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## Cenance, Robin

Bronx African American History Project  
*Fordham University*

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MN (Mark Naison): Hello, today is July 15<sup>th</sup>, 2009 and this is an interview with the oral history project of the Bronx African American History Project. We're here today with Robin Cenance aka DJ Rockin' Robin who's been a major figure in hip hop in the Bronx and New York City. And today we're going to talk about her life and her experiences in music. With us today is Kathleen Adams who's a senior at Fordham college, one of the organizers of Mama's Hip Hop Kitchen, and our videographer and documentary film maker, Dawn Russels. So to begin Robin, could you please spell your name and give us your date of birth.

Robin Cenance (RC): Robin, R-O-B-I-N with an I. Cenance C-E-N-A-N-C-E. February 20<sup>th</sup>.

MN: OK, tell us about your family and how they ended up coming to the Bronx.

DR: Oh I caught – Oh sorry [inaudible] I pressed the wrong thing - Can you just grab those paper bags? Sorry.

MN: Ok so again tell us about your family and how they ended up coming to the Bronx.

RC: Ok well I was born in New Orleans -

MN: In New Orleans? Wow.

RC: Yes. I was born in New Orleans and when I was about a year and a half, two years old, my mom brought me to New York. Her cousin had sent for her to come to New York and she met my step-dad they got married and they were living in Harlem at first. And then their first apartment was in the Bronx, Mickle Avenue.

MN: Now Mickle and what's the cross street there?

RC: Boston Road and Mickle Avenue

MN: Ok and then they moved from there –

RC: They moved from there to Tremont Avenue and Davison. Then from there they moved to the Millbrook Projects in the South Bronx.

MN: Now what was the first elementary school you went to in the Bronx?

RC: PS 43 in the south Bronx.

MN: Do you remember where that was located?

RC: 136 street in Brown's Place

MN: And what was the composition of that school? Was it mostly black and Latino or all -

RC: Yes, it was blacks and Latinos. They had a program there called South Bronx Community Action Theater.

MN: Oh that – that – people have talked about that program so much. Tell us about that theater program.

RC: Well they had classes that you could take, drama classes, dance classes – in which I've taken, and drumming classes. And we would perform and have shows. And they also was connected with junior high school 139 Burger.

MN: Right, Burger junior high.

RC: Yes Burger junior high.

MN: So this is near St. Mary's park.

RC: Yes not far from St. Mary's park and then they gave me my first summer job. I was dancing, you know with the group, we would have concerts all over New York City.

MN: Now is this in the sixties or the seventies?

RC: This was in the sixties going – late sixties, early seventies.

MN: So the South Bronx Community Action Theater was active in the sixties and seventies?

RC: Yes

MN: Now did your family – did you have a musical background in your family?

RC: Well, being from New Orleans, you know everybody loves jazz and the blues, so, you know, I guess music was always in me from the start -

MN: So what kind of music did your mother play for you when you were – did you hear on the radio or the phonograph when you were growing up?

RC: Well, you know, back in the days in was WABC so everybody listened to a mixture of music. You know, I loved the Carpenters – I listened to the Carpenters. I listened to Tim Davis Jr with the Candy Man. There was Chuck Berry, My Ding a Ling. There was Marvin Gaye, then the Temptations and it worked its way up - from there.

MN: Now what was the neighborhood like growing up? Did you feel safe when you were going to elementary school or was it sort of – were you worried about walking from place to place.

RC: Well back in those days that's when, you know, all the buildings were burnt down – the tenement buildings. And I lived in the projects so I felt like I'm living high up like the Jeffersons because -

MN: So you were -

Kathleen Adams (KA): Can you describe that experience because in a lot of other interviews I've heard that the projects were completely different then versus today. And how it was like a nicer lifestyle, how it felt elegant and lush in some ways. Could you describe maybe like the surroundings like physically.

RC: Well you know, like when I used to go to dance class there was a young lady in my class that lived in one of the tenement buildings that were run down. And she would tell me these horror stories about, you know, addicts that would be in the hallways especially on rainy days and they would be nodding, you know. And I would be like "Oh my God" you know cause I don't see that much where I live, you know. So I felt fortunate to live in the Projects.

MN: And you lived in the Millbrook house –

RC: The Millbrook house

MN: And you walked to the elementary school from there.

RC: Yes it was about a block away and then there was, in between my school and the block down, there was a - what they called a – like a – gosh what was the – a reform school type of thing – 600 – they used to call it the 600 school.

MN: The 600 school.

RC: And it was all boys and the gate would be locked and, you know, with chains. And they would be in the school yard yelling things at us like "Hey come here" and this and that. And you know, I would be nervous about passing that school all of the time, you know, but, you know, I went to school all by myself. You know, we had a crossing guard -

MN: Did you actually see buildings burn when you were growing up or had they already been burned?

RC: There was always a fire going on, always a fire. And there was always the buildings with the bricks, you know, that was broken down in the back of another building where you just see bricks and everything. And they used to show us movies about, you know, people growing up, youngsters on drugs. There was a movie called *Not Me* and this young man was in the back of a building where he had a overdose and died at the end of the movie. And building that he was, you know, filmed at looked just like the buildings that I lived at, you know, around my neighborhood.

MN: Right. So Millbrook was like an oasis of cleanliness and safety in a pretty dangerous place.

RC: Yes, kind of sort of. You know, also like the playgrounds outside of the building, the gangs used to congregate there.

MN: Oh so you – so -

KA: So gangs were prevalent back then?

RC: Yes

MN: What were some -

KA: Grandmothers weren't-

KC: The black magic, the black spades, the savage skulls

MN: The skulls

KC: You know, and what used to trip me out was , you know, there was a group of brothers and one was in the Black Magic and one was in the Black Spades. And back then we used to wear our jean jackets and stuff. And we used to have patches on it with African American women, with the fists up, with power to the people and these little studs that you would put on your jacket. And my mom would tell me, you know, "Put your jacket on and go out." And I said - Well, don't want to wear this jacket because it says 'Black Magic' on it. And there was a lady with some green dust out of her hand and I didn't want to wear it because it said 'Black Magic' and I didn't want any of the gang members to see that and think that I wanted to try to be a part of their gang. So when I got downstairs, cause my mom said if you don't wear it you can't go outside - so when I got downstairs I just ripped it off and gave it to someone.

