And you know, he got - - it was so sad, and he got so until his eyes looked jaundiced. And you know, alcohol, have you ever been around a person that has a serious alcohol problem?

MG: You know I have [laughs].

VC: Well, okay, you know their skin gives off a certain odor - -

MG: Yeah! [inaudible]

VC: - - when their body has been so saturated with alcohol. And I'll tell you, I'll never forget, several months after my brother died I had a student in my class who was an alc, who was an alcoholic. I mean, he was so bad that one day I was going to the ladies room walking from my class and I stumbled over him. He was out, flat out on the floor.

MG: Oh god.

VC: You know, but before that had happened, he had come up to my desk to ask me something and I hadn't smelled that smell since my brother was alive and I almost fainted because it was the last thing in the world I expected to smell and I said, oh my, you know,

right away, it just brought back all these memories. And things really upset me. I had people once in a while call me up and tell me, you know, you've got to see what you can do for Bobby because he's killing himself. And of course, this was something I felt I couldn't really talk to about with my parents. My mother and father weren't alcoholics, when I was growing up maybe twice a month daddy would get a half a pint of rum and they'd get some coco-cola and they'd sit in the kitchen and they'd listen to the amateur hour at Apollo on Saturday nights, you know, it was a big deal. So, but, then I remember one of my, two of my, one of my dearest friends telling me, seeing Bobby and Sharon one night on the subway, and Bobby was violently ill. You know, he was throwing up and that made me, it made me sick. It was really terrible. And then when Sharon called me up about a week before Bobby died and said that Bobby had started hemorrhaging and she had to call him and get him to the hospital in Englewood. [sighs] And, oh it was very, very sad.

MG: Were they living in Englewood?

VC: Yeah, they were living in um, they were living in um, no - -

DR: Can you hold a second? I need to change this.

MG: Mmm, hmm.

VC: Okay.

MN: Should I uh - -

[pause in tape]

[tape resumes]

MG: - - David Carp was very interested in Barry Rogers - -

VC: Sure.

MG: - - who you know, changed, they say, his trombone playing you know so important to Latin music - -

VC: Yes, yes.

MG: [inaudible] and everybody loved him and everything. And then he had a tragic death also, from a heart attack but I think he was older than Bobby. But then when I was thinking about him it made me think about Bobby more - -

VC: Yes.

MG: - - because there are certain people that people focus on and one of the reasons they focus on him is because, you know, he was a white guy on the Latin scene - -

VC: Sure, sure.

MG: - - and also played with the black bands too - -

VC: Yes, of course.

MG: - - and he was like the only one and everything. But um, that often happens - -

VC: Yes.

MG: - - that there's focus on - - I mean, because he's white there's a lot of attention to it.

VC: Sure, sure.

MG: And then when I started looking at the scene about the jazz in the Bronx, there's certain key figures and Bobby Capers is like phenomenally important to the scene and influence, you know everybody talks about him, everybody. And the other ones are Tina Brooks and Oliver Beener.

VC: Oliver Beener.

MG: But then when you talk to a little younger set, because Oliver Beener and Tina Brooks are both involved in drugs and then Bobby, they know, had an early death because of alcohol, there's like something - - people don't wanna talk about that.

VC: Right.

MG: It's easier to talk about Barry Rogers who had a heart attack.

VC: That's right. Yes, of course, of course.

MG: But you know, it's stupid not to talk about it.

VC: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

MG: I mean it's despite the fact that he had this problem and couldn't stop drinking and died young - -

VC: That's right.

MG: - - he still in the time he had, I mean what he did is really amazing.

VC: Yes, yeah, right.

MG: I mean you could only, we wish he had lived longer - -

VC: Longer, exactly.

MG: - - and had been able to do more. But he lived very fast and he made us a big influence. That's very important.

MN: Now did Bobby also compose?

VC: Yes. Um, not a whole lot of stuff. I mean he didn't go into composing like I - - yes, but Bobby composed for Mongo, quite a number of tunes, yes.