MN: Now did you grow up in a politically conscious household with, you know, exposure to black history and civil rights and that kind of thing?

RC: No I didn't. My parents didn't really talk about that because being from New Orleans, my mom - her family - most of them tried to pass for white.

KA: So the whole Creole thing or -

RC: You know, my mother - my mother, you know, she looks like a Caucasian woman. She has the perfect pointy nose with the little lips and you know. On the other hand my stepdad, he grew up in Harlem, you know, but he - he was one that listen - go with whatever flow my mother was with.

MN: Right so did you have a quote "racial identity" when you were growing up or it didn't matter in that neighborhood? Did people try to ask were you Puerto Rican -

RC: Yeah, yeah. I used to get into problems with that all the time, you know, like the dark skinned girls would say, you know -you're - you know - you yellow this, you yellow that - and different things and call me names and I would tell my mom, you know. And mom would tell me - well you tell them that you may not look black on the outside but you're black on the inside - you know - that's what she used to tell me and I was surprised she even said something like that. But even today people mistake me for being Puerto Rican, Dominican, or something like that.

And they say – oh you looky Spanish – and I say – no, Spanish looky me, this is the way my people look in New Orleans, you know. We have a look of our own just like you have a look of yours.

MN: Right. Now did you grow up with the New Orleans cooking? Was that preserved?

RC: Oh my mother's cousins used to come over every weekend with the big pot. And then they would boil the crabs and drink their beer and they would have the gumbo and it's unfortunate a lot of them passed away so, you know, it's up to me to just try to make my own.

MN: Oh so you still make that?

RC: Every so often, yeah.

MN: So how old were you when you first became exposed to the arts? Was it in like kindergarten, first grade, second grade –

RC: Well with the dancing I would say maybe third grade. Third or six grade I started dancing. My dance teacher's name was Miriam Grieves and like I said in the summertime when we worked we was with Alpha Omega 1 through 7 Young Adult Dance Company. And we danced – we was taught by Chuck Davis, even Judith Jameson – that was my dance teacher's closet friend.

MN: Wow

RC: She used to call me “Miss Thing” because I was like the top dancer in the group.

MN: Do you have any pictures from those days of the dance experiences?

RC: You know I took pictures. My mom signed papers for them to give us copies. They never did. Burger has pictures of me though. They still have them.

MN: Is there any way of getting some of those?

RC: I don't know. I tried to ask them and they would not release them to me but that was a few years back

KA: Do you know what year these pictures might have been taken?

MN: They would be in yearbooks mainly? Or –

RC: No these was pictures that they took of me. I was told one of them – one of my pictures was put into some type of hall of fame or something but I never really checked into it. But I did see the pictures in a big box that they had of Burger Junior High School when I was visiting my dance teacher once. And also Garrett Morris was the drama teacher in PS 43 at that time. He plays Martin Sporse.

MN: Oh write that down.

RC: Yeah

MN: So plus this is when they had these great arts programs in the schools. In, you know, normal elementary schools

RC: Yes they did.

MN: Which are not there now to the same degree.

RC: They're not there now and it's sad because, you know, we really had a good time growing up. We had what they call day camp or summer camp, you know, in the summertime we would go to school, we would have breakfast, we would go through our programs with the dance or whatever you was taking up – drama and what have you. We would go on trips. We would go to the beaches. We would go everywhere.

MN: Where was – tell us some of the places where you go – you went on these trips when you were in the camp.

RC: We went to Orchard Beach

MN: Right

RC: Cause I never forget this guy put sand in my hair and my dance teacher was so upset with him about that. Cause I was like her second daughter. And we used to go to amusement parks. I think it was Palisades Amusement Park -

MN: Palisades Park over by –

RC: Yeah, that was a popular amusement park back then. We went there, you know. We did concerts all over before they made York College over there on – it used to be called New York Boulevard – but now it's called Guy R. Brewer Boulevard and Liberty Avenue. They set up a big platform stage and we would perform there.

MN: Now what is the style of dance that you did?

RC: We did African. We did modern. We did ballet. We did jazz and we did flamenco. And we did a little tap. And dancing is – it's still in my heart. It's still in my heart, you know. There's a difference with just doing like this and doing like this, you know. There's a difference, and not everybody can do that.

MN: Right.

RC: So you know, I know it's in me. It's in me. That and music and my dance teacher used to always play good music for us to dance off of Papa Was a Rolling Stone, Marvin Gay – we used

to do our exercises – our ballet exercises – our plies and our relevés off of Marvin Gaye What's Going On. You know Ain't No Mountain High by Diana Ross. Yeah we listened to all that type of music that we danced to.

MN: Now did you ever go to the Mitchell Center? Was that – in the Mitchell houses? Because we interviewed some of the DJs from that area and they said that was a spot.

RC: That was the spot, yeah. I was too young. My mother wouldn't take me over there herself and I didn't have any older brothers or sisters, it was just myself and my younger brother so I never went over there but I did hear about, you know, a lot of things going on.

MN: Now when was the – were there, before what we would call hip hop, were there outdoor musical events in the Millbrook houses – block parties?

RC: Block parties, they would have block parties. In fact, we had our own little center -

MN: At Millbrook

RC: And they would have what were called bazaars and you could go inside and, you know, play a game, you know the Chuck-a-luck game and stuff like that. Different rooms had different activities in it. That's what they had.

MN: Now at these block parties what kind of music do you remember being played – at a block party?

RC: Well at the block parties they was playing whatever was out back then. You know, whatever was the hit songs back then. You know, as a kid growing up, it's like when I got older they stopped the block parties. They wasn't doing as much block parties. Now what they do is they have reunions, you know. That's what they do. The Bradhurst reunion cause you know we grew up in Harlem also on Bradhurst Avenue. In fact, I stumbled across one the other day meeting my cousin. I didn't even know they was having it. The Crotona Park reunions, you know, which is coming up soon.

MN: Yeah the first Sunday in every August. Now -

KA: Who used to organize the block parties?

RC: Well I know the one on Bradhurst Avenue, my girlfriend's aunt – she works for the Parks Department – so, you know, because they have those trucks that they open up and use as stages and stuff like that for different entertainment so I believe she's one of the organizers.

KA: Even growing up, that's who organized it?

RC: Whoever lived in the community.

KA: Someone just took initiative and so they just died out.

MN: Now were you exposed much to Latin music when you were growing up?

RC: Oh yes. Yes, in fact, I told the teachers I don't know Spanish but I could sing Edes tu. I can tell you – sing it word for word but don't know what it means. And I had asked the teacher about it – who made Edes Tu, I'm looking for that song. He told me – he told me who it was. I went on youtube and I downloaded it with my CD recorder and now I have it.

MN: So that was part of the soundtrack of your youth also – the Latin music.

RC: Yes, yes.

MN: Now do you – what was your first exposure to somebody with two turntables.

RC: It was called Monticello. Monticello. A lot of my friends in the neighborhood we used to always hang out on 173<sup>rd</sup> Street and what was called East Burn Avenue in the schoolyard of CES 70.

MN: Now this is when your family moved to the Grand Concoors area.

RC: Yes when we moved to the Grand – actually we moved first down the hill from the Grand Concoors on Mount Eden.

MN: So how old were you when you moved to Mount Eden?

RC: 14

MN: 14 ok. So that's – and this is Mount Eden and where – what was the cross street?

RC: And Morris. Between Morris Avenue and East Burn.

MN: Ok right.

RC: And then we moved up the hill on 173<sup>rd</sup> and Concoors. Like a block up and one block down. So I was around the same friends and there was these twins Donald and Ronald and they used to drive cab – they was a little older than us – and Donald used to always load us up in the car – Come on let's go to Monterey – Monterey that's what is was. I said Montecello, I'm sorry – Monterey Avenue and that's where Kool Herc used to give parties

MN: Whoa, so this is in the seventies?

RC: Yes.

MN: Moneterrey Avenue – where is that? Is that near Sedgewick?

RC: That's like off Webster Avenue somewhere.

MN: Monterey – I'll look it up.

RC: One hundred and eighty something street.

MN: Is it by the – what do you call –

RC: Not far from Arthur Park

MN: Ok

RC: Cause then he used to give jams out there in Arthur Park.

MN: So he'd take you to see Herc.

RC: Yes.

MN: These guys, these two guys.

RC: Yes

MN: He'd pack everybody in the cab and take you to see.

RC: In his car and then we would go out there and I would bug Herc all night long – when is Timmy coming – because one of his Herculoids was named Tiny Tim or Timmy Tim they used to call him. He lived in the building across from mine – like the Bronx Lebanon Hospital had an oval and I lived on this side and he lived on that side. And you know we kind of liked each other.

MN: Now when you say the Herculoids were these MCs.

RC: Yes – Clark Kent, Tiny Tim

MN: So by this time when you were seeing Herc there were people, you know, rapping over the beats already.

RC: Yes and the dance was called the Freak that was out at the time. And you know, they – the guys would do – make what they call a sandwich out of a female. It would be two guys dancing with a female in the middle. You know, and you'd be sliding your feet and the guys be on you like this – one in the front, one in the back. You know, making a sandwich out of you, and –

MN: I've seen that. It's still around.

RC: Yeah but it was respectful back then.

MN: Yeah I would hope so. So did you dance at these events?

RC: Yes I did. Yes I did. And especially like when we would go to Arthur Park that was like the main – because I -

MN: Now tell them – I'm not sure they now where Arthur Park – it's off-

RC: Off Tremont Avenue and Arthur Avenue

MN: Right and Arthur Avenue near Third Avenue.

RC: Yeah

MN: Yeah that area, so that was – were there other DJs or did Herc rule alone. Like if Herc threw a party at Monterey or Arthur Park was it just Herc? Or would other people come from other neighborhoods.

RC: Well, you know, most of the time when you go to a jam – that's what we would call it, a jam – there would be, say if Herc was throwing the jam, there would always be a DJ from some other crew or what have you would be around and they may say – hey why don't you get on and say oh we have DJ Cas or what have you. And then he'll get on and what have you. And what they used to do is they used to take a magic marker and they used to cross out the name of the song because they didn't want nobody to bite their beats. And they would plug the turn tables and everything into the light posts.

MN: Right so that's where the electricity would come from – light posts.

RC: Yes.

MN: Now, you know as I tell people if you did this today the police would be on you in a second so why didn't the police bother you in those days?

RC: I guess they thought it was a block party. You know, maybe that's what they thought it was cause block parties was common.

MN: So you're identity at that time was as a dancer primarily is that how you thought of yourself?

RC: When I was younger yeah.

MN: And you know so that was your skill, that was your way of expressing yourself. Did – when did the idea of becoming a DJ enter your mind?

RC: It entered my mind when I first went out to Queens and – well not first went out, I used to go to Queens a lot cause we had multiple relatives there at one time and then that's when they moved back to Harlem and then to the Bronx again. But I continued to go and visit my friends and I had became very close friends with a couple of families out there that I used to go and stay the whole summer so a friend of mine from the neighborhood – his name was Dave – he introduced me to this guy named Flash. And he said – can you rap? can you - and I was like – yeah I can rap, you know. So I mean, you know, it was just a little rap that-

MN: So you experimented with rapping also -

RC: Yeah and then I did this party and people would stop me on the bus – hey didn't you do that party at such and such? Hey you was good –

MN: Can you remember any of your little raps that you could do for us?

RC: Well I used to say – you know – Say my name is Robin from the planet Earth. Know I came to rock this universe. It makes no sense in standing around. Come on everybody let's all get down. I was born in the Bronx of the USA. My mother made me the deaf DJ. She put me in the room with a heart of stone. And she put me on a [inaudible] microphone. Now 18 years – that's how old I was – was born at last, the greatest MC was born at last. I'm the world's greatest MC cause I rock the mic so viciously. I'm jazzy, I'm sassy, and sweet like cotton candy. Number one of a kind and I'll rock your mind and I'll put the wigs right in your behind [inaudible]. You don't stop. Come on, come on, come on and let me see you rock.

MN: Wow.

KA: How old were you when you first -18?

RC: Well at that time – that's why everytime when I say that rhyme I say and 18 years and it's like ok I was 18.