MG: And you know, playing alto and being lead alto, or you know being, that's like such an important instrument, such an important - -

VC: Yes it is. And then after playing the alto there with Mongo, he played tenor on occasions, also when Hubert left, he played tenor. And then Bobby wound up playing baritone. He was a fabulous baritone.

MG: Oh!

VC: I would love to get, we did a recording years and years ago about '67 when I directed an album that they never released that Bobby did and we did Atlantic and Joel Dorn was involved with that.

MG: Oh yeah?

VC: With that, and Bobby did a version of Georgia on My Mind and we had singers in the background with it, [inaudible] orchestra - -

MG: They never released it?

VC: They never released it with strings. And the guy in the studio said this, he said this and, what did he say? He said this and I think he might have mentioned Ray Charles. He said this and Ray Charles, he said this is the Ray Charles of the instrumentals for Georgia on My Mind and I would love to get - -

MG: But you know, the way, uh, the way Joe, I'll e-mail Joel Dorn because the way they do downloading now, something like that could be on iTunes. You know, you don't even have to release it in a hard copy anymore.

VC: Oh, yes.

MG: Joel Dorn probably still has, he has everything here.

VC: Wow, wow.

MG: And you have a relationship with him still?

VC: No. But I, when I went Cleveland and I spent the week there doing TV shows and workshops and all that sort of stuff, I was there and one of the disc jockeys was a close friend of his and when he mentioned Joel Dorn I said oh give me his address, I'll contact him when I come back, and I didn't but I would love to contact him after all this time.

MG: Okay, okay. Alright, I'll give you that information.

VC: Oh, that would be wonderful.

MG: Yeah, because he um, he still is the same, same, uh huh.

VC: Okay.

MG: That's excellent. So after, how long did he stay with Mongo?

VC: He was with Mongo from, let me see, about '61 or so until, I would say, of course he stayed longer than , he stayed longer than Hubert did. He was still there when Hubert left. I would say maybe until about maybe '69.

MG: That's a long time.

VC: Yes.

MG: Now you know when they, and they travel and they went everywhere - -

VC: Everywhere, yes.

MG: Everywhere, and they were extremely popular.

VC: Very popular, absolutely.

MG: But did they have also, did you know, have a reputation for partying in the hotel rooms?

VC: Oh, well listen [laughs] - -

MG: Because I used to tell Mongo, when Dexter would go into the Sea Sprite which was in Los Angeles on the beach, where Dondo beach, remember there was that club on the beach?

VC: Right, right.

MG: And they would say, and I used to say to him, please don't have Mongo's band in there before us because they won't take musicians.

VC: [laughs]

MG: Because, it was a joke. After Mongo's band stayed in a hotel they'd be like, no more musicians.

VC: Oh, get out of here!

MG: Did you ever here this story?

VC: No, I'm gonna have to ask Marty on that.

MG: Yeah, I'm gonna have to ask Marty too. The Sea Sprite. I was like oh no, but you know, my bands are very quiet, well what a lie.

VC: [laughs]

MG: But they're not like that. Those Cubans, they're very wild. They always talked about those Cubans. There's one Cuban okay? One Cuban and he wasn't even the one that was wild [laughs].

VC: LaLupe she was wild.

MG: Yeah, that's true.

VC: Oh, LaLupe was wild.

MG: Yeah, that's true.

VC: But I'll tell you - -

MN: Did LaLupe sing with them?

VC: Oh she sure did. She sang with Mongo.

MN: She lived in the Bronx.

MG: No doubt.

MN: [laughs]

MG: But she's not from the Bronx. Is she from the Bronx?

MN: No she's from Cuba originally, but she then settled in the Bronx. I have one of her CD's I stole from somebody.

VC: Well if there's any possibility that, somebody wrote a book on LaLupe a couple of years ago and I was very excited about it, it was in Spanish - -

MN: Is she the one who moans?

VC: Yes. Ayyy!