MN: So, so you were rapping as well as dancing and then the –

RC: I was rapping and then my boyfriend at the time, Flash – which they called him Kid Flash out in Queens – he taught me how to DJ. He taught me – taught me how to mix. And which is the guy I'm married to right now but we're – we're separated. We're getting ready to go through a divorce. But he was really good and he always wanted to battle Grandmaster Flash and I had never met Grandmaster Flash at that time. So when I did finally Grandmaster, I went to the Stardust ballroom on Boston Road with my friends from the Bronx and they was routing on this Flash, Flash and I'm like – ah he's nothing compared to my Flash in Queens, you gotta see him. And they're like – yeah right, he can't do what Flash does. And the first song I heard Flash cut up was “Georgie Porgie Pudding and Pie” and they – when the MCs – the Furious Five was saying – if you all want to hear Grandmaster Flash say “Hell yeah”. And I was saying “Hell no.” I'm the only one saying “Hell no” I'm not routing for Flash cause I'm routing for the Flash in Queens. Well one day when I was about 19, my girlfriend introduced me to the disco fever.

MN: Right and tell – tell the folks where the disco fever was.

RC: The original disco fever was on 167<sup>th</sup> street and Jerome Avenue. And Sal was the owner. And when I went there, I'm sitting down there with my girlfriend and I said – I hear freedom come on [hums]. And Flash walks through the door and I said –Deborah, that's Grandmaster Flash. I saw him at the Stardust ballroom. And she's like – this is one we're gonna have to fight over. I says – may the best man or woman, may the best woman win. So she went on the dance floor. She's dancing with the guy and then I see this guy talking to Flash that I went to high

school with – his name was Donny. I says – Donny, Donny, come here, come here. You know Flash? He says – yeah I know Flash, that’s my man. I says – introduce him to me, I want to impress my cousin. Cause you know girls used to say we’re cousins, or what have you, at the time. So she comes off the dance floor with Disco B which was Flash’s assistant DJ. So she’s like – I want to introduce you to Disco B. I says – Yeah? Nice to meet you. I want to introduce you to Grandmaster Flash. Her face just dropped cause she was like that’s it, I’m out of it, I’m out of the game. You know, you won, you know. And so then after that, you know me and Flash, we exchanged phone numbers. You know, we would call each other, what have you, hang out, go out or what have you. You know, after we leave the fever go to breakfast and stuff like that. And the Fever was the place, if you wanted to be an official rapper or marked as an official rapper, you had to go through the Fever which they called the home of the rappers. And –

MN: This is late seventies, early eighties?

RC: Yes this is like eighty, eighty-one. Yeah seventy-nine, eighty, eighty-one.

MN: Yeah.

RC: Around that time.

MN: So that was the spot.

RC: That was the spot.

MN: In the whole city?

RC: Yes and everybody was there – the founder of Sugar Hill Label, Sylvia Robinson – she was the artist that made “Pillow Talk”

MN: Oh yeah

RC: And she – the Fatback band was the first ones to make the rap record which was called King Tim III

MN: Yeah, I played that in my rock n roll to hip hop class

RC: And then –

MN: Did they go – did they come to the Fever at all? The Fatback band –

RC: I don’t remember them coming there but I’ve seen Sylvia Robinson there and everybody else was there.

MN: Right wow.

RC: You know. Even Angie Stone. You know Angie Stone is Angie B from the Sequence

MN: Really?

RC: Yes, that's Angie B.

MN: Wow. Now you mentioned high school. What high school did you go to?

RC: I went to John F Kennedy High School.

MN: Oh up –

RC: In Riverdale.

MN: In Riverdale. And what was that experience like for you?

RC: It was a good experience. I had no fights. I had no problems. I had good friends.

MN: And you were still – that time you were living in the Concour area – when you were at Kennedy?

RC: Well my first year we were in Harlem and then we moved to the Bronx.

MN: Right ok.

RC: Onto Concour.

MN: And was there any organized music or art programs at Kennedy? Or by this time you were mainly doing the neighborhood stuff and club stuff –

RC: No there was no programs that I can recall of, only they had a police program if you wanted to become a cop. That's about it as far as I know and I wasn't interested in that at the time. But I was, you know, I used to take my mother's turntable and back it up and try to get that beat. It was -

MN: Now how about - talk to us about like the art of the DJ as you first got it from your – Flash in Queens. What's the skill in it and – and – and how do you get that – the touch?

RC: Ok when you go to make a beat – say you let the record turn, the turntables spin – and you flip the album – you flip the record back until you hear that beat and it goes [imitates beat]. You know, the break beat part and then like it will go [imitates beat] cause super spur when it says – super spur – that was the break point everybody would lose their minds. You know, so you would go [imitates beat]. And then as I - well I have my own equipment now so my – my ex-husband – he taught me how to blend. At that time I didn't know how to blend – I just knew how to catch the beat.

MN: Right.

RC: You know, now I know how to blend them together. You know and I know how to do like what Flash used to do back in the days - he would mix a patch sheet, which was like a number one hip hop song that we listened to, would break beat and he would mix it with Woody Woodpecker. You know [imitates beat]. You know, now I know how to do that. As opposed to I couldn't do that before.

MN: Now do you – did you have a mixer in between.

RC: Yes, you had two turntables and you had your mixer. And of course the amplifier.

MN: Now when you were doing this were you also rapping over it? Or you were strictly doing the –

RC: Well no. I would rap while he would DJ. Cause it was a crew of us. I was the only girl –

MN: Oh, what was the crew called?

RC: Oh boy. Electro-funk. And my name wasn't even Rockin' Robin back then. It was MC Ra-Ra.

MN: MC Ra-Ra.

RC: Right. I got my name Miss Rockin' Robin when I started at the radio station with Flash

MN: Now when did you start DJing your own parties?

RC: When I got my own equipment – I would say maybe 4 years ago.

MN: Oh ok, so you were – it was your radio career that got you the name DJ Rockin' Robin. It was the radio DJ more than like a party DJ.

RC: Well see, I started out as the – I used to answer the phones, you know, when they had the phone contests and stuff like that.

MN: So this is at Kiss FM?

RC: Well first I started – the first – my first experience was at WHBI with Mr. Magic. I had entered my girlfriend in the bathing suit contest because Starski –Lovebug Starski -

MN: Right

RC: He wanted to enter me because I always would sit next to the DJ booth. Every time I went to the Fever I would stay by the DJ booth and just watch – just watch them because I was like so, you know, shocked and I wanted to learn, you know. So I would sit at that bar and me and Starski became friends. We were buddies. He was used to seeing me here, said I'm going put you in that contest. I said - no no no, put my girlfriend in there, she's beautiful, she lives in Queens,

her name is Grace. Said – put Grace in there. And she came in third place. So all the winners had to go to WHBI –

MN: Tell them – tell people about WHBI and Mr. Magic because this is a key historical event which a lot of people now don't know about.