MN: Ayy! Ayy! Ayy!

VC: And then on the Watermelon Man she goes, ha ha ha eeee, eeee!

[laughter]

VC: But she, Bobby said she was crazy but they all loved her, they all loved her. And you should, if she lived in the Bronx at all, she should be somebody that you include.

And there should be a way to find out who the person is who wrote the book on her. And she had a very sad ending.

MG: Yeah.

VC: She wound up, you know, she didn't have any money, she would, I don't know whether she was on welfare, but she was really bad off. But she was a wonderful woman, a lot of vitality and she could sing, you know? She could really sing. But Marty now, what you need if you and Mark want some really wild stuff, when they had this tribute to Mongo at the um, Harlem Y about three years ago [phone rings], we went and um, I was in the back - -

MG: You wanna get the phone?

VC: No that's all right, I'll let the machine pick it up.

MG: Okay.

[phone continues to ring]

VC: So we went to the thing and backstage, Marty and Victor Venllegas was since passed away, the bass player who worked with Mongo, all that time. They were back there talking about the things that they did when they were traveling. I was on the floor. I said, you're kidding me! And I hate to say this but Bobby was married but Bobby was playing around there out on the road.

MG: Uh oh.

VC: And Marty was telling me about the women and this and that and he and Bobby and I said, oh Marty don't tell me. And he said, Valerie, it was insane. The whole thing was insane. But he could tell you some stories that would have you on the floor. I mean, just absolutely on the floor.

MG: But that used to be a joke and every time I would see Mongo I was like, oh please, you know, could you change the itinerary, follow Dexter.

VC: [laughs]

MG: Could you not [inaudible].

VC: That's Marty [inaudible].

MG: But I'll have to ask Marty about that.

VC: Mongo was a sweetheart and it was a wonderful thing that Bobby had the chance to play with Mongo [inaudible].

MG: That's was a long time.

VC: Yeah, that was. That was a long time.

MG: So then what happened?

VC: And that, after that - - and Bobby said, and I think this is worth mentioning, he said that working with Hubert was extraordinary. He said that Hubert was the one that contributed so much in his flute playing, and he was a good flute player.

MG: Did he ever live in the Bronx?

VC: Hubert? I don't think so.

MG: No.

VC: And then he said, the other thing is that he said Hubert taught Bobby how to circular breathe.

MG: Oh!

VC: And I mean Bobby could circular breathe for weeks. I mean it was just ridiculous, I don't know how those guys do it.

MG: Do you know what that is?

MN: No.

MG: Circular breathing? Would you explain what it is?

VC: Okay, Mark, it's the idea that they are able to play their instrument with the breath going out and at the same time finding a way to take in breath. So they're taking in breath as they let it out. They take in breath, they let it out and it means they can continuously hold a note.

MG: They never have to stop breathing.

VC: They never have to stop.

MN: That's crazy.

VC: It's extraordinary. And when it's used musically, right, in an exciting way it absolutely is ecstasy.

MG: [laughs]

VC: Ecstasy.

MG: [inaudible name of musician]

VC: Oh man!

MN: Who's this?

VC: Uh, [inaudible name].

MN: Hurt?

VC: Hurt, yes, yes.

MG: It seemed like he never, he never took a breath. He took one breath and then - -

VC: I'm telling, well Bobby learned to do that and Hubert taught him to do that. He said it was wonderful working with Hubert.

MG: And so then after, when he left Mongo - -

VC: When he left Mongo, um, I have to tell you, when he left Mongo nothing was ever really quite the same. Um, he did, he worked, he did some music in a couple of programs. He was a musical person in programs at a couple of hospitals where they did work and all kinds of therapy and good things and then Bobby was doing that. And that was at a time when he did some teaching at the Lighthouse and he did a little bit of private teaching and playing gigs here and there, um, but it was, it just, things just weren't what they were before. And of course by that time, by that time, Bobby's first marriage had gone to pot and he met Sharon at the Manhattan School of Music through me, for she was in my jazz workshop. And so that's how they met. And he helped me with that. And he and Sharon as a matter of fact were making plans to have a, to form a group together, and they were doing some work on it and getting it together around the time that he passed away.

MG: Mmm, hmm.

MN: Are you in touch with his children?

VC: Oh, you brought up a very, you brought up a very, very, very sensitive situation. Um, but it's no secret. My oldest niece, Roxanna, is somebody that I loved like a daughter, okay? I really, I really loved her like a daughter. I even had her living in this particular house when she was trying to get herself together. But something very terrible happened and so that part of the family have become estranged. I haven't uh, I haven't talked to her or seen her since, since April of 1993. And the situation is that she, um, she embezzled money from my savings account and from her grandmother's savings account.

MG: Oh my.

MN: Oh!

VC: She was living, she was living in my house here. I did everything for her, I helped her - -

MG: See, we don't have the only dysfunctional family.

[crosstalk]

MG: Dawn, I'm always telling Dawn, we are not the only ones.

DR: It's really sad when that kind of thing, and you know, Malcolm X's daughters?

VC: Yes.

DR: One of them was really great friends when she was in college with my daughter

[inaudible].

VC: Yes, yes.

DR: And she took her ATM card and went to the bank and took money or whatever it is.

VC: No, no.

DR: And you know how [inaudible] found out, you know she investigates, she had the bank take the pictures.

VC: Oh my!

DR: Because she denied it. And there she is coming in the bank.

VC: Oh, that's heartbreaking.

DR: Can you imagine? Malcolm X's daughter.

MG: No, well we know that they have problems.

DR: This is the young one. Yeah, she she's a lot of problems.

VC: Yeah, and I loved her like a daughter. Now what she did was, and look, I had my, I maybe had my checkbooks in the drawer where I had my bras. I live in my house. I didn't

think I had to hide my checkbook or anything like that. She would - - and not only that, but I was handling, my mother was starting to have problems with dementia so I handled mother's bills and her banking stuff. Don't you think I had my mother's checkbooks here too? She, she signed my check and took money from my mother. Took money from my mother with my name on it, signing my check. She - - I had, it had taken me 22 years to save up 30,000 dollars that was savings I had, the only savings I had, outside of what the college took out you know, for - -

MN: For retirement.

VC: She went though about 28, 00 dollars - -

MG: [gasps]

MN: Oh!!!

VC: - - before I realized what was going on.

MG: Oh my god.

VC: See I never - - she intercepted my statements when it would come in because she had keys to the house, she had everything.

MG: Oh shit, that's horrible.

VC: And she, and the thing is that I, so I - -

DR: [inaudible]

VC: I hadn't checked my statements because I only used that thing when I needed extra money and I knew it was there so I didn't stay on top of it every month like I usually do.

Well she - - finally, this particular night I got my, I got the statements and I sat down here

at the table with John, and out of that 30,000 dollars, I think there must have been about maybe 500 there.

MG: [gasps]

VC: I said, what? Can't be!. John says, it says 500. No. And then I went to my mothers. Now my mother has no kind of money. We had 2100 dollars in there like she was on Medicaid and we had like what they call the burial fund and we had that kind of thing for emergencies. The thing was wiped out.

MG: Oh!

VC: She took her grandmother's money.

MG: Oh my god.

VC: And I went to the bank - -

MG: She have a drug habit?

VC: No! No drug habit and no drinking habit. Now I don't know, maybe she took that money she spend it on furniture, she paid bills, she's a kid with all kinds of problems you wouldn't even dream about, but not alcohol or drugs. So what happened, I went to the bank and this wonderful woman, she said listen, she said, come in the back, because I was about to faint and I was in tears. She said, Miss Capers, number one, she said, you stay here, we're getting the police. If you don't press charges or you don't do something, you have no chance of getting your money back whatsoever. She said, you've got to. Well that chick, I'm telling you, that chick just took - - my friends, they were so wonderful. My friend Ruth who's been my friend for forty something years, she went

right away. I said Ruth, she took all the money. She said, no! I said, yeah. And then Ruth immediately put 1000 dollars in my checking account because I had nothing there.