RC: WHBI was the first radio station to play hip hop. And Mr. Magic was the DJ.

MN: And what number in the dial was it? Do you remember?

RC: It was someplace close to – was it 92 – 92 KTU? It's somewhere around that one, near there.

MN: Right now because – I don't know if you know the song “Juicy” by Biggie Smalls – he says Mr. Magic, Marley Marl –

RC: Yeah, yeah -

MN: So that's what this comes from. This was, you know, a big event in New York City. This was the first recorded-

RC: Yes and it used to come on at 11 o'clock at night cause we used to set our alarm clock. Me and my girlfriend – we would meet up at her house after we get off work or what have you. We would take naps – we would eat, take naps, and set the alarm for 11, turn on WHBI to listen to the radio station and I think it would end like at 12 or 1 o'clock. And then we would leave and go to the Fever. And then we would stay at the Fever til 7 am in the morning. Some people would go to this place called the Hilltop – it's like an after-hours spot. It's up the hill on University not far from the Fever but I didn't go there because, you know. We would leave there and we would go to work.

MN: Now what sort of work were you doing at the time?

RC: At that time I was a cashier in the supermarket. Yeah –

MN: So you didn't go to college right off from high school.

RC: No, I did not.

MN: Now this – how did you get involved at this station – answering calls and with the contests and all that stuff.

RC: Well when my girlfriend was gonna go to the radio station with Sal and the other contest winners, I asked Sal could I go also. So when I went Mr. Magic asked me – can you do the request line. I said - well if you show me sure. So I did the request line.

MN: That reminds me of the song “Request Line.” Did you know the people who did “Request Line”? The – Slick Rick was one of them.

RC: It sounds familiar –

MN: I think they were from the Claremont houses area. What the hell were they called? Something the three. But that was –

KA: I know what you’re talking about

MN: But, so you handled the requests coming in?

RC: Yes.

MN: And then how did that segway into, you know, your own show?

RC: I went into the army so I lost contact with Grandmaster Flash for like ten years.

MN: So you went into the military

RC: Yes I went into the military

KA: Wait when was this?

RC: In ’82.

MN: Wow.

RC: Yeah I left. And then I would say maybe in ’90, ’91, ’92 my cousin had a block party in Louisiana. So she said – oh the crowd went crazy cause they’re not used to having block parties in the South – you know. She said – I want you to get in touch with your top DJs in New York - because she works for the mayor down there. I says – well, you know, Flash is on WBLS, I could try to contact him, you know. She says – well do that. So I called the radio station and Kev - he was part of the team. Flash’s name was Kevin Valentine - we went to high school together. He – I didn’t know it was him at first, you know, – he kept putting me through the third degree – well who is this and this and that and asking me all these questions cause this is what Flash makes you do – you know, you got to really scan a person before ,you know. So he finally met up with me and when he say me he was like – Oh my God, Robin it’s you! I’m like – yeah Flash, it’s finally you came to meet me at my job now you know who I am, well this is the deal my cousins wants this, that, that, that. Which he never followed through but me and Flash became very, very close because I was working at a voicemail beeper company and they also had mailbox service

MN: And this was after you got out of the army.

RC: Yes this is way after I had had both of my boys, you know. I had divorced from my first husband, you know. My oldest was like maybe six and the youngest was like two.

MN: And where were you living at that time?

RC: At that time I had just moved to off of Baychester Avenue from the Grand Concourse – the same place cause my mom had moved out and me and my first husband stayed there. So it was on Eden ward Avenue and Monticello. It was a private house. I left an apartment paying 279 dollars a month for an apartment paying 1000 dollars by myself with my boys but I wanted them to grow up in a decent neighborhood.

MN: Was it Concourse was getting dangerous?

RC: Yes, I mean gunshots in broad daylight. It was one Sunday, I was on the phone with my girlfriend in Louisiana and she heard the shots. I looked out the window and I see this man with no shirt on with the gun shooting at someone. I says – you know what –

MN: This is like the late eighties, early nineties?

RC: This was in '92, '93.

MN: This is – that's the heart of the crack years in the Bronx. So that – again that's important for us to put on record that was the time when – you know, the gun fire was all over.

RC: Yes, yes. And so I moved from that neighborhood to the Baychester area and I was proud to have Flash come to visit me at a nice place, you know. Had three bedroom house, you know –

MN: Wow and what were you – what were you working at – at that time?

RC: At that time I was working at the voicemail and beeper company on 14<sup>th</sup> street. I was still a public assistant but I worked. I always kept a job too, you know. And when I was looking for other jobs and that's when I started working for school safety. I was – then I went into the Academy for School Safety. Yeah and which is – I'm still doing that 14 years later.

MN: Right

RC: But I have a Bachelor's degree now and I'm going to have my Master's next year.

MN: Wow, ok –

KA: Master's in what?

RC: In communications.

KA: Oh, from what college?

RC: The college of New Rochelle.

KA: Oh great. Congratulations.

MN: Now, so ok, you're reconnected with Flash. When you were in the military were you doing anything with music in those years?

RC: No just going to the NCO club and partying.

KA: Where were you like –

MN: Stationed

KA: Stationed

RC: I was – Fort Jackson, South Carolina - I did basic training, went to AIT at Fort Ben Harrison, Indiana. I went to – I was stationed in Fort Lee, Virginia. I was stationed in Fort Pickett, Blackstone, Virginia. Yeah and then I came home and was in the National Guard on 14<sup>th</sup> street at the armory over there.

KA: What made you chose to join the army?

RC: Hah, I'm glad you asked that question. I went to the rappers' convention at the armory – 369<sup>th</sup> regiment armory. And a riot broke out. And my dad at the time was in the state guards. So he used to drill at that armory. So I'm on the – I'm like out the window. You know, you can like step out there. And I'm sitting there for like two – literally two hours. And I'm looking to see – just trying to get out of there, I had lost my shoe. I saw Special K and Kool Moe Dee. And I asked Moe – call K – cause K was the only one that really knew me at the time. Moe didn't really know me.

MN: This is in the eighties?