MG: Oh my god.

VC: And then, and then my friends, my closest friends from the Julliard School, they used to call my mother and father mother and daddy and they were close to Bobby too and I told them and they said we're gonna give you some. I said, no, I said look, if you wanna do something you can lend me some money. She took 2100 dollars out of my mother's funds. I said, and there is nothing, and I need it in case my mother needs underwear or some shoes or whatever. So they said, well we're gonna give you, I said, no just lend it to me. They immediately sent the money which I put in my mother's account.

[phone rings]

VC: Well the upshot of it is that she came around the next day because she began to hear that things were, and she came in here, I'll never forget it, and I said to her, I was in tears, she was in tears, I said, I'm glad your father's not here to see this. I said, your brother, your father and I - -

[phone continues to ring]

VC: - - we were very close. And I said, and I said, for you to betray me like this, I loved you like a daughter, I said, and for you to do this, I said, your attitude is that you have an aunt whose blind and stupid and a grandmother whose old and crazy. And that's how you feel about us after every thing we've ever done for you. So I told her, I want you out of my house and out of my life. And that's, that was the last thing I ever did.

MG: Wow!

VC: Out of my house, and you know what?

MG: Did the police, did she have to - -

VC: Listen, she, she, I don't know the whole, and I understand - -

MG: Did you ever get it back?

VC: No thanks to her. And do know what her mother had the nerve to say to me? It was going on a year. I was trying to get it back. I had no money to pay a lawyer even to try and get it back - -

MG: But if - - isn't the bank responsible?

DR: The bank [inaudible].

VC: Only to a point. Um, they, listen, the chase, it was chase then, it's now, no it wasn't chase then, then it was chemical, down the street. And they said, first of all, Estelle said to me when I, my colleague when I went the next day to tell her, they were all shocked. And I brought a bank statement and she said, uh oh, she says this bank statement says that if you find any discrepancy with your statements you have to let them know within 15 days or something like that. So I said I never heard of that. See, the interesting thing is that I got all my bank statements in Braille and they never put the disclaimer in Braille. So I never knew that I had to - -

MG: So then that's on them.

VC: Yes, right! But still, you're right, but still in all, we tried and I got letters from the chase bank, from the chemical bank, and I contacted, I sent letters explaining what happened. We had both the criminal and a civil suit going, both of them at once. She, they told me, they told me that the most they would give me back was something like

4000 dollars. And I wrote back and I told them, no, you're going to give me all my money back because I didn't know how they were going to give it. Because I told them, I said, you know, I don't care, I said, I'll go to court, I said, because everybody in the Bronx knows who I am and I've been a good citizen in this boroughs and when they hear about what happened to me and the bank's stand, I said, that jury would go, you know, would vote for me getting my money. So we went on like this and we went on like this and a friend of mine suggested a lawyer to me. He told me it was gonna be about 400 dollars. I said, I don't have 400 dollars, I can't pay you more than 100 dollars an hour. Well she didn't work out and then when she figured there was no more money and then she just left me and she said no - - and it's now going, that happened in March of 1993, it's now '94 and we're getting close to March now. A friend of mine, I don't know if you met her, you might have along your way Maxine. Her name is Valerie Gladstone.

MG: Mmm, mmm [no].

VC: She's a freelance reporter and she does a lot of writing. Mark, did you ever hear of Henry Gladstone who was on WOR, he did the - -

MN: That name sounds familiar.

VC: Yes, Henry Gladstone did the news and Valerie is his daughter. Anyway, she was so upset about what had happened. And they told me I wasn't gonna get - - and I said, I know what it was. They're figuring this African American woman in the Bronx on the concourse, we don't care if she gets her money back. The hell with that. If I live don Park Avenue they might have. But anyway, the point is, Valerie told Michael Kaufman who wrote articles in the *Times* about it and he came up to interview me and he sat right where

you were sitting Maxine. And he, I told him, he said, this is a terrible story. Well that was a Monday. On Wednesday I had my money back.

MG: Oh well!

VC: Michael called the New York Times and he said, do you real - - because I was in school, it was a Tuesday and somebody said Michael Kaufman's on the phone. So I said, oh, so I went into my office and Michael said sit down. I said, yes? He said, you're getting your money back. It will be reinstated tomorrow morning and he said with apologies from the bank and he said my article will be in the *Times* tomorrow.

MG: Oh my!

VC: And so I was so grateful. And he said, he said, he told them, do you have any idea of this woman you're up against and this and that and so forth and so on and so. But you know sometimes people don't get their money, I got my money back. And from then on in I decided I had to cut, I had to cut that family loose. And what's so sad about it is my mother went to her grave never knowing, never knowing that she had two great-granddaughter's, two daughter's of Roxanna's and she never knew that she had them. And so Roxanna's action just tore the whole family apart. And when her mother called me up and said to em when all this was going on, well you know, I knew you'd get your money back. I said, what do mean you knew I'd get my money? I said, all the experts told me I wouldn't get my money back so how come you figured I would get my money back after your daughter stole it from me? She just didn't seem to be that interested and the thing is that I understand now when I hear from her younger sister Pilar that she's still just as mixed up and as messed up at creating all kinds of problems with her daughters - -

MG: She never went to - -

VC: No.

MG: - - jail or anything?

VC: No!

MG: You didn't press charges?

VC: No I didn't, I didn't press charges. But what happened, what happened - - I did press charges against but I think Benita's mother, Roxanna's grandmother who lived down in Baltimore, for the sake of the two little girls, I understand she had to come up with 20,000 dollars to keep Roxanna from going to jail and she had to pay this so maybe, all sorts of stuff went on that I'm not privy to and so forth and so on. But she's you know, her children are mixed up and confused, she's still living in debt, her mother has been in the neighborhood where that girl is concerned and for years, for years, I got so, I had forgotten they had even existed. You know, when they're out of your mind, you push them out of your - -

MG: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

VC: - - because Roxanna, what she did to me just ate me up.

MG: Oh my god.

VC: I was so angry.

MG: That's horrible.

VC: I was so angry and upset that it was eating me alive and I said, God, you've got to help me deal with this because this is ruining me. I can't, I'm angry, I'm upset, I'm hurt. So I got over that and I pushed them out of my mind and then one day out of the blue the

younger one calls me who didn't do anything. The younger one I had disassociated myself from because one day my mother and I were disciplining her about something, she looks just like Bobby, exactly like Bobby, and very pretty, and cute and spunky and so forth, and she said something and it was very, it was very fresh, to me and then to her grandmother. And I, and I told, I said, so when she called she said, auntie I just want to be close to somebody in my father's family. She said, I didn't do those terrible things and I think it's a terrible thing Roxanna did to you and she said, but I would like to in some way, for us to be close or to touch bases again. So I said well we can try Pilar, you know, I said, my thing with you is, I said, I crossed you off my list even before I crossed your sister off because I crossed you off long before she stole from me. I said, but you were so disrespectful one day to your grandmother and to myself that I decided I would never give you the opportunity to be that disrespectful to either one of us again, you know? So I had cut them both out. So now I hear from Pilar, except, I spoke to her a couple of weeks ago as a matter of fact and I had just, I said, you know, I just about crossed you off my list. I said, you know, I'm the oldest one in the family now, and I said when you talk about keeping in touch, I said, since you're the younger one, I said, it seems to me that it's up to you maybe to call and see how your aunt is or something like that. I said, you know, I said, but I don't hear from you and blah, blah, blah. Then she tried to give me all these explanations. So two years ago, which really upset me with her which I take what she says now with a grain of salt because my mother was dying then, I didn't realize it, but it was just 3 days before she passed and she was getting sicker and sicker and I had to

go downtown for an MRI. And I had, and they were sending a substitute home care attendant for my mother - -