RC: Yeah

MN: The early eighties –

RC: Yes and K brought me like three shoes. He said – just try one on so you don't cut your feet and we'll be back for you when the limo comes. So I seen this guy with a uniform on and I said – listen my dad's a sergeant here, could you please get me out of here, I'm afraid. And he brought me downstairs through the motor pool and I got out. Two weeks later I see this guy on Bradhearst Avenue sitting on the park side. He's like – hey why don't you join the military. I'm like – I don't have a high school diploma, I dropped out. He says – they taking you without them. I said – are you serious. He's like – yeah come on in, take the test. I took the test. I was in there.

KA: Did you get your GED eventually or –

RC: Yeah, well I didn't get it in there because they didn't prep you for it. They would just let you take it. So when I came home I went to City College and I got my GED.

KA: What made you decide not to graduate from high school?

RC: From high school, because my parents was really strict on me. They was always keeping me on punishment like all those parties and stuff that everybody used to go to the Renaissance, the Executive Playhouse down the hill on Jerome Avenue – I never stepped foot in there. Yeah I hear all my friends talking about the parties and stuff and I couldn't go. I would just say – oh yeah I was there. I would hear the story from someone else and tell this person – yeah and this and that happened right, I was there. So I would cut class a lot and wouldn't go to school.

KA: How far did you go?

RC: I got left back twice in – I got left back in the ninth grade. Then I got left back in the tenth grade. So I went to school for four years – high school – but I never finished.

MN: And here you are getting a master's degree and you were left back.

RC: Yes

MN: That says something about –

RC: Well I didn't have parents that pushed me. They didn't really push me as far as education was concerned. You know, I could give them a – could say – look I passed, I got a seventy. And they were like – oh that's good. They wouldn't say – well you need to better than that – you know.

MN: Now was there ever a teacher who took an interest in you or said, you know, you're – you're smarter than you're showing?

RC: While I was in high school?

MN: Yeah

RC: Well I would say my guidance counselor was very nice. And, you know, he would try to guide me. And he was – he was really good at what he did, you know. But I wasn't interested, you know, at the time. All I was thinking about was freedom, you know. And that was the only time I had it, was when I went to school. So I wouldn't go to class, you know, I felt that, you know, I need social skills. I needed to be able to know how to socialize with my peers. My mom always kept me on the bench sitting next to her. You know, with this Louisiana, you know, frame of thought with, you know, I don't know, the way she grew up it was different. I always felt like I was isolated so when I was away from home I felt free.

MN: Now when you were – so you're back up in Baychester. You're connecting with Flash and how did this lead to the radio station?

RC: Ok Flash – I would listen to – he was on what they called Flash at Five right? So I said – you know what - I would listen and I would record it. So I said Flash - I would call and say – Flash, one of your turn tables is dragging – you know – Flash why is this guy Hollywood always speaking when they cutting you off, this guy is on the air all day, you’re only on the air for two hours, he cuts you off when you talk – I point little things out to him. He sees that I meant, you know, I was very loyal, you know, to him. And I had a lot of good points, you know, I told him about the voice. I says – listen, you want to do the contest thing, you can get mailbox service here, you can get voicemail, you can have a phone number, you know, you can have an address here, legitimate address here, you know, you can Grandmaster Flash Entertainment 853 Broadway Suite 1516 New York, New York 1003, the number’s 212-388- whatever, whatever, whatever, you have a tone pager that beeps and lets you know when you get a message, you have, it has a – oh what do you call it – a toll saver. You know, if you put a quarter in and it rings that means you have no messages, you hang up, you get your quarter back. If it picks up that means you have a message, you press star, put in your passcode, and you get the messages. Which he had me end up doing that, you know. And then I would call people back that wanted to, you know, book a party with him, you know. And, you know, he would have me just – that’s how I became his business administrator.

MN: And were you on the air also talking?

RC: Yes, when – when we went to BLA- I mean W – to Kiss FM, excuse me, that’s when I was on the air talking. What he would do is he would introduce Team Flash – that’s what our group was called – Team Flash. And he would say, you know, say hello, you know. And I’d say – hey, you know. He – Hey Robin go ahead – he would introduce me. And then I’ll say, you know, I’ll say – I want to give a big shout out to such and such and what have you. Or speak of the current events or what have you.

KA: What year was this?

RC: This was about seven years ago.

MN: And then how did you start getting into, you know, throwing your own events?

RC: I made up my own business cards. You know, word of mouth – people told other people I – like it would be mostly like family functions. And they would have friends and then their friends would have friends and then they would say – hey do you have a card? You know, and stuff like that. And I want you to DJ – oh I love the music and this and that. I even deejayed at my college in undergrad – College of New Rochelle. I deejayed out there one day, you know.

KA: So do you own your own equipment and everything? Or –

RC: Yes

KA: Speakers and stuff?

MN: So if we invited you here to perform this could happen?

RC: Yes it could happen.

KA: How did the – how did the other guys – other DJs – male DJs feel compared to you? Because, you know, you're a woman.

RC: Well, my husband first thought it - really teaching me when I had my own equipment that I would do a little mix or something and it would sound really good – he'd like wow. And I'd say – yes you wish you'd did that didn't you? Then he would go [makes noise]. Talk about my head just blew up. It exploded cause it go so big, you know. He would make fun. But Flash – Flash had announced my first – he said – Miss Rockin' Robin did her first debut today at the College of New Rochelle. I just happened to catch him on the air that evening. Just happened to be here and he was on the air. I called the station and he announced it on the radio that I had did my first debut at the College of New Rochelle.

MN: Now what do you see – where do you see yourself taking this, you know, music career?

RC: Well you know what, I use music with a lot of things. You know, I had a class last semester and it was a non-profit organization class and so we had to do, you know, when you have to do the little projects and presentations and stuff and final presentations and stuff. And so what I did was I made a CD and I put different songs on it that refer to different non-profit organizations. Like the children – I played the Children's Playground and I would mix it. And I put We Are the World which was a fundraising song. So music is used for just about anything, you know. It touches us in every way that I could imagine, you know, I use music a lot. You know, music – you can remember things by music – by playing music gives you memories whether it's good, whether it's bad, you know.

MN: Have you ever like thought of organizing a DJ class for young women? Is that something that –

RC: Well I never thought about it but it would be interesting.

MN: Yeah I mean there are so few women who go into deejaying and less, you know, many more people – they're more MCs, they're more dancers – but, you know, something to think about.

RC: Yeah it is something to think about.

MN: So do you have a dream about where you see yourself in 5 or 10 years? As, you know, with an organization, or you know, where do you see yourself professionally?

RC: Well I wanted to be a public advocate and I wanted to like start some sort of organization with children where I can have them be a part of their community and put in their input and their, you know, whatever they want to do to help the community so that they can grow up with pride,

you know. And say hey – I did this, I did that – you know. And, you know, keep them off the streets, like – kind of like when I grew up, you know.

MN: So you're – that's interesting because you feel like kids have less now than when you were growing up.

RC: Yes they do, most definitely. They don't have anything else to do so, you know, the idle mind is the devil's playground. And they get into all kinds of things because they don't really have nowhere else to go.

MN: OK, Dawn do you have any questions that you would like to ask?

DR: From New Orleans, what part of, what ward were you from?

RC: I don't know [laughs] I just know what my birth certificate says but I've heard of the central wards, you know, and the night wards, I believe. Yeah –

MN: Do you still have family down there?

RC: Yes, in fact, I just met some family on facebook that I didn't even know I had cause I'm the only Cenance in New York City other than my younger son. And these people were from Detroit but they're originally from New Orleans and we're going to have our first family reunion which I've never had one in my life, never been to a family reunion so it's going to be my first one next summer in New Orleans.

MN: Really?

RC: Those are the people that, you know, I had never met and I ask my mom why didn't you tell me about these people and, you know, who are they? And she said – well, you know, they wanted to join the Civil Rights marches and we didn't want to have no part of that so we went our way and they went theirs.

MN: Wow.

DR: Did you ever ask your mother about more details about that?

RC: She doesn't really want to talk about it.

MN: Is she – is she still alive?

RC: Yes she is.

KA: She coming to the Bronx?

RC: She lives on Fulton Street.

MN: Would she –

RC: Near the old Bronx Lebanon.

MN: Oh the – that's like in Morrisania.

RC: Near Crotona Park, yeah.

MN: Near Crotona Park, ok. Boy, she'd be interesting to interview if she – you think she'd want to talk?

RC: No, she don't talk to me, what makes you think she'll talk to you?

MN: You never know. So it sounds like this family was in between the races, in between, you know, whether it be political or not. And your mother made a decision not to –

RC: Well they always kept to themselves, you know, my mother and my stepdad – they, you know, they – they don't want trouble or anything. I'm like the backbone of the family. I'm the big mouth. I don't care, you know, I want answers, you know. That's why I want to get into public advocacy, you know, because I want to fight for people that's afraid to fight for themselves, you know.

MN: Wow, Kathleen do you have any?

KA: No.

MN: Is there any, you know, we always give at the end, is there anything you want to say to all the people listening – a message from you to the world.

RC: Ok a message from me to the world

MN: Yeah, kind of, yeah

RC: There's no such thing as I cannot do it. I learned that in the United States army and that's the honest truth. If you put your mind to what you really want and you stay focused, it can happen. It can really happen, I don't care where you came from or where do you think you're going to go, wherever you want to go, you can go.

MN: Look, so that raises an interesting question. So you had a positive experience in the army.

RC: Yes, I mean, who would think that I would be able to low crawl underneath barb wire fences, you know. I would never believe that. Walk across a one-rope bridge, you know. Take apart an M16 and put it back together within seconds. Run eight – run around, you know, the jogging field eight times within two minutes or what have you, you know. It's remarkable what, you know, what they teach you.

MN: And as, how did it feel as a woman there? Did you feel like you were respected and recognized?

RC: Well I felt like ok. If it was – if it was the men’s – if it was the decision of the male drill sergeants they would not have had women there but then again at the same time it could be a psychological thing, you know, to push you because regardless of how they felt, they still had to teach us and they just had to get the job done as a soldier so, you know. And they taught me a lot – they taught me a lot. Being a woman drill sergeant, you know, I didn’t like female drill sergeants because it seemed like they had to prove themselves to be tougher than the men and they would be tougher on us unnecessarily, you know.

MN: Right, did you feel you came out a stronger person than when you entered?

RC: Most definitely. Most definitely. That’s why, you know, like I said, I’m a fighter. And I wasn’t so much a fighter before I joined the military but once, you know, I learned that – what they taught me – that anything is possible. Then I said from there on it’s like the sky’s the limit.

MN: Ok, well thank you very much. This was a good experience.

RC: You’re welcome

End of Part 1

MN: Now to continue I want to have a discussion about your family’s racial identity. You identify as black but your brother doesn’t and your mother doesn’t so talk a little bit about that.

RC: Well growing up in the household with my mom, you know, she would speak of our ethnic background as – she wouldn’t be specific with what it was but she would always knock blacks.

MN: So there was a lot of negative talk about black people in your house.

RC: Yes, don’t bring that nigger to my house anymore – that black nigger to my house anymore.

MN: So she talked that way

RC: That’s the way she talked.

KA: And – but in New Orleans was she – you said she was not treated as black in New Orleans?

RC: She would pass for white as they would call it

MN: Did she go to colored school growing up?

RC: I don’t know what school – she doesn’t talk about it

MN: But she said she would ride in the front of the bus.

RC: She would ride and pass for white – ride in the front of the bus.

KA: What about neighborhood wise? I know neighborhoods in New Orleans were basically split by race. What neighborhood did she live in?

RC: Well I heard her say something about – well she – my grandmother stayed – my dad's mother – stayed in the Iberville Projects which is on Basin Street, right next to the graveyard. And when my mom was dating my dad, she stayed with my grandmother. So she basically – and she used to mention something about the Desire Projects.

MN: Right, oh yeah. Now did your mother ever talk about white people.

RC: She – well she would always praise white people. She'd say - well if it wasn't for the white people we wouldn't have welfare to take care of us. You know, to help poor black people, you know, if it wasn't for the white people. So she would always praise the white people and down – down rate the black people.

KA: So she was living on welfare and since she identified with being black only in that sense.

RC: Yeah, I guess.

MN: Now talk about – your brother is four years younger and he identifies as Latino, not black.

RC: Yes

MN: Talk a little bit about –

RC: Well he'll say he's French because my mother speaks French because she's from New Orleans.

MN: So she speaks French?

RC: Yes she speaks it and her cousins and everyone that she's around in the family speaks it. But they never spoke it to us. They never taught it to us because they felt that they wanted to speak in that language when they wanted to say things they didn't want children to hear so they never taught it to us. I even asked her to teach it to my children when they were little so they would know. She never taught it to them.