MN: [coughs]

VC: - - because her regular home care attendant was away. So I said well let's see. We talk about family so I called her and I said I need your help, can you come and stay with mom, she called her, come and stay with mom tomorrow I said, because I have to go down for an MRI and I waited three weeks to get this appointment and I need to go down there, she has to have her medication. And so she didn't have a car for her to come from co-op city, that's where she was, where her mother's apartment was. So I said, I'll leave car far here, subway and taxi car fare and so forth and so on and you come - - anyway, the upshot of it, you have to be here by let's say 7:30 tomorrow morning because the home care attendant will be here at 8 and I have to leave. So anyway, so next morning, she's not here. And so I didn't know what to do. Finally the home care attendant comes, she's not here, I have to get downtown to get this MRI so I went through everything real fast and then I went downtown and while I was downtown I called up here to see and Frank at the door said no she never showed. Well I was very upset about that and she never showed. And I didn't hear. So now Monday goes, Tuesday goes, my mother, I have to take her to the hospital, call 911 because she's you know, babbling and and she's like, what's the word? I can't think, I wanna say hysterics but - -

MN: Incoherent?

VC: Incoherent, that's right. And she was burning up, so forth and so on, I tried to call again and every time I called her house, no answer, it was like they said the message, the

memory is now filled up. So Tuesday goes by, Wednesday goes by, my mother, she's now off the, she's off the life support and so forth and so on. Not a word from that chick. Yet Sunday, when I said, if you, when you come down tomorrow to look after moms I said I'll have the money. I'll have the money. I said, in fact if you come down this evening, I won't be here but I'll leave everything with the doorman. Well she came down and she got the money didn't she? She came down and got the money I set aside for transportation and travel and so forth and so on. Well P.S., I didn't hear from her until the day after my mother passed away. I had counted on her and she said she wanted to be family and we needed to help each other along. So when my mother was dying, John and my friend Mary, they were the ones at her bedside with me, not my niece you know? So when you asked that question Mark - -

MG: Yeah.

VC: - - I'm just saying that it's tough. And I just, you know, outside of myself I really don't have much family at all.

MG: But uh, where - - okay, we're gonna stop in a minute because the snow is coming down thick and I'm not walking home in the snow.

VC: Okay, I got you, I got you.

MG: But I just wanna ask you, this way that you have of making this independent life you know, being a musician, traveling, being the educator, who instilled this in you? I mean, are you born with this because it's quite unusual, even for a person, sighted persons, you know, persons in this business because there's so many things that knock you down - -

VC: That's true.

MG: - - you keep getting up and you keep fighting forward but does that come from being a child or - -

VC: Well you know it comes from my mother and father and my Grandma Capers, those three people, absolutely and the good Lord. You know, mother and daddy always wanted me to be strong and to feel I could face anything and grandma always felt the education was important and she knew I was smart and so she pushed and I always liked doing thing sand I don't liked to be defeated with things [laughs] and so forth and so on.

MG: [laughs]

VC: So I uh, that's where I got the independence from I think, from my family, from my parents.

MG: Because it's quite, it's exceptional, don't you think?

MN: Um, yes.

MG: [laughs]

MN: I, I, when I got, you know, was explaining who you were, I never said anything about your sight.

MG: yeah he didn't wanna, he didn't wanna mention race, gender, or sight - -

VC: Oh!

[crosstalk]

MN: I just said, okay here's this amaz - -

MG: This great musician.

MN: - - composer...

MG: Okay woman, yeah. Woman musician, composer, educator, you know, she'd be perfect and everything. I said Mark, could mention [laughs] a few other things?

VC: [laughs]

MG: Might be - -

VC: Be interested in, right, exactly, exactly.

MN: But this convention is really important because Nell Irvin Painter is the uh, is the president of the association that year and she's one of the leading historians in the country who also is an African American woman.