DR: Do you know if there's any Haitian in your background – in your elements cause a lot of the light skinned people from Haiti –

RC: No

DR: escaped the Revolution and they actually were the ones who formed the – the middle Creole class.

MN: Really?

RC: Well I hear a lot of people say that.

MN: Now how did – could you imitate the sounds of the New Orleans French? Could you mimic, you know, speak a few words.

RC: Like speak it – like *Mais jamais* – that means well I don't know – or no – no God damn that's what *mais jamais* means – *Mais jamais* they would say or *mais* [French] that means well I don't know, you know. *Magnifique* means something's good, you know, stuff like that. Then they would have you know a different accent, you know, like I keep saying “you know” cause that comes from New Orleans sometimes it slips when I speak.

KA: Is your stepfather from New Orleans as well?

RC: No

KA: Is he African American?

RC: Yes he is.

MN: And does he identify as African-American

RC: Yes he – he does. But he has a nice Indian complexion and a nice wavy black hair that, you know, he looks like an East Indian or something, you know.

KA: So when you say “nice” do you mean like it's really prominent or like – cause you know people say nice like – oh light skin is nice, dark is not nice.

RC: Well like a smooth tan complexion, you know

MN: So if somebody saw your mother and father – and stepfather – walking down the street, what would they think they were seeing? An and untruded eye

RC: Well they would say – those two is inseparable because they are always together and holding arm to arm, yeah

DR: But what race do you think your mother appears to other people?

RC: White

MN: Do you think that people in her neighborhood think she's white?

RC: Possibility. It's a possibility.

MN: In the Milbrook Projects do you think people thought of her as white?

RC: That's a possibility too, except for the ones that got to know her or got to know me. Like their kids may have went to school with me and they knew different, you know. Cause they used

to, like I told you, they used to make fun of me in school and say, you know, like – why – like one time I had a fight on 138<sup>th</sup> street and Willis Avenue – no Brook Avenue – and these Spanish people came round and they broke up the fight and they grabbed me and they told other girls – Get out of here, get out of here – they were African-Americans and stuff – Get away from her – they thought I was Spanish! They was defending me cause they thought I was Spanish and then you know they would say – I’m going to get her parents because, you know, back in those days people knew all the kids’ family, you know, they’re parents and stuff. They knew where you lived and everything, you know, I remember I got hit by a car in that same spot coming from the pizza shop. They went and got my parents, you know. So, you know, but they would always clinch to me and protect me because they thought I was one of them.

MN: Right, now you mentioned your brother had a whole different way of dealing with his Spanish friends than you did. Describe that for us.

RC: He would talk about blacks like my mom did, in a sense. You know, like when his friend – someone they knew had gotten shot – and he says to his friend, you know, who did it, it was them. And his friend says – them who? And he says the [foreign word]. His friend says - what do you mean the [same word], you saying a black guy did it. He says – yeah. So he says, you know, - why you saying it like that? You know, why would you say they did it like you’re not black. No, I’m not black. Well then what are you. I’m French. He’s like – French? He starts laughing cause my brother used to have this little speech problem, you know, he would talk with the “ch” and the “sh” [imitates brother]. You know and it was like – you know you can hardly speak English, how you going to say your French, you know. And he – all his friends were Spanish. His two wives were Spanish. He had a daughter with a Spanish woman. And he had the nice grade of hair like his dad, you know. But it was like sandy- sandy brown and the light eyes like mine. His eyes were even lighter than mine so he would pass for Spanish or something, you know. He came to the club that I used to hang at – the Broadway International for a show – and he got on stage and the blacks were saying – hey [inaudible], you know, they thought he was Spanish, him and his friends. And then one of the guys – G from I think it was the Fantastic Four – one of those rap groups. He was, you know, the MC for the show and he had to make a speech and let them know hey that’s why black people don’t make it in life because you don’t support each other, you know. This guy right here is your brother just like we are, you know. And so – and so what if his friend is Hispanic, he’s part of our race too - just as much, you know.

MN: That raises an interesting question. What does your mother think of Barack Obama?

KA: I was about to say the same thing.

MN: Does she identify with him?

RC: You know I wonder myself. I didn’t hear her say anything bad.

MN: But did they wear Obama buttons? Or did they –

RC: I haven't seen my mom in a little over a year. I don't go over there too much because, you know, we have – we think in different directions, you know.

KA: How does your brother feel about Obama? Or Michelle cause she's not fair-skinned like his past wives.

RC: We barely speak too so I really don't know, you know. He's probably saying to his-self – yeah it's a matter of time, he'll mess up or something like that. Cause that's the way they think, you know.

MN: Wow

DR: Did you feel that when you were growing up that you were treated differently from you brother?

RC: Most definitely. Most definitely. And I think – and I – you know what? I'm grateful for that because I'm the strong one, you know. I'm glad I didn't fall into their – their way of thinking because then that – that would make me a weaker person.

MN: Did they – did they favor him because he was lighter than you?

RC: No they favored him because he was both of their child. I had a different dad and my dad must of reminded my mom of me. I mean me of my dad. Because, you know, whatever bad times they had they took it out on me. You know, she would say – oh you're just like your dad. And you know the first time I met my dad I was twenty four years old, went to New Orleans, you know as an adult. And we're at the airport – I don't know what this man looks like – never had a picture of him. He doesn't know what I look like. So all I know is he's got a green shirt cause I called my aunt. So I'm at the baggage check and I'm looking at this man and he's looking at me. And we looked at each other up and down like – what are you looking at? And we turned our heads. And we looked back at each other and then we smiled. It was just really crazy cause like we really both have each other's attitude. Like he would say something about my mom, you know – oh your mom used to love my dirty drawer – my last year dirty drawer, she kissed the ground I walked on. I said – yeah but she's loving Gerald's this year so don't talk about my mom when she's not here. I said - I'm your worst nightmare, I'm a part of you. So – but it was fun when I met him. Trying to get to know this guy that reminds me of myself, you know. And – yeah but they used to have their little – their little perfect family together. You know, like when my dad would get paid – my stepdad, you know. He used to be a hospital police at Lincoln hospital and when he would get paid, my brother would go with my mom to meet my stepdad on pay day. And they would all go out and eat and stuff. I'd be left on the block, you know. That's why I always, you know, was able to get on – get in the car with the twins and my friends and we'd go on off to Arthur Park or somewhere, you know.

DR: That's the end of this

MN: Ok so anything else you want to ask about this? Wow ok.