VC: Yes, yes.

MG: Right.

VC: Well just let me ask - -

MG: She's one of the early - - and she was a student of um, of um, mmm, she just died, what's her name - -

VC: Oh!

MG: - - African American historian.

VC: Oh, oh, you know what I'm thinking of, I'm thinking of [inaudible].

MN: Oh, oh - -

MG: No, no, um - -

MN: At Michigan?

MG: Yes! What's her name? The first African American Ph. D. from Columbia.

VC: [gasps] Oh, you don't mean her - - oh!

MG: Or Harvard. What's her name? She just died.

VC: Oh wait a minute. Wait a minute. I know who you mean. Um, god at Michigan, I know who you mean.

MN: McKinney or something, no?

VC: Was it Doris or Dorothy something?

MN: It wasn't - -

MG: Why can't we think of her name, this is so bad. But she's so famous. Anyway, Nell is her student. I mean, she created that whole next generation of African American women historians who are - -

MN: If it's who I think - -

MG: she was the first and she was at Harvard and when she died, I mean it was a big, big African American review, all the magazines, all the historical reviews have like big issues that's written by her students. And she's very famous, of course we can't remember her name right now. But it one of the articles it said that until she died, they first of all, she was 16 years older than they thought.

VC: Wow.

MG: She, her sister was really her daughter. The woman that she says was her sister was her daughter - -

VC: Oh my gosh, yes.

MG: - - who then went to Radcliffe and Harvard and you know. And that she had gone to CUNY and she had been married and she worked full time and went to college, went to you know, CUNY and everything. But when it came time to go to graduate school she

realized that this gap of being married and having a child young and working her way to college didn't set her up for what she wanted to do.

VC: Yes.

MG: So she erased that whole history - - this is like, you know, African American women got to do what they got to do and then she went to Harvard with this new, I just graduated - -

MN: Well I have to tell you the story - -

MG: And I mean it was unbelievable because they have her dying young in her 60's but she actually 16 years - -

VC: Wow.

MN: Yeah, but when I - - when Nell - -

DR: [inaudible]

MG: Well she looked very good, very cute, you know very perky, you know?

MN: When Nell invited me to - -

MG: She was like 79 instead of 60 something, it was unbelievable.

MN: But you know, when Nell invited me to give a presentation at her whiteness seminar in Princeton, we went out to lunch and she said, you know, I'm retiring to go to art school because all my friends are dying, in my cohort are dying young.

MG: Oh.

MN: And this whole group of African American women historians - -

MG: wow, because it was so hard.

VC: That's right, exactly.

MN: And she said, I've never felt comfortable here. And it's a funny thing. You know, she had been chair of African American studies at Princeton and we passed the African American studies office at Princeton and there was this amazing poster called, for a conference over at - - "Elvis is Dead," and two African American men facing each other with like processes like James Brown. I said, wow that's a great poster. She ripped it off the door and said, here it's yours.

VC: Oh!

MG: [laughs]

MN: But you know, she wanted this convention not to be the normal sort of elitists so she asked - -

MG: She's retired now though right?

MN: Yeah, she's retired and so she asked me and my colleague Irma Watkins Owens to be in charge of the local arrangements committee to get it out of Manhattan into the Bronx, Brooklyn, and Newark.

MG: Good, good.

MN: So that's the mandate.

VC: Well let me just say - -

MG: Then I'll e-mail you the name of the very famous person.

VC: Did you mind me telling you that? You know, I mean I know it's so personal. I didn't make you feel uncomfortable did it?

MG: No!

MN: No this is - -

MG: no, if it didn't upset you.

VC: No, no, no, no, no.

MG: No, no. I think it - - when we do these interviews and people do tell you know - -

MN: Things - -

MG: - - I mean because one of the things that happens with oral history, especially in our earlier interviews, it's all good.

[END of TAPE 1 SIDE B]

[END OF INTERVIEW]